

150 years ago in the Shuswap

A *Shuswap Passion* column for the Shuswap Market News

By Jim Cooperman

This year the province of British Columbia celebrates its 150th anniversary, which commemorates the year that it became a colony of Great Britain. Until 1858, this province was not much more than a private fur trade enclave run by the Hudson's Bay Company. It was the discovery of gold in the Fraser River that resulted in thousands of miners flooding into the region and thus prompted the English parliament to create a government here to ward off the possibility of Yankee expansionism.

As the province gears up to celebrate this anniversary with heritage events and displays, it is time to reflect on what life was like in the Shuswap 150 years ago. This is not an easy task; as few historical records exist that describe our region because the only white people here then were the fur traders based at Fort Kamloops. The Mary Balf Archives in Kamloops contain only a few copies of Hudson's Bay journals, as the bulk of these are stored in Winnipeg.

One has to imagine what the land looked like here before contact, but it is likely there were extensive stands of old growth forests, lakes and streams crowded with trout and salmon, and hillsides teeming with deer, elk and even caribou. Some treed hillsides today, such as parts of the Larch Hills, were regularly burned to produce berries and other foods. Prior to contact, this area was a rich world for the First Nation peoples, but by 1858 life was already changing.

Hudson's Bay records show the Secwepemc people adapted quickly to the ways of the white men and had become dependent upon trapping and trading in order to procure goods such as axes, cookware, beads, knives, flour, tobacco, muskets, blankets and traps. By 1827, the peak of beaver production had passed and over-trapping had left the country almost destitute. Martens replaced the beaver, but the introduction of firearms led to an overkill of deer resulting in a shortage of buckskin and venison. The native people were persuaded to also trade dried salmon and by the 1840s and 1850s there were occasions when some bands were on the verge of starvation. Diseases, including diphtheria, also took a toll causing population numbers to plummet.

While lifestyle changes likely occurred more slowly for native bands that lived farther away from Fort Kamloops, there were a few ways that the Shuswap Lakes bands were exposed to European contact during these transition years. The old Bridgade trail that passed through the upper Salmon River Valley continued to be an important trade route long after the Hudson's Bay Company began using a different route to the coast in 1849 that passed between Tulameen and Hope.

While local native people would often travel to Fort Kamloops with their furs, traders would also venture out to what they called the "upper lakes" to buy furs from Adam, Gregoire, Grand Antoine and Skainilth (Niskonlith), all of whom were key chiefs and leaders. Here is one journal entry from October 22, 1860 that provides a glimpse of what

life was like then, “Had a long talk with Gregoire and his band about their hunting and afterwards gave them a dram each and also 10 charges Powder and ball and 6 inches tobacco each as gratuity.”

Life began to change dramatically in 1858 as U. S. gold seekers began to pour across the border in the Okanagan to head up to Tranquille and the Cariboo and later to the Shuswap Lakes region and the Columbia. A number of huge supply pack trains also came through that year, but some miners faced resistance from tribes near the border and there were a number of skirmishes. Along with the miners came smallpox, which devastated many of the bands. Epidemics of measles, influenza, whooping cough and tuberculosis, followed, wiping out nearly three quarters of the Secwepemc population and only 17 of the original 30 bands survived.

While the North Thompson bands were nearly wiped out, a larger percentage may have survived in this area, thanks to armed resistance from Adams Lake. In 1866, Henry Featherstone, a surgeon, notified the Colonial Secretary about gold discoveries at Scotch Creek and Adams Lake, but noted the miners were “informed they would not be allowed to return. The Indians said the Boston men would destroy all of their potato patches that are now cultivated, ravish their women and infect them with disease [and] therefore threatened any one with death who went up the lake.”

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