



LIǾWILDAǾW RESEARCH CENTRE

We are continuing regular newsletter updates to share exciting history from the Archives with the communities. Some of you know all about these legends but others do not, so it is a pleasure to introduce V.2, Edition six of; **Tales from the Vault.**



“Sisiyutł Hunter” painting by George Hunt, 1980

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.

In LiǾwildaǾW 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 mǎlǾlu (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."