

FIRST NATIONS ELDERS AND FORESTRY: A HAPPILY REMEMBERED HISTORY

By Ian MacNeill

*Oh, the cedar tree!
If mankind in his infancy
had prayed for the perfect substance
for all material and aesthetic needs,
an indulgent god could have provided
nothing better.*

- From "Out of the Silence", by Bill Reid (1971)

The First Nations of coastal British Columbia have been engaged in forestry for thousands of years. Long before the arrival of the first Europeans with their iron saws and axes, aboriginal craftsmen were using stone, bone and even shell tools to peel planks off living trees in order to construct long-houses and falling giant cedars to make dugout canoes. Wood use among First Nations was ubiquitous. Craftspersons used it to make a host of everyday items including ladles and bowls, boxes and tools, while artists fashioned fantastical masks and expressive sculptures as well as mortuary and totem poles emblazoned with ancient family symbols. Western red cedar, the tree of life, was prized and through its contribution to the survival of the people earned a place of utmost respect. In addition to its wood products, the cedar tree's bark was woven into clothing, hats, baskets and blankets.

Because First Nations artisans were often able to harvest what they needed from living trees there are some still standing bearing marks of cultural modification including cuts, scrapes and scars. Unfortunately, many of these living artifacts were harvested prior to an understanding of their cultural and historical significance, but they are now seen as part of Canada's architectural and historical heritage and are protected by law.

Although many of the old ways have vanished, the forest is still an important part of the First Nations economy, and according to elders interviewed here, BC's forests could and should play an even more important role in the future, providing jobs, pride and self-reliance.

In this issue we present the first of a two-part series on First Nations

involvement with forestry in British Columbia. In this instalment, we hear about the recent past from five elders. In the second instalment, scheduled to appear in the spring issue of *Truck LoggerBC*, we will look at First Nations involvement today.

Chief Frank Malloway, 80, Yakwekwioose First Nation, Chilliwack

Chief Frank Malloway's early career as a logger occurred suddenly but unsurprisingly. Both his father Richard and his uncle Vince were loggers, as was his brother Mervyn, so when a friend showed up at school one day in the sixties and announced that logging operations had opened in the Chilliwack Valley he didn't think twice about signing up; it was what everybody did!

"It was the main occupation back then," recalls the presiding chief of the Yakwekwioose First Nation in the Upper Fraser Valley. "And it was easy to get a job. There were all these gyppo operations near Harrison Lake, so many you could quit a job on Friday and be back working for someone else on Monday." He even worked across the border in the United States, a fringe benefit of his having a status card connecting him to the larger community of Coast Salish people in Washington State.

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He really looked up to his uncle Vince, his one-armed uncle Vince who worked his entire life in the forest, primarily as a faller, manning his end of a two-man hand saw in the early days and later a two-man chainsaw with as much or more gusto than most men with two good arms. "He was my role model," says Chief Malloway. "He got married and raised six or seven kids. He spent his whole life working. Even after he quit logging he went slash cutting for the power lines."

Even though he gave it up after 11 years to pursue other interests Chief Malloway thinks it would be good for more young people from First Nations go into the woods to work, partly because of the inherent respect their people have traditionally had for the forest. "We always prayed to the cedar for the way it served our people, we use the boughs to cleanse ourselves and make a red paint from the rotting powder in the tree to protect us from bad things," he says. "Anything the creator gave us was sacred, like the salmon."

Larry Baird, 69, Ucluelet First Nation, Port Alberni

When Larry Baird and his cousin showed up at the office of MacMillan Bloedel's Sproat Lake Division in the late 1960s the manager took one look at the two teenagers with their long hair and "hippie" appearance and made them an offer, cut your hair and you can have a job.

"I didn't mind," recalls the long-time chief councillor for the Ucluelet First Nation on Vancouver Island. "It wasn't really conducive to the working environment." He started out the way we all did back then, clambering through the thick brush setting chokers, eventually working his way up to hook tender. His dream was to become a faller but

his wife wasn't having any of it so when the call went out for more logging truck drivers he jumped at it. "I loved driving," he says. "It was like having a job with no boss because you're on your own. As long as you hauled your quota of loads nobody bothered you. And the pay was good. When I left I found out I was the tenth highest-paid worker at the division."

