

TALES FROM THE VAULT 2025



COMPILED BY THE LIŪWILDAŽŲ RESEARCH CENTRE



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Vol. 2 - Edition 1

Remembering the 1946 Vancouver Island Earthquake

The Ninini (earthquake) dance is performed during the Tlasila (Peace Dances) portion of the Kwakwaka'wakw potlatch – a time when chiefly families open their Box of Treasures to validate their connections to specific lands and resources and demonstrate their ancestral knowledge of supernatural and natural events, such as earthquakes. (Chief Waxawidi, William Wasden, Jr.) These stories teach us to have foresight that earthquakes and tsunamis will happen again on the west coast. It reminds us that we are part of the land and ocean, and not above it. (A-nii-sa-put, Tim Paul)

On the quiet Sunday morning of June 23, 1946, at precisely 10:13 a.m., the heart of Vancouver Island trembled in a way it never had before. A magnitude 7.3 earthquake—the strongest onshore earthquake ever recorded in Canada—struck near the Forbidden Plateau. Its effects felt as far south as Portland, Oregon, and as far north as Prince Rupert, British Columbia.



Figure 1 Foundation failure in Comox, 1946 earthquake

In Cumberland, Union Bay, and Courtenay, 75% of chimneys collapsed, and buildings suffered heavy damage. In Port Alberni, Comox, and Powell River, homes and businesses were shaken. In Victoria and Vancouver, buildings swayed, a small fire broke out at the Hotel Vancouver, and frightened residents poured into the streets. Along the coast, lighthouse keepers reported shattered windows and smashed dishes. The quake's power even knocked the needle off a seismograph at the University of Washington.

Thankfully, the timing—a quiet Sunday morning—spared many lives. Schools were empty, and streets were less crowded than usual. In Courtenay, a chimney crashed through two floors of the elementary school, destroying classrooms that would have held 60 children had it been a weekday. Tragically, the earthquake claimed two lives: one man succumbed to a heart attack, and another drowned when his boat was swamped by waves near Deep Bay.



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Some Elders recall a nearly three-foot-wide chasm opening in the village of Cape Mudge. Curious children were warned to stay far away until the ground finally settled and the gap closed several days later. The late Olly Chickite spoke of a terrifying encounter while fishing following the quake. While hauling in his set, he saw a massive, nearly 60-foot sea creature rising from what he believed was a chasm in the sea floor. Stunned by the sight, the crew made the difficult decision to cut their net and flee to safety.



Figure 2 Chasm in Kelsey Bay highway, just north of Campbell River

Vancouver Island sits atop the Cascadian Subduction Zone, a tectonic boundary known for its seismic activity. While minor tremors are common, the 1946 earthquake was a stark reminder of the immense forces shaping the region. It also sparked a new era of seismology in Canada, leading to the installation of sensitive seismometers and systematic earthquake studies.

