

Ethnohistory Field School Report 2011

“Bring Home the Canoe”: History and Interpretation of Sepass Canoes In S’ohl Temexw

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The Ethnohistory Field School is a collaboration of the Stó:lō Research and Resource Management Centre, Stó:lō Nation & Stó:lō Tribal Council, and the History Departments of the University of Victoria and University of Saskatchewan.



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Figure 1. Shovel-nosed canoe carved by Cheif William Sepass in 1915.
Photograph by author, at Xá:ytem Longhouse and Interpretive Centre, May 2011.

Introduction

A canoe hangs from the rafters of a Stó:lō shed-style longhouse outside of Mission, on the north bank of the Fraser River (see fig. 1). It is 22 feet long, 3 feet wide, and 3 inches thick. The canoe has been given many descriptors over the years; tl'elay, shovel-nosed, I-1, and CM1924 being only a few of ways people have referenced it. Carved from cedar one hundred years ago, this canoe is about to make one more voyage.

In early 2011, Bill Sepass, a Stó:lō man and member of the Skowkale First Nation, began to circulate a petition amongst his friends and family. Sepass' goal appeared to be quite straightforward: to “bring home the canoe” carved by his great-grandfather, Chief William Sepass.¹ At that time, the canoe was displayed at Xá:ytem Longhouse and Interpretive Center in

¹ Bill Sepass et al, “Bring Home the Canoe,” petition to the Stó:lō Heritage Trust. Though the cover letter to the petition is not dated, the first signatory, Norman Sepass, dated his signature to January 18, 2011.

Mission, a Stó:lō archaeological heritage site which closed the previous fall. To ensure that visitors, students, and Stó:lō people could continue to be able to view the canoe and learn from it about Stó:lō culture and history, Sepass and the petitioners called for the relocation of the canoe from Xá:ytem to the Stó:lō Research and Resource Management Centre (SRRMC) in Chilliwack. Dave Schaepe, the Director of the SRRMC, and Ron Denman, the curator of the Chilliwack Museum (which owns the title to the canoe), quickly agreed to the proposal. Plans are now underway to transport the canoe to the SRRMC where it will be exhibited in the building's main entrance.

There is always more, of course, to every (hi)story, and this one in particular is much more profound than the few documents generated by the transfer of the Sepass canoe might indicate. In this paper, I explore this deeper history of the Sepass canoe. I chart the history of the canoe's passage through time and space from its creation in 1915 and use by the Sepass family, to its acquisition and exhibition by the Chilliwack Museum and later Xá:ytem Longhouse, until the present. In the second half of the paper, I attempt to understand the significance of the Sepass family's request to relocate the canoe. In an appendix at the end of the paper, I discuss my research methods. Through an exploration of the canoe's history and an analysis of the petition which will bring it home, this paper seeks to demonstrate the significance of the Sepass canoe. As it simultaneously represents the history of cross-cultural relationships and education in the Fraser Valley, the preservation of Stó:lō historical knowledge and cultural heritage, and the profound affect of intergenerational family connections, the Sepass canoe is at the center of a relational network which links Stó:lō people, their pasts and the present. It is also symbolic of the mutually respectful relationships between the Stó:lō community and staff at the Chilliwack

Museum, who have consistently worked with Stó:lō people to ensure adequate physical care and appropriate cultural interpretation of the object.

The Sepass Canoe

The history of a canoe begins with that of its carver. Chief William Sepass (KHHalserten) was born in Kettle Falls, Washington in 1841. His mother was from Thompson River (Nlaka'pamux), his father was Shuswap (Secwepemc), and these bloodlines, as well as those from his Okanagan (Sinixt) ancestors at Kettle Falls, meant Sepass was a traditional hereditary chief.² Throughout his life, Sepass was worked as a Stó:lō leader, serving as chief of Skowkale, and advocating for Stó:lō land claims in the 1913 Royal Commission. Even today, people I spoke to about Sepass also remember him as an expert canoe carver, a knowledgeable outdoorsman, a skillful hunter, and perhaps the earliest Aboriginal writer in BC.³

Though he does not know who specifically taught his great-grandfather to carve canoes, Bill Sepass thinks that he probably learned the craft at a fairly young age, likely from another male family member. “Children learn what they hear, what you say and do,” Sepass says, “It must’ve been his uncle or dad, or something of that sort.”⁴ Sepass also emphasizes the necessity of passing on valuable skills like canoe carving to younger generations: “You gotta do what you need to do to survive. It’ll be just like anything, like today, like our set of wheels that we get around on... You have to have something to get around. In those days, you’d either walk or the river was our main source, it was our highway between here and the ocean, or between here and

² Gerald Sepass, “Introduction,” *Sepass Poems: Ancient Songs of Y-Ail-Mihth*, commemorative edition (Mission: Longhouse Publishing, 2009), 2; Oliver Wells, *The Chilliwacks and Their Neighbours*, Ralph Maud, Brent Galloway, and Marie Weeden, eds. (Vancouver: Talonbooks, 1987), 33-38.

