

## **Shuswap – What’s in a name?**

A *Shuswap Passion* column for the Shuswap Market News

By Jim Cooperman

The Shuswap region, like other regions of the province, is named after the aboriginal people who lived here for thousands of years prior to when the white men arrived. The Hudson Bay traders, who were the first white people to arrive here, could not pronounce the word Secwepemc (or Shoo-whā’ -pa-mooh as recorded by Dawson or Suxwa’pmux as recorded by Teit), which was the word the aboriginal people used to describe themselves. Other meanings of the word include upper waters, spillover of water and downriver. Consequently, their original mispronunciation, shuswap, became the word used to describe this region’s indigenous people as well as many of the region’s geographic features. It is likely David Thompson himself who began the usage as his 1813 map gives a rough sketch of a large lake draining into “Shweewap River” to the west. The word Secwepemc has been revived and is now used as the name for the Shuswap Nation’s Cultural Education Society.

The Shuswap people are classified as part of the Interior-Salish.Ethnic Division, based on their language, which is one of 34 dialects in the province. Shuswap territory once stretched from west of the Fraser River to the Rockies and from the Okanagan to north of Williams Lake. The thirty original bands who numbered upwards of 7,000 or likely more suffered greatly from the fur trade and later the gold rush which brought starvation and diseases to a once culturally rich, self-sufficient people. As a result, their population shrank and nearly half of the bands were lost.

When the Indian reserves were first allocated under Governor Douglas in 1862, the Shuswap claim’s included a huge area from Scotch Creek to the North Thompson River. A few years later the reserves were radically reduced in sized by Surveyor-General Joseph Trutch, but were then doubled when B.C. joined Confederation in 1871. Because of the unjust land allocation and the lack of treaties, an uprising nearly occurred in 1877, but federal commissioner Gilbert Sproat was able to cool down the situation.

Although the Shuswap people left no written records, they had a rich oral history consisting of legends and traditions, some of which still exist today. Since the Hudson Bay Company’s records only contained a few references to the Shuswap peoples, most of the written information that exists today comes from the ethnography studies published by Frank Boas in 1890, George Dawson in 1881 and James Teit in 1909. Further knowledge can only come now from archaeological digs and carbon dating. Unfortunately, many artifacts disappeared long ago into private hands and distant museums and many heritage sites adjacent to the lakes and rivers have been destroyed by land development and erosion.

The hardships endured by the Shuswap people by the loss of their ancestral lands were compounded by the government’s deliberate attempt to destroy their culture. In 1890, a residential school was built in Kamloops and all native children were required to attend. The children were forbidden to speak their language and were forced to adopt the white culture. For many, alcoholism and despair took over their lives. Thankfully, in the last few decades the tide has turned, as the Shuswap language is now taught in Shuswap

Nation schools and the 17 Shuswap bands are becoming economically, socially and culturally successful. To learn more about the Shuswap people, visit their website: [www.secwepemc.org](http://www.secwepemc.org).