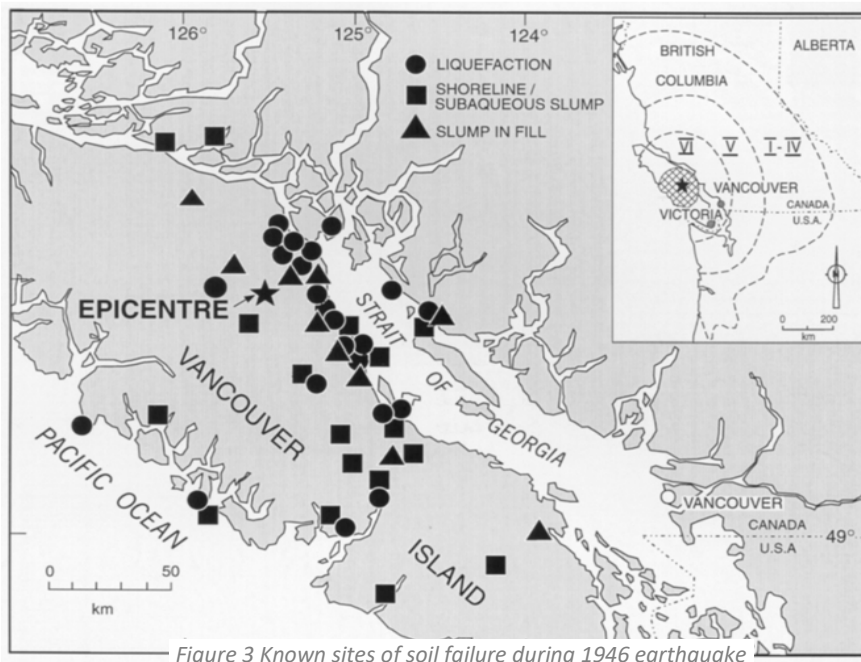


Figure 3 Known sites of soil failure during 1946 earthquake

This earthquake remains a powerful story of nature's unpredictability and the resilience of those who endured it. Talk to your aunties and Elders about their memories of that day. What was it like for them? Did they feel the earth shake? What stories do they have about our communities? These recollections bring history to life, connecting us to the lived experiences of those who witnessed these extraordinary events and mysterious creatures.



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Vol. 2, Edition two

The Story of Trade Beads



Long before Europeans arrived, we thrived in a vast trade network rich in culture and craftsmanship. Beads were always part of our lives, carved from shell, pearl, bone, stone, and fossil. Among the most prized were dentalium shells, small ivory-colored mollusks resembling tiny tusks, symbolizing wealth and status long before glass beads appeared.

Dentalium: The Original Trade Beads

Harvested from the deep, cold waters off Vancouver Island, dentalium was both beautiful and valuable. Coastal Nations braved the open ocean in dugout canoes, using specialized tools to scoop the shells from the seafloor. Worn in regalia and exchanged in trade, dentalium reached as far as the Great Plains.

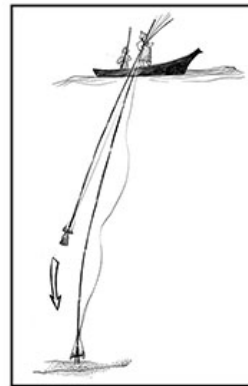


Figure 11.9

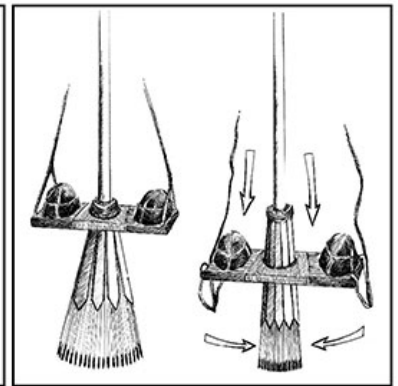


Figure 11.10



The Arrival of Glass Beads

European traders introduced glass beads from Venice and Czechoslovakia, recognizing their value in our trade networks. Vibrant, easily strung, and abundant, these beads quickly became part of our traditions. Some, like the Hudson Bay "White Hearts" and "Russian Blue" beads, were especially prized. We embraced their beauty but never abandoned our own traditions, adapting them into our regalia while maintaining our cultural identity.

Russian Blue Beads

These deep blue, faceted beads - despite their name - originated in Venice. Russian traders acquired them from American and English merchants in exchange for furs. Crafted with remarkable precision, they were shaped, drawn, cut, and polished to enhance their brilliance. Some of these beads contain lead, likely to enhance their shine. In some cases, lead levels exceed safe standards. It's best to keep them off the skin, wash hands after handling, and keep them away from children.





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The Art of Glass Bead Making

Venetians revolutionized bead-making in the late 1400s, drawing molten glass into long tubes that were cut, polished, and smoothed in rotating drums. By the 1500s, demand was so high that unfinished glass tubes were sent to Czechoslovakia for finishing before being shipped worldwide.



Padre Beads and Chevron Beads

Among the most sought-after glass beads were the deep blue "Padre Beads," essential in trade by the late 1700s. Chevron beads, with their star-like layered designs, were rare and provide insight into early trade routes. Though less common during the fur trade era, they are found in sites dating to before 1600.

Button Blankets

When the Hudson's Bay Company began trading wool blankets to our people, we transformed them into new forms of regalia. Traditionally, we used abalone or other shells for decoration, but glass beads and pearl buttons added new dimensions. Worn during potlatches and ceremonies, these "Robes of Power" displayed lineage, wealth, and artistic mastery. Their red inner borders, originally dyed with salmon eggs, symbolize the strength and vitality of cedar.



The Enduring Legacy of Trade Beads



Though trade routes shifted, some beads faded while others, like dentalium, remained cultural symbols. Beads still enrich our regalia, dances, and ceremonies, connecting us to our ancestors.

