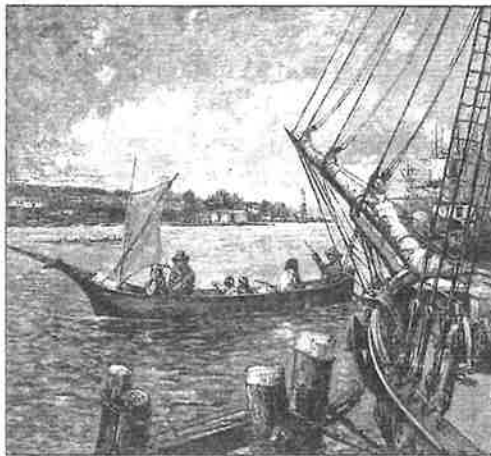


## **“No, We’re Water People...That’s Why Our Front Door is right there!”** Chief Andy Thomas Aug 4, 2009

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.<sup>i</sup>

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.<sup>ii</sup>

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”<sup>iii</sup>. 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. <sup>iv</sup>

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<sup>v</sup>: 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 (*chuwew't-hw*). Children lived with their parents, aunts, uncles, cousins and grandparents in a single large *chuwew'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.<sup>vi</sup>

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. <sup>vi</sup>

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.

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<sup>i</sup> 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.

<sup>ii</sup> 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

<sup>iii</sup> Interview with Chief Andrew Thomas, Hereditary Chief, Esquimalt Nation. August 4, 2009. p. 4

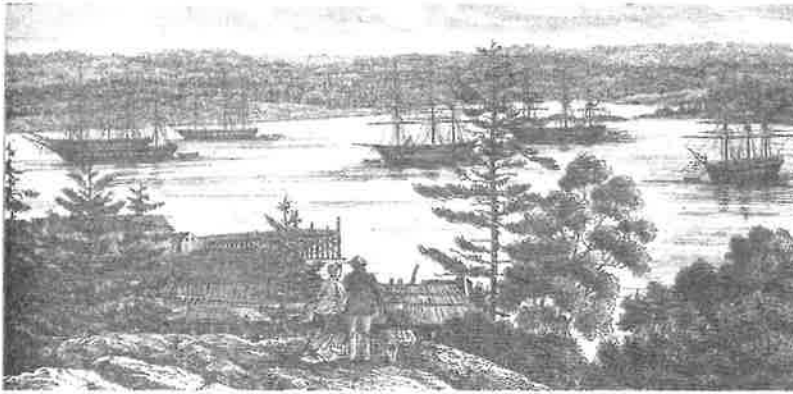
<sup>iv</sup> *ibid* p. 3

<sup>v</sup> 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.

<sup>vi</sup> Interview with Chief Andrew Thomas, Hereditary Chief, Esquimalt Nation. August 4, 2009.p. 9

<sup>vii</sup> *Ibid* p. 5





Esquimalt Harbour, 1872. Note longhouses in the foreground and trees surround the village area. Villages were built along the seashore to give ready access to fishing sites and to help with travel. Surrounding forest areas provided wildlife for easily accessible food sources, as well as allowing easy access to ritual and ceremonial sites. Look closely at this picture, as it has captured the territory of the families known as Teechamitsa, Xwsepsum, Swenghwung, Chilkowetch, Hwyywmlith, Cheko'nein, Kakyakaan, Tsuli'Ihchu. Our Ancestors  
In Canadian Illustrated News. Engraver E. Haberer

## **Sacred Trust: Our Traditions still continue...**

### **“We’re all connected to all these..”**

While speaking about our teachings, August 2009, Chief Andrew Thomas said “..it’s what’s going to give us a long life, when you follow those teachings.”

The purpose of this short article is to connect historical evidence identifying use of the land and sea resources by our Ancestors as they relate to our teachings. Secondly, it is meant to identify important elements of the Treaty of 1850 signed with Esquimalt ancestors, in particular the Kosapsum (Xwsepsum) family. One of the fundamental promises made to the Xwsepsum was to be able to “hunt and fish as formerly”. Prior to the arrival of the Xwulunitum (Whites) to our shores the entire territory was used for secular and sacred reasons. For example, if you look at the picture again, notice the forested areas surrounding the village—wilderness sites where hunting and fishing activities, gathering of plants, roots and berries by Xwsepsum occurred all year round.

Our teachings are as old as time itself—we have been here for over 10,000 years (Lominska, Johnson and Bernick, 1986:5). That is a very long time. In all that time we have developed and maintained important cultural mechanisms such as the Winter Dance Complex, and later on, the Shaker Church. It is in these mechanisms that we find the values and traditions spoken about by Chief Thomas as a “Sacred Trust”. He described the Sacred Trust as a relationship of trust and responsibility to work and help one other. It is held between children,

parents and families, between communities and their leaders, and between the land and the people. That responsibility was also reinforced by the Anthropologist Wayne Suttles who, while writing about our traditions said “..his survival as a whole person must surely contribute to this cultural reproductivity,” and were applied to “influence the continuing evolution of Indian culture” (W. Suttles 1963:229-230).