³ Alan Twigg, “William Sepass,” in *Aboriginality: The Literary Origins of British Columbia* (Vancouver: Ronsdale Press, 2005), 47; Wells, *The Chilliwacks and Their Neighbours*, 33-38;

⁴ Bill Sepass, interview by author, May 10, 2011.

the sloughs.”⁵ In addition to the importance of familial transfer of knowledge, Sepass also reminds us here of the vital role canoes played in Stó:lō life before the development of comprehensive road systems. Canoes were not the leisure craft they have come to be seen today; for families in the Chilliwack Valley up until at least the mid-20th century, canoes were necessary for survival.⁶ William Sepass’ training in canoe carving can thus be seen as both his participation in intergenerational transfer of knowledge and in ensuring that his family would be able to access the goods and sites necessary for their survival.

Oliver Wells, a local anthropologist, writes that William Sepass learned those lessons well. He praises Sepass’ mastery of canoe-carving and discusses the canoe which is the focus of this essay: “His skill in canoe-making was unsurpassed. He made many during his lifetime – small shovel-nosed ones for use on the swift Chilliwack, larger ones for use on the Fraser.”⁷ Making a canoe required significant technical and artistic expertise. Leslie Lincoln, historian at Seattle’s Center for Wooden Boats, tells us that after making spiritual preparations, the carver would test a cedar tree to determine if it would be suitable to make a canoe from. If the carver judged it to be appropriate, he would fall the tree, either by chiseling the base or by using controlled burn techniques. Carvers also sometimes took trees that, due to the erosion of river banks, had fallen over. Dug out canoes like the ones made by Sepass use only one half of a split cedar log; the rounded edge of the tree becomes the canoe’s hull, and the split side is hollowed out and becomes the top of the canoe. Before metal tools were readily available, Salish carvers used nephrite blades or jade-bladed D-adzes to carve out the inside of the canoe, but more recently, carvers have started to use metal D-adzes or even chainsaws for this task. Once the

⁵ Bill Sepass, interview by author, May 10, 2011.

⁶ Keith Thor Carlson, ed., *You Are Asked to Witness: The Stó:lō in Canada’s Pacific Coast History* (Chilliwack: Stó:lō Heritage Trust, 1997), 168.

⁷ Wells, *The Chilliwacks and Their Neighbours*, 33-38.

canoe has been roughly hewn from the log, the carver might use stone maul and chisel to ensure an even thickness and a smooth shape.⁸ Finely-crafted shovel-nosed canoes like the Sepass canoe demonstrate the carver's mastery of both technical skills and artistic abilities, and thus also function as symbols of prestige.

According to Wells, Sepass made the shovel-nosed canoe which is the focus of this essay in 1915, "on the banks of the Chilliwack River above Tamihi Creek; its maiden voyage took its maker down the river and out into the Fraser, where he used it daily to tend his nets."⁹ Bill Sepass recalls his grandfather telling him that William Sepass "would just drop a tree and build it right near where he thought he needed to use it,"¹⁰ which means that, if Wells' information is correct, the Sepass canoe was almost certainly made from a cedar tree which had grown near Tamihi Creek.

Shovel-nosed canoes like the one made by William Sepass have some elements that make them distinct from other Coast Salish canoes. As Bill Sepass says,

the shovel-nosed canoes were made for swift water because when you have a narrow point one, the currents would hit it and they would just drag you in any direction it wanted to, how the current was going, but with the shovel-nosed canoe, because it's rounded at the bow, you're able to go over whirlpools or swift current without too much of a concern. And you're able to paddle or pole yourself to shore a little further than any other one because of the degree of the bow, you're able to step ashore a bit easier.¹¹

Shovel-nosed canoes generally have a symmetrical design, without a pronounced bow or stern. The bow and stern of shovel-nosed are rounded, and project over the water, making them easier to maneuver on the shallow, swift currents of twisty, tributaries and intertidal areas. As well, the two-ended design makes transportation through the sloughs of the Fraser Valley more efficient,

⁸ Leslie Lincoln, *Coast Salish Canoes* (Seattle: Center for Wooden Boats, 1991), 24-27. Some Coast Salish canoes are further treated with hot water to steam-spread the hulls to a more outward-sweeping shape, but dugout canoes do not often receive this treatment.