Seeing these beads always takes me back to summers on Quadra, where family members would find them buried in their front yard gardens. As a child, I didn't grasp their significance, but now I do. They are more than just trade beads; they are tangible links to history, and to our ancestors.

Trade beads help to tell a piece of our story. Though glass beads were incorporated into our trade systems, they never replaced our ways. Our relationship with beads - whether from the ocean, the earth, or another continent - remains a testament to the vast networks our ancestors built, the adaptability and resilience of our culture, and the ways we continue that legacy today.



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Vol. 2, Edition three

Lake Balls Explained

One crisp autumn day at Heydon Lake, near Loughborough Inlet, a near-perfect sphere was found resting on the shore, about 10 centimeters in diameter, its surface a dense tangle of pine needles and bits of bark. It wasn't just a random clump of debris. The sphere was surprisingly sturdy, solid yet lightweight, as if nature itself had woven the perfect ball. Over the years, similar spheres have been found, some reportedly as large as a meter across. But what exactly are these strange objects?

These natural formations, known as lake balls, are the result of plant material - pine needles, bark, and other forest debris - accumulating in the water and being shaped into spheres by wind and wave action. As the needles gravitate towards shore, wind action stirs up waves. Then they lap against the shoreline and the needles start clustering together. The back and forth and around action of the waves rock the clumps into spherical shape. It takes a certain combination of weather, shallow and sandy shoreline, and a lack of freezing that allow the balls to form.



Found 35 years ago at Heydon Lake, B.C.



In LiḡwildaḐw territory, lake balls have been found in both Heydon Lake and Seabird Lake.



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Recently, the BC Forest Discovery Centre was donated two lake balls found at Heydon Lake.

While they are rare, lake balls have been found in other parts of the world too. Similar specimens have been found at Seabird Lake in the territory, and just East of Osoyoos at Conkle Lake, BC. The famous writer Henry David Thoreau saw them, calling them "curious balls composed of fine grass or roots, perfectly spherical." In Japan, they are known as marimo and formed from algae, and in some European lakes, they have been found made of plant roots. Two lakes in New Brunswick are known to produce the balls, they have been found as far away as Ögii Lake in Mongolia, and even the Scottish Highlands.

Indigenous groups from Montana describe them as holding spiritual significance, a place to symbolically leave behind past burdens. These curious formations are a reminder of nature's skilled artistry, where wind and water come together to weave together something us humans could never could re-create.

The knowledge of these lake balls in Liḡwíłdaḡw waters helps us to understand some of the ways the land and water are always shaping and reshaping themselves. We are all part of the story of the land, formed by the same winds, currents, and cycles that have always guided life here.

Next time you're by a lake in our territory, keep an eye on the shoreline. You might just spot one of these perfectly woven spheres, a little piece of nature's mysterious handiwork.



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Vol. 2, Edition four

The Story of the Watchman's Pole



WATCHMAN'S POLE IN CAPE MUDGE VILLAGE, AROUND 1920S

In Kwakwaka'wakw culture, the watchman's pole holds deep meaning. It is more than a structure, it's a symbol of leadership, legacy, and our responsibilities to each other and the land.

One of the old stories, recorded in the early 1900s but rooted in teachings much older, tells how Chief L!aǵolas raised a watchman's pole to prepare his son, L!isotiwalis, to take on the role of a true leader. This wasn't just a community event. It involved the neighbouring Nations, singing songs, naming coppers, and reminds us of the power our people have when working together.



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What is a Watchman's Pole?

The watchman's pole is a tall cedar pole with a platform where a leader stands to "watch" for the return of salmon and the wellbeing of the people. It shows that the chief is ready to protect, provide, and carry out the teachings passed down from the ancestors.

Raising a pole like this involves a lot of work. Far-away Nations are invited by canoe. Goods like blankets are loaned out and the loans are carefully tracked by the chief's wives, the only ones trusted with such important work. Ceremonies are held. Speeches are made. And when the time comes, the new chief climbs the pole while the people sing the Watchman's Pole Song, just as our Elders did for generations.

The Ceremony of L!isotiwalis

Oral history tells us that when it was time to pass on the name and title to L!isotiwalis, his father, Chief L!aqolas, invited the Mamaleleqala, 'Namgis, and Ławitsis to Fort Rupert. He told them: "My salmon have come."