The old people, with one look, could tell if a person was taught our ways or participated within our own cultural activities. Participation within our very old cultural systems by the whole family, leads to stronger families, and to knowing that we hold relationships and alliances between our territories. Think about how whole extended families, during a naming ceremony for example, all get up when a speaker is hired or when the speaker begins to announce the names of those people called upon to witness the work. Suttles wrote that these interactions are “the most significant aspect of contemporary Coast Salish life” (Suttles 1963:18). When we help each other and stand together in this way, our responsibilities are shared and we know we belong to a larger community. It is this aspect that Chief Thomas refers to when he says, “..it’s what’s going to give us a long life, when you follow those teachings,”

In 1848 the population of Xwulmuxw (Indians), on Vancouver Island was 11,463 people, and this was after already surviving a disastrous smallpox epidemic in the 1780’s that killed at least 50% of the people. Today, it is hard to imagine a time when only our own people moved across the land hunting, fishing, visiting relatives, visiting to potlatch or play bone games. At the same time, significant family groups in our immediate region were identified as Teechamitsa, Kosapsum (Xwsepsum), Swenghwung, Chilkowetch, Hwuyuwilth, Cheko’nein, Kakyaakan, Tsuli’lhchu.

The attached photo shows our world as it existed in 1872. The world of the Esquimalt Nation still had wilderness areas surrounding immediate village sites. Access to wilderness sites was important to our ancestors as it meant access to hunting and fishing sites. When the 1850 Treaty was signed, our ancestors had wanted to keep, according to Chief Thomas, significant access to hunting and fishing sites. Increased development around our homelands has seriously restricted and prevented our ability ‘to hunt and fish as formerly’. Families who hunt and fish for winter dance and family meetings can no longer access sites within a short distance of our homes. Surely the loss of traditional hunting, fishing, and gathering sites, and the loss of lands due to encroachment of houses and roads means an infringement of the 1850 Treaty signed with the Xwsepsum by James Douglas.

The ancestor of Chief Andy Thomas, Sisunuq was one of the Chiefs from the Xwsepsum family and his people had at least 3-4 village sites in the immediate region of what is now known as Victoria (A. Thomas, 2009:6). These were the families that signed the 1850 Treaty with James Douglas. One of the advantages of the Esquimalt Nation, compared to other Treaty Tribes, comes from Chief Thomas’ ability to identify a direct line to Chieftainship to his 3rd Great Grandfather Sisunuq.

The ancestors' world was complex and based on renewing their relationship with the Creator and protecting their families and relatives. For example, ritual preparation to assume the role of a Chief required extensive seclusion. In 1847, a Chief known as Chea-clach in preparation to assuming a chieftainship from his father went to the mountains for 30 days and nights to dream and fast (Kane, 1968:150-53). After this he returned and his family hosted others to announce his new status. Then, like today, relatives would have provided seafood, deer, plants etc. to feed their guests. Theirs world, like ours, was one in which the youth inherited teachings and rules for good living from parents, grandparents etc.. Today, we also still have ceremonies which require cleansing, seclusion, and public validation of a new status.

Others who underwent training were medicine people. According to Kane they went into seclusion for three days and on the fourth day were taken and washed in cold water and bathed. Today, our families are familiar with ritual seclusion and then ritual morning bathing to wake up a person. In another instance the host of a gathering distributed all his property including "blankets, shells, [and] ornaments" and another gave "twelve bales of blankets, 20 -30 guns, numerous pots, kettles, pans, knives, great quantities of beads, trinkets and Chinese boxes." Generosity of this nature was expected of Chiefs and fulfilled the Sacred Trust requirement to help and look after their extended family and community. And, of course, the distribution of wealth items validated status (Kane, 1968:150-153). All of these are good examples of traditions which have been held for hundreds and hundreds of years. In the context of the 1850 Treaty with our ancestors, this kind of evidence proves our reliance on wilderness areas around our village sites to supply us with meat, fish, and plants to feed our guests, which was and is a big part of who we are.

Our people in the Central Coast Salish region continue to invite relatives and friends to gatherings, to initiate dancers, to use rites associated with the Shulmuhwtsus Rattles, Sxwaixwe Masks, etc., conduct memorials, and yes, to use and validate ancestral names. When speaking about our ritual and ceremonial world, Chief Andy Thomas learned the following from his grandfather and from that time related the following, "...we're all connected to all these, and that's why we have our ceremonies in place. So we can protect ourselves from hurting our own bodies, hurting our children, our family around us. That's why I call it that Sacred Trust that we have with our territory."(2009:5)

W. White August

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