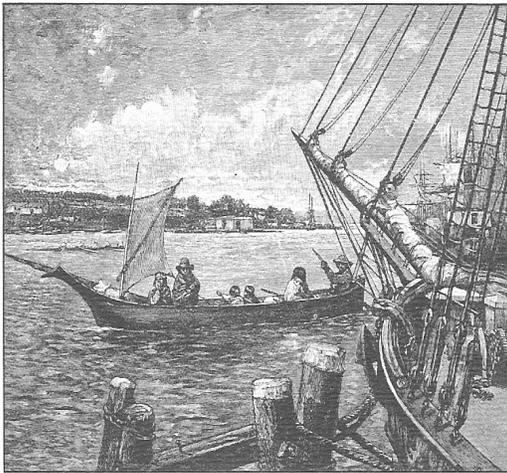


“No, We’re Water People...That’s Why Our Front Door is right there!”

Chief Andy Thomas Aug 4, 2009

By William A. White and Andrew Cienski May 17, 2010



This engraving by Ernest Ingersoll was published in Harper’s New Monthly Magazine, April 1884

The year is 1884 and there are no Starbucks Coffee Shops, Safeway Stores, I-marts or gas stations. The Island Highway to Nanaimo and further north does not exist. There was also no such thing as a Big Gulp! Decades before our time, relatives who came down to potlatch or to play bone games did so by canoes such as the one pictured to the left. In 1847, Chiefs Si’sunuq and Chea-klach regularly harvested such foods as salmon, cod, sturgeon, clams, seal, ducks, geese, and herring roe within a very short distance of their Longhouses.ⁱ

Interactions with Xe’els, the Creator, such as the First Salmon Ceremony, guaranteed regular access to these essential resources.

When families traveled together (as illustrated in the engraving), they were putting into practice something that was the very basis of the strengths of our communities. Today, new dancers travel together as a group and most tend to wait for each other until everyone has arrived before heading into the Bighouse, like a family. We have been here for at least 10,000 years, and our ancestors learned these traditions by paying attention to the land.ⁱⁱ

The purpose of this short article is two-fold. First, echoing Chief Thomas’ interviews when he spoke about being a Water People; the Sacred Trust between ourselves, our lands and our ceremonies; and the original names of the five territories within our home lands. Second, to ask that you think about the modern implications of the 1850 Treaty signed by our ancestors (with James Douglas) especially the section “hunting and fishing as formerly.”

When Si’sunuq and others signed the Treaty in 1850, because of the complex nature of our relationships with the land, resources and our ceremonies, he understood the importance of regular access to fishing, hunting, ceremonial sites, etc. Of these complex relationships Chief Andy Thomas said it was our responsibility “to look after the land”ⁱⁱⁱ. Just as everything in nature relies on something else for its health and survival, this interdependence, or Sacred Trust, teaches the fundamental nature of self government. For this reason it is very important that we

..understand our relationship to the water, to the land, to the sea resources, all the fish, the clams, the ducks, the deer, the elk. All our foods. All the ceremonies that have to take place. ^{iv}

The Victoria (*Matoolia*) area was divided into five territories. These lands essentially belonged to settlements that were made up of extended families. Though some overlapped in places, they were as follows^v: Tsuli'lhchu, around Mount Douglas (*P'q'a'ls*); Cheko'nein, around Cadborough Bay; Chikowetch, around Oak Bay; Swenghwung, around James Bay; and Xwsepsum (sometimes spelled Kosapsum) in what is now called Esquimalt. Though each *sche'chu* (family) had its own territory, they all spoke the same language, Lekwungen. Lekwungen, which used to be called Songish, is similar to the Saanich, Lummi, Samish, and Sooke languages. They are dialects of what linguists call the Straits Salish language.