As everyone gathered, strong young men raised the watchman's pole out in front of the big house. L!isotiwalis then climbed to the top. From below, Chief L!aqolas called out four times to the people, marking the moment his son accepted the responsibilities of a chief.

The people sang: *"Now I see it—the salmon.*

It is coming upstream with a great wave.

You were overcome by me on account of this watchman's pole."

This song is about spiritual preparation, community wealth, and cultural responsibility.

A Teaching for Today

The watchman's pole teaches us that leadership is earned, not claimed. It must be witnessed. It must be supported by the community and honoured with generosity. This is how our people have always done it.

When L!aqolas broke a copper and gave away blankets, he wasn't just giving gifts, he was making a promise. A promise that L!isotiwalis would walk the path of their ancestors and care for the people. That promise lives on today when we gather, share our history, and remember who we are.

Ĝilakasla to all our Elders, speakers, and knowledge keepers who carry these teachings. May the stories like that of the watchman's pole continue to guide us forward.



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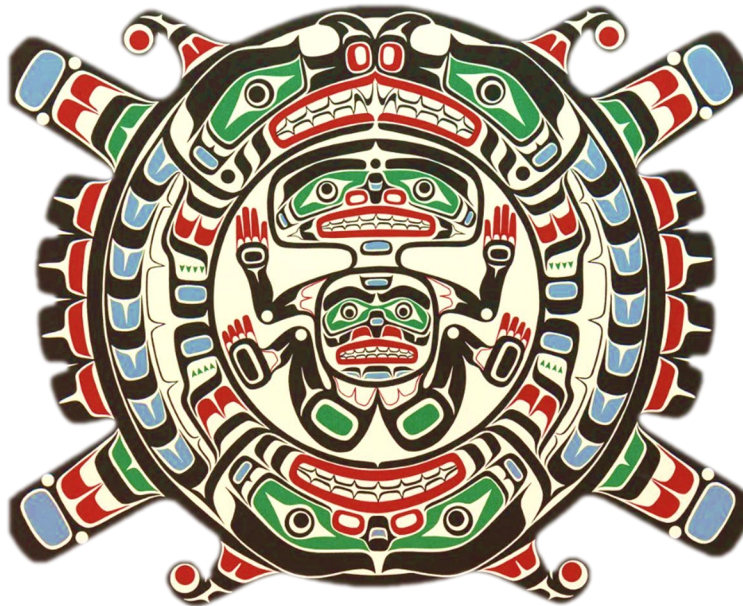
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Vol. 2, Edition five

The Sisiyutł and the Doctor

As shared by Dan and Alberta Billy, with gratitude.

This story was shared in 2015 as part of a research interview. The events are recorded as they were told and remembered. Interpretations of the Sisiyutł and ceremonial roles are drawn from both lived experiences and historical records, including those of Franz Boas, George Hunt, and contemporary knowledge holders.



“Sisiyutł Hunter” painting by George Hunt, 1980

In LiğwildaŦ traditions, the Sisiyutł is more than a creature. It is the supernatural form of salmon, a force of transformation, protection, and evaluation. It appears with two serpent heads and a face in the center, sometimes understood to be a powerful ancestor or the Cannibal Spirit.

The Sisiyutł is closely tied to shamans and healers, those rare few who can walk between the physical and spirit world and carry its knowledge and powers.

Dan Billy shared this powerful story - passed down from his father - about a remarkable man from Phillips Arm who, as a young hunter, came face to face with the Sisiyutł.

He was in his twenties. One early morning, he set out alone into the high mountains to hunt m̓əl̓x̓lu (mountain goat). The fog was thick, the forest quiet. Then he noticed something strange; a cloud of flies rising and falling over one spot. He froze.

“He knew stories,” Dan said. “About what it means when you see something like that. His father had told him to take care. Not to rush in.”



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He waited and watched. As the mist began to clear, he saw it — a giant double-headed serpent, stretched across the ground. And in the center, a vision: the face of his own father.

But he didn't look away. He had been taught: if you turn or blink, the Sisiyutł disappears and something bad may happen to someone in your family.

So, he held his gaze. Then he took out his musket, cut the tip of his tongue with his knife, and let his blood drip into the barrel. He loaded it and fired straight at the center, the vision of his father. He reloaded, doing the same for each of the serpent's two heads.

"That's how he got the power in his tongue," Dan said.

"He became one of the greatest doctors our people had."

