



LIĞWILDAŦ 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 things but others do not, so it is a pleasure to introduce V.2, Edition four of; **Tales from the Vault.**



Watchman's Pole in Cape Mudge Village, Around 1920s

The Story of the Watchman's Pole

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!aqolas 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.



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 histories, and remember who we are.

Ḡilakas!a 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.