⁹ Wells, *The Chilliwacks and Their Neighbours*, 36. 1915 is the date that appears on the museum catalogue sheet for the Sepass canoe; it is the only piece of evidence that gives a specific date for canoe's creation.

¹⁰ Bill Sepass, interview by author, May 10, 2011.

¹¹ Bill Sepass, interview by author, May 10, 2011.

since the bow and stern are almost interchangeable, the canoeist does not have to turn the boat around in narrow waters.¹² Shovel-nosed canoes are thus an ideal watercraft for the Fraser Valley region.

Although William Sepass made numerous canoes, according to his great-grandson Bill Sepass, William “valued this one quite a bit” and used it frequently and for various purposes.¹³ Bill shared a story with me that also appeared in a more abridged form on his cover letter for the petition to have the canoe moved. Since Bill and the Sepass family clearly sees this story as being significant, here is how he told it to me:

...getting back to the stories that my grandfather would tell me as we’re fishing along the lake, he would tell me this story about the one canoe that his dad would load up on his horse and wagon and they would make their trips out towards the um – cause we lived here in Sardis – he would load up his canoe and bring it down to the Fraser River by horse and wagon and launch it near the landing, he said. I guess that was a well-known site for the old steamboats that had a launching site there, a landing site there. They would get in the canoe with his dad and his sister, and his sister’s name was Dorothy. They were actually first cousins, but cause they lived together, he considered her as his sister. He’d talk about that and how his Dad would go fishing with it from time to time. He’d talk about his sister riding in front of the canoe, at the bow, and he would be in the middle, and his dad would be paddling, and they would paddle downriver to Sumas Mountain. There was a little place there that he said his Dad would fish there all the time, at a place called Lucky. It was right near, just past the mouth of Vedder River, against Sumas Mountain, just below Devil’s Run there. He said on this particular trip, they went fishing for oolichan, dipnetting. They made their way down midmorning or whatever and he talked about filling it up with oolichan right to the top, I mean right to the top. It was getting close to late afternoon and he said always in the late afternoon, the west wind would pick up. Nature’s things always have a way of repeating themselves. His dad had a sail, so he said he’d put up the pole. Built inside the canoe, there’s a spot where there’s a cross beam, a hole in the cross beam, and a little place in the bottom of the canoe where the pole would fit in and his Dad would put up a sail and sail back upriver to their horse and wagon, and he would steer it with the paddle. He said that thing would just clip along, being full of oolichan at one of the other regular fishing places that they would go to. He would tell me this story and have a huge smile on his face as he would say “and my sister would always have a big smile on her face as we’re going back upriver, and her hand touching the water as we’re going upriver.” They were catching their supply of oolichans for smoking and whatever they used it for. That was one of the real stories that he told me about that canoe.¹⁴

The shovel-nosed canoe was thus simultaneously a leisure craft and a fishing boat, a site of extended family relationships, and vital resource acquirement. William Sepass’s profound knowledge of the local landscape is reflected in his impressive catch of oolichan at Lucky, a

¹² Lincoln, *Coast Salish Canoes*, 12.

¹³ Bill Sepass, interview by author, May 10, 2011.

¹⁴ Bill Sepass, interview by author, May 10, 2011.

favourite fishing site, and in his ability to catch the west wind for the return trip. The addition of the sail to the canoe demonstrates the multifunctionality of the canoe and Sepass' expertise as a canoe maker.

Imaginably, the canoe made a number of voyages like the one Bill Sepass recalls to Lucky, and down Chilliwack River as Oliver Wells suggests, as well as other trips around the area. William Sepass was renowned for his skills as an outdoorsman, and Bill Sepass highlights his great grandfather's skill in canoe-carving and his deep attachment for that shovel-nosed canoe in particular: "The way it sounds is that he packed this one around, in a wagon, right, in a horse and wagon ... It takes quite a bit of time to build something like that."¹⁵ The shovel-nosed canoe was likely a prized possession then, not only for its utility as an object for transportation and fishing, but also as an example of William's canoe carving expertise.