In the years that followed, this man became known across the coast as 'The Doctor.' It was said he could draw sickness or poison straight from the body without ever making a cut.

"He healed my grandfather," Dan said. "He was falling trees when a piece of bark flew into his eyes. He couldn't open them. The doctor just put his tongue on either side and sucked the bark out, pulled it right through the skin."

People called on him from Phillips Arm to all the way up to Rivers Inlet. And whenever he went out to fish, the salmon came right to him.

"He'd just go out in a canoe," Dan said,

"and the fish would come.

The Sisiyutł was with him all the time."

When the young man saw the serpent, the face in the center may not have been his literal father, but a vision. A test from the spirit world.

"It probably wasn't his father," Dan reflected.

"It was just a picture. Something from that other world, where things aren't always what they seem."

These teachings remind us that healing was never just about medicine. It came from ceremony, from spirit, and from a deep relationship with the land.

"You have to believe it was real in order to begin to understand it," said the late Alberta Billy.

That kind of belief - in stories, signs, and unseen forces - is something our Elders carried with them every day.

"You won't find anyone like our Elders," Dan said.

"They were so close to nature. They believed anything could happen."

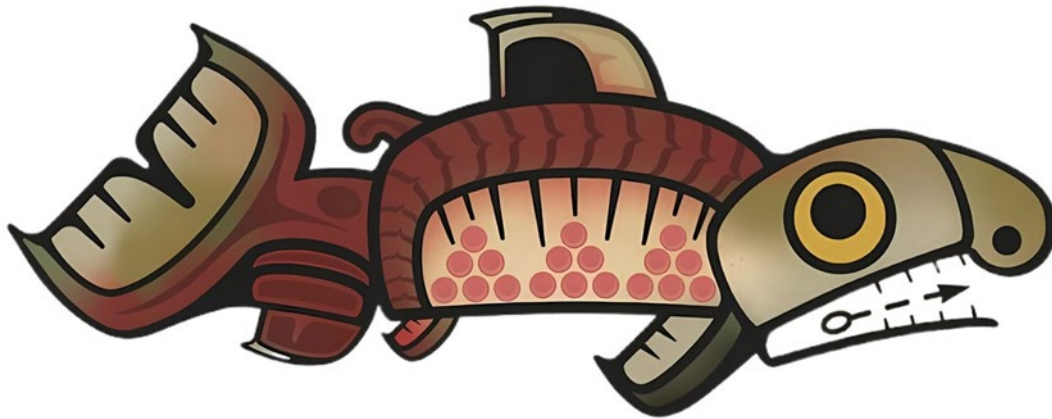


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Vol. 2, Edition six

The Gift of Salmon



SLAM'N SALMON, BY SONNY ASSU. 2024

At 6:00 a.m. Wednesday August 6th, the first Tyee of the season - a powerful Chinook weighing 32 lbs - was brought in from the waters at the mouth of the Campbell River. The catch drew the same kind of early-morning excitement that has filled the banks for generations. While visitors have celebrated these big fish for nearly a century through groups like the Tyee Club, the LiḡwildaḶ people have welcomed the salmon since time beyond memory. Long before photographs or newspapers, the people at ʔuxʷstilis (Tyee Spit) marked this moment each year, honouring the first salmon as the return of an important relative.

In LiḡwildaḶ beliefs, **Kutəla** (salmon) are not viewed as “resources” but as supernatural beings, who live in their own villages beneath the water, powerful warriors who put on their kutəla masks each year to travel back up the rivers. They come willingly, and offer themselves so that humans can live well, and they expect care, respect, and gratitude in return.

This is because a long time ago, there was a period when the people had no kutəla. The villages along the rivers and sea survived on other foods, but they could feel that something was missing.



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Then one day, a great being - some say it was **Kumugwe**, Chief of the Undersea – came and spoke to our ancestors. He told the people there was a gift waiting for them far upriver, if they were ready to receive it.

The being led the people to the headwaters, where they saw *kutəla* for the first time. Their silver backs flashed in the water as they swam. The people were shown how to catch them with nets and weirs, how to cook them over open fire, and how to dry them for winter. They were also taught the most important lesson, that the *kutəla* are our kin. They must be welcomed with ceremony and treated in a way that honours their sacrifice, so they will return year after year.

The teachings were clear: the first *kutəla* of the season should be carried with care, never dragged; cooked and shared so that all may taste; and the bones carefully returned to the water so the *kutəla* can go back to tell their relatives they were treated well. To harm the *kutəla* - by waste, rough handling, or greed - would risk the runs not returning.

