



LIḡW̓IL̓DAḡW̓ RESEARCH CENTRE

We continue to make regular newsletter updates to share exciting history from the archives with our communities. While some of you may know this story, others may not. So, it is my pleasure to introduce you to V.2, Edition nine of **Tales from the Vault**.

The walas k̓wisa (big snow) and the ḡlox̓m̓əd̓isbalis (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 k̓wisa (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, k̓wisa (snow falling) buried our x̓wak̓w̓əna (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 x̓wak̓w̓əna (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 ɕəwənḡ (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 kʷisa (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 ʔoxwədʷisbalis (Willow Point – grove of alders on the beach). Distress calls went out, and the lifeboats hit the water. One lifeboat reached Cəqʷəlutən (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 Liḡwíłdaḡw people, storm stories are more than just dramatic moments; they tell us about survival, community, and resilience. The walas kʷisa (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.