Bill Sepass talks about other canoes that his great-grandfather carved as well:

There was a freightliner canoe that they used which old Chief Sepass had made where he had found a silver mine at the other end of Chilliwack Lake. He found it and he named the silver mine Silver Chief Mine. I don't know what business ventures he had with the miners at the time, but he used the freightliner canoe. He made a huge, long, over 21-foot long cedar canoe to transport the people and goods across, back and forth, on the lake.¹⁶

So, while William Sepass might have used his canoes for family leisure and food gathering activities, it also appears that he carved canoes for utilitarian and commercial transportation purposes as well.

Following William Sepass' death in 1943, Oliver Wells acquired the canoe. According to his profile of William Sepass at the beginning of *The Chilliwacks and Their Neighbours*, Wells bought the canoe "from the Sepass family soon after the Chief's death."¹⁷ However, Bill Sepass

¹⁵ Bill Sepass, interview by author, May 10, 2011.

¹⁶ Bill Sepass, interview by author, May 10, 2011.

¹⁷ Wells, *The Chilliwacks and Their Neighbours*, 36. Chilliwack Museum and Historical Society, Native Artifact Catalogue Worksheet, Sepass Canoe. This phrase is quoted directly on the Chilliwack Museum and Historical Society's catalogue worksheet for the Sepass canoe.

explains that his grandfather, the late Robert Sepass, experienced this events differently: “He said one day - he called them white people - they came to his dad’s farm, grabbed the canoe, collected it, and took it. And he said he didn’t know why.”¹⁸

Though the sequence of events in both narratives correspond to each other, the Wells version asserts that the canoe was purchased, but the Sepass family story notably does not include this fact. Instead, the Sepass family story demonstrates a sense of confusion and perhaps loss on the part of Robert Sepass. If a purchase did take place, he does not remember it, which is not to say that it did or did not occur. Wells could have paid William Sepass for the canoe before he died, or he could have paid another family member for the canoe, and Robert might not have known or remembered that this had happened. Maybe Wells felt entitled to the canoe for any other number of reasons, or maybe he did not pay for it at all.

When I asked him to comment on the divergence between the two stories, Bill Sepass offered a hesitant but generous interpretation of the acquisition of the canoe: “I can’t... I wasn’t born at that time, I don’t know. My other family members, they feel a little bit funny about it, but in another sense, the canoe was preserved and well looked after, and it’s here today.”¹⁹ While Sepass acknowledges that there may have been something “funny” in Wells’ acquisition of his the Sepass canoe, he also recognizes that perhaps Wells’ actions are what led to the canoe being so well preserved today. It would seem, then, that Sepass excuses the possibility of a historical wrong-doing on the part of Wells or forgetfulness on the part of Robert Sepass, because the events unfolded to allow for the present and future use and exhibition of the canoe, highlighting again the intrinsic educational merits Sepass sees in the canoe. However, at the time that Wells collected the canoe, it seems clear that for Robert Sepass, parting with it – an object that was

¹⁸ Bill Sepass, interview by author, May 10, 2011.

¹⁹ Bill Sepass, interview by author, May 10, 2011.

clearly so valued by his recently deceased father – produced a sense of confusion at least, as it would have been another representation of the separation between the canoe’s creator and his family.

After Oliver Wells acquired the Sepass canoe, he appears to have kept it for his own personal use, because he did not donate it to the Chilliwack Museum until 1962. In the introduction to *The Chilliwacks and Their Neighbours*, Wells’ daughter Marie Weeden remembers, “Chief Sepass’s last canoe rested beside the creek at Edenbank, turned over to slough off the heavy rains.” Weeden goes on to recount that when she was a girl, her father would take her paddling on the streams around their farm in that canoe, but that years later, Wells oiled the canoe and hung it from the rafters of their barn “preserving it for the museum he hoped some day [to] have in Chilliwack.”²⁰ The timelines suggest that the canoe Weeden remembers is the Sepass shovel-nosed canoe, especially since we know that Wells’ desire to preserve and exhibit the canoe in a museum was later realized.²¹

What all of this demonstrates is that at some point during the time Oliver Wells owned the canoe, his actions regarding the canoe (and presumably, by extension, his conceptions of it) shifted considerably. While originally he continued to use the canoe as a tool and recreational vehicle, his later careful preservation of it implies that he increasingly came to understand the canoe as an object of particular cultural value worthy of protection, display, and interpretation. It is at this point that the history of the physical use of the canoe ends; though it certainly continued to be used after Wells oiled it and hung it in his rafters, this use was limited to the realms of the didactic and the representational. Displaying the Sepass canoe is a very different form of use than paddling or poling it; though the latter originally helped to provide bodily survival, the

²⁰ Marie Weeden, preface, *The Chilliwacks and Their Neighbours*, 6.

