

Secwepemc way of life

A *Shuswap Passion* column for the Shuswap Market News

By Jim Cooperman

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Eight to ten thousand years of Secwepemc peoples' life here is a very long time, especially when compared to the more recent origins of the European civilization. Although the early Secwepemc left no totem poles, long houses or written records, their culture had advanced to the point that there were aspects that were indeed more civilized than parts of our culture now. Not only did Shuswap's indigenous people treat the environment sustainably, but they treated each other with more respect than we often witness today, given the number of homeless people living in many North American cities.

Since most of the archaeological sites date back to no farther than 4,000 years ago, archaeologists have divided the Secwepemc history into three eras or horizons; beginning with the Shuswap horizon (4,000 to 2,400 years before the present or BP); the Plateau horizon (2,400 to 1,200 BP); and the Kamloops horizon from 1,200 BP to the beginning of the fur trade.

However, a few sites have been located that contain material carbon dated from an earlier period in time. Close to the Shuswap along Gore Creek near the South Thompson River, Canada's oldest securely-dated human skeletal remains were found dating back to 8,250 BP. Analysis shows that the diet then was meat based, as salmon were not yet plentiful then. Elsewhere, to the west and the east, artifacts such as projectile points have been found that match those found to the south that have been dated as far back at 10,000 BP. In the South Shuswap, a rock shelter yielded carbon material that was dated to 8,100 B.P.

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. All of their reports agree on one important facet of Secwepemc culture, that compared to other tribes, the Secwepemc people were primarily egalitarian and peaceful although some of the western division bands were often at war with other tribes over resources.

Unlike our society, in which might is often right and greed too often rules, the primary focus for the Secwepemc peoples was sharing and making sure that no one went without adequate food and shelter. Hunters would always share their meat and fisherman their catches. Their belief system included the notion that stinginess resulted in bad luck. And there was no individual land ownership, as the land and the resources were shared equally amongst a tribe.

For the Adams Lake Band the tradition of sharing carries on. Each fall, there is a communal fishery and those who cannot fish help with the cleaning and take home what they need for the winter. As well, there is a community hunt and the meat is given to the needy and used for community gatherings.

While there was a division of labour between men and woman, it was not set in stone as often some women would hunt and some men would assist with the berry picking and food processing and at times made their own clothing. According to Teit, “Chiefs had no special privileges, and their only duties were to look after the general welfare of the band, regulating when necessary, the gathering of the food-supply, so that all could have an equal chance, and admonishing the lazy and quarrelsome.”

Until the arrival of the Europeans, the Secwepemc had managed their land base sustainably. In some areas, forests were burnt to encourage the growth of berries and feed for deer, elk and caribou. Fishermen were careful to avoid overfishing and to ensure there were enough salmon and trout in the rivers and streams to maintain the populations. Berry bushes were often pruned to encourage future growth and leaves and roots were harvested selectively to leave enough to ensure these plants continued to flourish.

Perhaps the most important part of Secwepemc social structure were their extended families that allowed the young people to learn from their elders and to ensure that their heritage and culture passed on from generation to generation. One of their most important values, which was so important to the Secwepemc way of life, was Kweseltnews, meaning “we are all family.” As famed Neskonlith elder, Mary Thomas explained in one of her university lectures, “It was a must to have a strong family unit.”

Nearly two hundred years of European exploitation and mistreatment led to the near destruction of this province’s first nation cultures. However, since the 1970s, the Secwepemc people have been regaining their heritage by focusing on those values that allowed their civilization to flourish for so many millennia. We can all benefit by learning more about the Secwepemc peoples and gaining more respect for their way of life.