There were many families living around what is now Victoria, Esquimalt and Saanich. Each family lived together in villages, *sqw'uqw'unukwul*. Each *sqw'uqw'unukwul* had several longhouses (*chuqew't-hw*). Children lived with their parents, aunts, uncles, cousins and grandparents in a single large *chuqew't-hw*. The neighbouring homes were more distant relations, or *sche'le'chu* (one family is *sche'chu*, more than one is *sche'le'chu*). For as long as our parents, grandparents and great-grandparents could remember, knowing who we are and knowing the importance of being quiet, brought gifts and understanding. Of our relationship with all living things Chief Andrew Thomas said:

Until we start to reach our young people so that they know how to use those mountains; ..how to use that beach again. Listen to the birds. Listen to the water. Listen to the winds. They all got something for all of us, each and every one of us.^{vi}

Together, a family owned a large territory, *shhwule'e'*, where they would hunt, trap game, and harvest food and medicine from the plants. *Sqw'uqw'unukwul* (villages— one village is *sqw'unukwul*) were almost always on the shore, giving *sche'le'chu* (families) access to clams, fish, and seals. They also owned reefnet sites at locations where schools of migrating salmon would pass close to the shore. Our ancestors, including Si'sunuq, understood that survival meant learning our responsibilities to all living things; a complex relationship that continues today. In speaking about these complex relationships Chief Thomas referred to these as self government and said:

“...respect ..and accept us for who we are. Let us be who we are. Let us get that fish out there. Let us get that deer and those ducks. Because it's a part of us. We have laws that govern our relationship to the land, the water,

and the resources. “vii

Some *sqw’uqw’unkwul* were winter villages. In the summer time, extended families often dispersed in smaller groups throughout the area to hunt and harvest elsewhere. When they did this they either set up small temporary camps with tents made from reed mats, or they would take down the plank walls of their Bighouses and move them to summer village locations. Only the supporting beams of the Bighouse remained when they did this, including *qequn*, house posts. These canoe trips often took our people to territories owned by other *sche’le’chu* (families), some as far away as the mainland or down into Puget Sound. Those *sche’le’chu* shared the resources of their lands, and in return they would come to this area to reefnet, hunt and harvest foods at other times of the year.

In the winter, people from neighbouring nations would often visit each other’s winter dances (*smilhu*) and ceremonial feasts (*stl’e’eshun*). Since there were strict rules against marrying people from within your own community, because they were related, dances and feasts gave regular opportunities to reconnect with *sche’le’chu*, families and friends, the way *smilhu* and *stl’e’eshun* still do today.

The combination of all of these things, especially echoing the teachings handed down to Chief Andy Thomas as Hereditary Chief and many of our own Ancestors, has been referred to as ‘marking the trail’ in order to help young people understand who we are.

ⁱ Read Paul Kane, Wanderings of an Artist Among the Indians of North America from Canada to Vancouver’s Island and Oregon Through the Hudson’s Ba Company’s Territory and Back again. (Edmonton: Hurtig Publishers, 1968) pp144 -154. Kane visited the Esquimalt and other territories in 1847.

ⁱⁱ Elizabeth Lominska Johnson and Kathryn Bernick. Hands of Our Ancestors: The Revival of Salish Weaving at Musqueam (Vancouver: University of British Columbia, 1986) p.5

ⁱⁱⁱ Interview with Chief Andrew Thomas, Hereditary Chief, Esquimalt Nation. August 4, 2009. p. 4

^{iv} *ibid* p. 3

^v The spellings in this article try to show the pronunciation of place names recorded from speakers, such as Edward Joe, Sophie Mishael, and Ned Williams (These words were recorded by people such as Wilson Duff, Wayne Suttles, and Marjorie Mitchell). The writing system generally follows the current Hul’qumi’num’ system, since it’s one of the easiest to read without special training.

^{vi} Interview with Chief Andrew Thomas, Hereditary Chief, Esquimalt Nation. August 4, 2009.p. 9

^{vii} *Ibid* p. 5