For the people at ʔuxʷstilis, this first *kutəla* often came in **ǻmsǻmsdi** (August), also known as the “time of empty fish storage boxes.” By August, the dried winter stores were nearly gone, and the return of *kutəla* brought not only spiritual renewal, but relief from hunger. It was a season of gratitude, when careful fishing, sharing, and ceremony helped ensure the *kutəla* would keep their promise to return.

That promise carried responsibilities. In the past, *kutəla* were greeted not as quarry, but as honoured guests. This relationship was part of a broader law: be mindful, take only what you need, and care for those who care for you.

Today, even without the formal ceremony, many LiğwildaŦ still feel the meaning of that first catch. Standing on the riverbank or the deck of a fishing boat, there’s a quiet moment of thanks, to the *kutəla* for finding their way home, and to the waters that have carried them since time beyond memory.

As the season unfolds, may we remember the teachings from the salmon ceremony; treat the *kutəla* with respect, share what we have, and care for the intricate networks that bring them back to us.



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Vol. 2, Edition seven

Yahniqulus' Dream Experience

THE FOLLOWING STORY WAS RECORDED BY EDWARD CURTIS IN THE NORTH AMERICAN INDIAN (1915, REPRINTED 1970, VOL. 10, PP. 60–61). IT SHARES THE DREAM EXPERIENCE OF YAHNIQULUS, WHO JOURNEYED INTO THE SPIRIT WORLD AND RETURNED TO TELL HIS PEOPLE WHAT HE HAD SEEN.



CHIEFS PARTY - FROM EDWARD S. CURTIS'S "THE NORTH AMERICAN INDIAN - VOLUME 10, THE KWAKWIKWIL."

Long ago, a young man named Yahniqulus had a powerful dream. While his body lay as if dead, his spirit traveled into the next world.

He saw a canoe coming up the river. The men inside called to him: "*Come! You are the one we have come for.*" Yahniqulus climbed in, and the canoe carried him toward his home village of **Tōka** (Jackson Bay). Though the canoe moved without paddles, the journey felt familiar, he recognized every place along the way. In this spirit world, the light was not like sunlight, but more like the flash of a shining surface.



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As they passed through **ʔostowī** (Seymour Narrows), two drowned men sitting on the rocks called out to join them. The spirit men explained, *“Those are drowned ones, we do not take them.”* Near **Qućumin** (Bear River), two others on shore were taken aboard. Yahniqulus recognized one of them as Qunhwulahl, but the other, whose face was blackened, he did not know.

When they reached **Tāka**, there were houses but no smoke. All the spirits were gathered in the dance house. Inside, a cloud of eagle down floated through the air like fog, and when Yahniqulus breathed it in, it caught in his throat and nearly strangled him. He was told to follow careful steps around the fire to keep safe. The noise of the drumming and the striking of batons was deafening, shaking the house. At the right moment, Qunhwulahl urged him to run for the door. Yahniqulus escaped, followed by Qunhwulahl and the black-faced man. They turned back again and again to block the path, holding off the spirits who pursued them.

At last, Yahniqulus found himself alone on a high point of land, sitting beside a stone and weeping for his parents. Then he heard a whistling in the air. When he finally looked up, he saw a great white bird gazing at him. Something in his heart told him to climb onto its back. The bird ran forward on the ground, then rose slowly and heavily into the sky. Higher and higher it spiraled, until it perched on the top of a mountain. Yahniqulus got off, and the bird flew upward until it vanished from sight. Again, he wept.

Before long, the great bird returned. Once more he climbed on, and this time it carried him across the water, setting him down on the top of another mountain. From there he saw a long straight road leading to his people’s camp. As he hurried along, he passed between two trees bent with the weight of owls, the spirits of the dead.

Far ahead he saw a house, and near it a man standing by a stream. The man called out: *“Be careful. You must leap all the way across. If you fall into the water, you will never return. That is why I stay here, to warn those who pass.”* Yahniqulus drew back, then ran and leapt far across, landing safely. He went straight on to the camp, entered the house, and lay down.

At dawn, he awoke to the sound of his mother weeping. His body was already wrapped and bound for burial. He spoke: *“Tell my mother not to weep. Bring me water, for I am thirsty.”* His family brought him water, and he drank. He was alive again.

