

Famous First Nation Petition 100 years old
A *Shuswap Passion* column for the Shuswap Market News
By Jim Cooperman

This year marks the 100th anniversary of a pivotal event in southern interior First Nation history, when three chiefs representing the Shuswap, Thompson and Okanagan Nations presented a petition to Sir Wilfrid Laurier. Known as the Laurier Memorial, this document described their 100 years of contact with the Europeans, a sad history of exploitation and abuse and it made a solid case for solutions to the land issue and the question of Aboriginal title and rights.

The Memorial is written in the style of a letter that expresses from the First Nations point of view their hope that Laurier will see that their “wrongs may at last be righted.” Laurier responded to the presentation, read by Father Le Jeune in a hall in Kamloops on August 25th, 1910, with a promise to help them. However, he lost the election the following year and these First Nations were forced to carry on presenting their grievances to successive federal governments without any resolution to their concerns.

The preparation of the Memorial was made possible thanks to the help of ethnographer James Teit, a young Scotsman who settled at Spences Bridge and married a member of the Thompson Nation. The chiefs had dictated their letter to Teit, who could translate their languages into English. Teit became an advocate for Native rights and wrote several treatises on Interior Salish tribes that includes many ancient legends and stories.

The chiefs considered Laurier to be a “real white,” the description they gave to the fur traders, most of whom were French. They trusted and respected the French because of the respect these French traders showed towards them. In those first 50 years of contact, the French did not try to take their lands, nor did they prevent them from hunting and fishing.

Life for the interior tribes began to change dramatically in 1858, as thousands of Americans and Europeans swarmed into the hills in search of gold. By 1862, the establishment of Indian reserves resulted in the loss of their land and resources. And thousands of Native people died when smallpox and other diseases swept through their communities.

From the interior chiefs’ point of view, the European settlers and the government in Victoria took advantage of the Natives’ friendliness and weaknesses to force their unjust laws and rules on them. As the Memorial explains, “They enforce their own laws one way for the rich white man, one way for the poor white, and yet another for the Indian.” From their perspective, the ‘Whites’ stole their lands and resources and treated them “as less than children and allow us ‘no say’ in anything.”

The Memorial places most of the blame on the B.C. government, while it looks to the federal government for support because the chiefs believed the Queen’s law guaranteed their rights. Yet the Indian agents appeared to neglect them. And when help in the form

of agricultural tools, schools and medicines were offered, the chiefs turned these down for fear they would be charged for the help and would thus lose even more of their land.

The Memorial mentions another petition presented in 1908 that listed the many disabilities faced by the interior tribes, including the loss of pasture and water supplies to white settlers, the inadequacy of their reservation lands, the restrictions placed on their hunting and fishing, and the depletion of salmon by over-fishing. In some cases, Natives were fined and imprisoned for breaking game and fish laws. Essentially, these original inhabitants became “regarded as trespassers over a large portion” of the land that was once their own.

Despite the chiefs’ condemnation of “the B.C. government towards the Indian tribes of this country as utterly unjust, shameful and blundering in every way,” they continued to harbour “no grudge against the white race as a whole nor against the settlers.” Instead, the chiefs called for getting an equal chance at making a living and looked to the federal government to settle the land question fairly.

Former Skeetchestn Indian Band Chief, SFU professor Dr. Ron Ignace believes the Memorial rings more truth today than it did in 1910. “The Secwepemc Chiefs like their ancestors, call on the support of the ordinary citizens by stating that our fight is not with those who took up land in good faith; our fight is with the government and citizens have a duty to see that their government does the right thing,” noted Ignace.

The Shuswap Nation Tribal Council has plans to commemorate the 100th anniversary of the Laurier Memorial at its annual Shuswap Gathering that will take place this year at the end of July at the Kamloops Indian Band Pow-Wow grounds.