Political by nature, he got involved with the union and worked his way up to second vice president of the now-defunct

IWA in Port Alberni, proving his mettle by signing up new members working for non-unionized contractors. There were tense moments. “I used to have to stand up to angry loggers who thought they were being ripped off,” he says. He also lived through the so-called War in the Woods, the long and often bitter struggle over the future of Clayoquot Sound.

In 1993 he was part of a team that secured the rights to log in the region and went on to help form Iisaak Forest Resources (iisaak being a Nuu-chah-nulth word that means “respect”), which at one time employed as many as 60 of his people. Although Iisaak has significantly reduced its scale and scope of operations, Baird believes forestry represents one of the best opportunities for his people going forward. “Logging is a great vocation,” he says. “We could be as successful as any company if we worked together.”

Matt Johnson, 78, Heiltsuk First Nation, Bella Coola

Matt Johnson was 20 years old in the year 1957 when he decided he’d try his hand at logging. He started out working as a boom man, herding the fresh-cut logs for orderly transport to the many sawmills dotted along the coast. He got pretty adept at dancing over them in the crystal clear waters of Rivers Inlet, what with their tendency to roll and bob like elusive opponents in the boxing ring, although he confesses with a chuckle that he went into the drink a few times. To show how much times have changed we asked him what kind of training he received prior to starting work. “Didn’t have any training,” he says laughing again. “I learned it

by myself,” he adds in what is probably the industrial equivalent of learning to swim by jumping in the deep end. One thing he does remember is the long hours, 12 and even 14-hour days; on the water before sunrise and working until dusk, this at a time when, at least according to Statistics Canada, weekly earnings in the logging industry averaged \$69.03 or \$1.72 an hour based on a 40-hour week. Before he wound up his career in 2005 he’d spent 25 years on the water before going to work higher up in the logging food chain—toiling in logging camps setting chokers, working the landing, hook tending. Where? “All over,” he says with an air of triumph. He didn’t mind camp life, it all depended on the camp, and of course the cook, always the cook. He thinks well enough of the life he had to recommend it to others. “It’s good to work in the forest,” he says, “and it’s better than welfare.”

Cody Gus, 84, Tseshaht First Nation, Port Alberni

Looking back over a long life, Tseshaht elder Cody Gus remembers with great fondness the half century he spent working in the woods on Vancouver Island, and on occasion, in Washington State. “It was good work with good friends, and the pay was alright too,” he says. He started out setting chokers at a rate of \$1.25 an hour and went on to become a boom man, and for the last decade of his career he was the skipper of a tug working on Sproat Lake, a job he describes as both fun and liberating because of the independence and authority that came with the job. As was usually the case back then you learned on the job, starting at the bot-

tom and working your way up; even the skipper’s job was picked up on the fly. “Didn’t need a ticket back then,” he recalls. Like other young men of the First Nations he followed in his father’s footsteps. “My dad was a boom man and so were my brothers,” he says. Carrying no regrets about his choice of careers, Gus says he only wishes there were more jobs in the forest and more young people willing to do them. “It was a great life,” he says.

Vera Peacey, 67, Homalco First Nation, Campbell River

It was a world of hard work and simple pleasures but Vera Peacey recalls it all with great affection. She was born in 1946 in the hamlet of Redonda Bay of a Russian father and a Homalco mother who met at the cannery that was once the core of the community’s existence. It was logging her father loved best though and it was Homalco people who lived there so it was Homalco people he hired when he started a small logging operation on Pryce Channel. “Everybody worked back then,” she recalls now from her home in Campbell River. “I don’t even know if there was such a thing as welfare; everybody did what they had to do to feed their families.” Her dad was definitely old school, and for a time he hand-logged on Raza Island, often with the help of her Uncle Willie. Together they’d hew the trees and jack them into the water, eventually forming booms that would be sent off to the mills at the end of the season. The aboriginal name for the place she grew up is T’xém7aajim, which means ‘red cedar place’ and Vera tells of harvesting bark with her mother Irene to make baskets that were sold to supplement the family’s income. She also remembers the row houses of her people running along the creek. “There were some very good people living there back then,” she says.

These are only a few of the many stories that could be told by First Nations elders about their involvement with forestry, an occupation that for British Columbia’s First Nations is as ancient as the people themselves. While the stories are different, our elders were in agreement on one thing, forestry could and should be a part of their communities’ futures.▲



Photo: Image 1245 courtesy of the Museum of Campbell River

This basket was woven by Vera Peacey’s mother, Irene, when the family was living in Redonda Bay. Irene’s baskets helped supplement the family income.