Yahniqulus told his people what he had seen in the spirit world. Not long after, the two men who had helped him escape from the dance house passed away themselves.



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Vol. 2, Edition eight

The following comes from the late Danielle Assu, published here with permission. She originally shared it with the community along with the following note.



"I always remember having Mulligan while we were canning our fish or when we were anchored out waiting for a fishery.

This always brings back fond memories to me as my great granny would often join us on the boat when we were canning our fish in the summertime.

She would stay with us all day sitting in the galley telling us stories and experiences growing up in her village at Salmon River."



Young Dani and family, enjoying a picnic lunch in Salmon River.



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Fish Mulligan

1 Freshly cleaned Pink Salmon - cut into pieces

1 Onion - cut into chunks

2 Potatoes - cut into cubes

3 Liters water (approx.) use more if necessary

1 tbsp. butter

Salt & Pepper to taste

Dried Seaweed (optional)

Eulachon Oil (optional)

First, sauté onion in butter approximately 5 minutes until the onion is slightly clear but still firm.

Chop potatoes into cubes and place into a pot of water and bring to a gentle boil for

approximately 5 minutes, potatoes should still be a slight bit firm.

Add onion and fish cut into pieces to the boiling potatoes.

Let simmer for approximately 10 minutes.

Remove from heat and top with dried seaweed if you desire.

Serves approximately 4 – 6 persons.

“As a note any type of fish could be substituted for pink salmon.

I believe that we always used the pinks as they are a good mulligan fish.

- Enjoy, Danielle Assu”



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Vol. 2, Edition nine (special, unpublished Edition)

Although this isn't Liḡwildaḑw history, it's something I came across this year and found interesting, especially because it seems to be a piece of history that isn't widely known. Given how close it happened to our region and how it connects to early colonial pressures and gold rush movement through Indigenous territories, I thought others might find it interesting too.

The Fraser Canyon War: The untold story of B.C.'s founding



NOON ON THE FRASER, 1858

In the spring of 1858, the Fraser Canyon became the site of a major conflict between Indigenous Nations and thousands of miners arriving in search of gold. The Nl̓eʔkəpmx (Interior Salish) people of Thompson River had already been mining gold before the arrival of outsiders. When news of gold spread south, large groups of American miners quickly moved into Indigenous territories, often ignoring colonial authorities and Indigenous land rights.

Some miners traveled in organized companies of 250 men carrying U.S. flags. Over 8,000 came north through the Okanagan corridor, where the Okanagan Nation and their allies attempted to block the routes. Others came by the Fraser River, with many deliberately bypassing Fort Victoria to avoid paying mining license fees.



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Tensions rose as miners repeatedly disrespected Indigenous lands and communities. At Okanagan Lake, a group of miners raided an Indigenous camp, destroyed their food supplies, killed unarmed people, and forced survivors to flee to East into Blackfoot (Cree) territory.

Fighting broke out in mining camps near the Nicoamen River and along a riverbank known as China Bar. Miners claimed that 26 of their own had been killed by Indigenous warriors, though some of these deaths likely occurred during river travel. In response, American miners attacked Nl̓eʔkəpmx villages, killing at least 36 people, including respected chiefs.

Some miners formed militias. The Whatcom Guards, led by Captain Graham, openly declared their intention to kill every Indigenous person they encountered. At the same time, another militia, the Pike Guards, led by Captain Henry Snyder, aimed to negotiate peace rather than continue the violence. As Snyder's group moved upriver toward present-day Lytton, he repeatedly urged Graham to stop his attacks.

Snyder eventually met with Chief Sexpinlhemx (Spintlum) and other Nl̓eʔkəpmx leaders on August 22, 1858. They negotiated a peace agreement that allowed miners to continue working in the goldfields while stopping further bloodshed. After the agreement, Snyder sent a white flag downriver to confirm the peace with other militia groups. Captain Graham was seen receiving the flag, scoffing at it and casting it aside, refusing to accept the truce. Soon thereafter, Graham and his lieutenant were assassinated by - many believe - Indigenous warriors watching the camp who had witnessed Graham's rejection of peace.

At Fort Hope, some miners gathered to call for a larger war, alarmed by exaggerated reports of white deaths on the newly opened Harrison-Lillooet trail. Governor James Douglas responded by traveling upriver, the visible presence of British forces discouraging some miners from continuing the conflict. To the miners, Douglas firmly asserted his authority, his arrival signaled that British law would be enforced. However, the Fraser Canyon War exposed the growing tensions between Indigenous Nations, American miners, and British colonial authorities.

The leadership of Chief Sexpinlhemx and peacemaking efforts of Snyder, combined with Douglas's intervention, helped prevent further escalation. Still, the Fraser Canyon War remains a significant event in our province's history. It was one of the earliest major conflicts between First Nations and newcomers in the region and was closely tied to the drawing of modern borders. Beneath these colonial borders, however, questions of land ownership, Indigenous sovereignty, and resource control remain unsettled. Issues that continue to hold relevance today.

Source note:

This summary draws from a combination of archival accounts, including writings from Governor James Douglas and newspaper correspondent Donald Fraser, as well as scholarly work on the Fraser Canyon War. Specific incidents were compiled from historical records, court testimonies, and recent interpretive works by BC historians and museums. Interpretations of militia actions and peace negotiations are supported by documented encounters between Captain Henry Snyder, Chief Spintlum, and colonial officials in August 1858.



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The walas k'wisa (big snow) and the łox'wəd'isbalis (Willow Point) Shipwreck

People often say winters used to be harsher here, but our old people remembered one so fierce it stayed in stories for generations. They called it walas k'wisa (the big snow), a storm that blanketed the coast in white, erased familiar shorelines, and forced people to navigate by memory and instinct. In the villages along the inside passage, snow fell thick and fast, muffled the waves, and left homes buried beneath deep drifts.



FLEET HEADING OUT IN THE SNOW, PHOTO FROM MARK LEWIS

During that winter, k'wisa (snow falling) buried our x'wak'wəna (canoes), froze a thin layer of ice along the waterfront, and weighed heavily on our roofs. Families were cut off from outside supplies for nearly two months. Roads became impassable, and villagers had to carve paths through meters of snow just to reach outbuildings or storage sheds. Settler journals recall how firewood ran dangerously low, and how people even tunneled to fenceposts to keep their woodstoves burning. Children and Elders alike had to navigate drifts of naʔi (snow on the ground) taller than themselves, while community members worked together to keep paths open. Even small tasks, like fetching water or digging out a x'wak'wəna (canoe), could take hours of effort.

Storms like that had the power to stop everything. They slowed life down, rerouted plans, and sometimes brought unexpected things to our shores. One of those things was a steamship. It was one of these winters of deep drifts and frozen shores, when a dramatic event unfolded: the wreck of the SS Cottage City.



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On January 26, 1911, the 200-foot wooden steamer, carrying passengers, freight, and a traveling vaudeville troupe from Seattle, attempted to head north to Alaska during the height of ǾwǾnǾ (winter). Even in calm weather, this route is feared by mariners, with a reef on one side and rocky points on the other. The currents were running hard that day when a heavy fog rolled in. Combined with blowing yola (wind) and sideways kǾisa (snow), visibility reduced to zero.



SS COTTAGE CITY OFF COAST OF WILLOW POINT IN 1911, PHOTO FROM CR MUSEUM

Captain Jensen struggled to navigate through the storm. But the Cottage City struck a reef just off ǾoxǾmǾǾisbalis (Willow Point – grove of alders on the beach). Distress calls went out, and the lifeboats hit the water. One lifeboat reached CǾqǾlutǾn (Cape Mudge), guided by the lighthouse keeper waving a flag from shore, who offered them a warm meal and shelter for the night. Other lifeboats carrying ship's papers, money and freight drifted along the shoreline toward Campbell River, where locals helped recover passengers and salvage belongings.

Miraculously, every passenger and crew member survived. Salvage crews arrived days later, but the vessel was ultimately broken apart by further storms, and pieces of the ship washed up along the coast as far as Chatham Point, 40 km away. Some things were retrieved officially; others were simply found. One ship's logbook from the Cottage City became the property of Major Dick from We Wai Kai, who used it as a potlatch ledger; a copy now resides in our archives. A physical reminder of the link between our communities and that winter disaster.

For LiǾwildaǾw people, storm stories are more than just dramatic moments; they tell us about survival, community, and resilience. The walas kǾisa (big snow) is remembered not only for its danger, but for the lessons it carried. Even in extremes, communities came together, took care of each other and shared what they had. Because whether now or then, our people help one another, our villages endure, and the land and waters continue to bring stories to our shores.