²¹ Paul Ferguson at the Chilliwack Museum and Archives also understands this to be the case. Personal communication, June 16, 2011.

former is dedicated to cultural heritage management and revitalization – also a project of survival.

The first public display of the canoe was during the Chilliwack Arts Festival from October 20-25, 1961. As part of the festival events, Oliver Wells and local artist Mildred Valley Thornton spoke to “a large gathering of Indians” at an evening presentation at the exhibit, “encouraging them to preserve their native arts,” sentiments which imply respect for Aboriginal artistry and which are also in alignment with salvage ethnography, a project to which both Thornton and Wells contributed.²² The Chilliwack Arts Festival was partly focused on Aboriginal culture: newspaper coverage indicates that the festival that year was “enhanced” by an extensive display of local Aboriginal artwork and crafts curated by Wells, which included the Sepass canoe.²³ The canoe was featured especially by *The Chilliwack Progress*, which reported that the “art of canoe-making will be in evidence from the 22 ft. long model by Chief Sepass in 1900 to the smaller ones carved today.”²⁴

The use of the word “model” here bears scrutiny: did Oliver Wells supply this word to the festival organizers? If so, what might he have meant by it? Did he – or did an over-zealous reporter – mean to imply that it was a model, and not a real canoe? For an object that bears physical evidence of such a long history of use prior to its acquisition by Wells, this seems unlikely. As Susan Roy writes, there is a problem with the word “model” as a descriptor for cultural objects and museum displays of miniatures because this manufactures distance between the object and a history of real-world use. Discussing the history of Musqueam archaeological

²² “Professor Praises Festival Display: Best Exhibition He Has Seen,” *Chilliwack Progress*, October 24, 1961. p. 1. Wells was an anthropologist, oral historian, and collector; Thornton painted portraits of Aboriginal elders. While Wells’ angle was science and Thornton’s was art, both of them were undeniably influenced by the concept of the “Vanishing Indian,” and so directed their actions towards preserving what vestiges they could of Aboriginal culture.

²³ “Professor Praises Festival Display: Best Exhibition He Has Seen,” *Chilliwack Progress*, October 24, 1961. p. 1.

²⁴ “At Fall Festival, Unique Display of Native Crafts,” *Chilliwack Progress*, October 11, 1961. p. 7. The date reported here seems to be incorrect; museum documentation as well as Wells’ own sketch of William Sepass in *The Chilliwacks and Their Neighbours* indicates the canoe was carved in 1915.

excavations, Roy argues that the frequent use of the word “model” in colonial museums in fact divests objects of their contemporary currency and places them in a historical past, thus simultaneously dispossessing Aboriginal groups and divesting them of their history.²⁵ Although perhaps the term “model” was applied without reflection to the Sepass canoe, this act means that the ongoing use of shovel-nosed canoes by Stó:lō people was ignored in its curation at the Chilliwack Arts Festival. However, the festival’s attempt to highlight local Aboriginal culture, and its prominent display of the Sepass canoe, means that even the presumably non-Aboriginal organizers saw a value in cultivating community-wide appreciation for these objects and the Aboriginal groups who created them, thus demonstrating the significance of the Sepass canoe for local cross-cultural education.

After the exhibit of Aboriginal art and craft at the Chilliwack Arts Festival, Oliver Wells officially donated the Sepass canoe to the museum (see fig. 2). According to the original catalogue card, museum staff accessioned the canoe in November of 1962, placed it in the “museum display area,” and gave it the reference number “I-1” (the “I” stands for “Indian,” the “1” implying that the canoe was the first “Indian” object to be accessioned at the museum).²⁶ The catalogue card also tells us that at one point, the canoe belonged to Casey Wells, Oliver’s brother, who was likewise interested in Chilliwack history (see fig. 3). This intriguing hint is the only piece of evidence I was able to find which implied that Casey had also owned the canoe.

²⁵ Susan Roy, *These Mysterious People: Shaping History and Archaeology in a Northwest Coast Community* (Montreal: McGill-Queen’s University Press, 2010), 63.

²⁶ Chilliwack Museum and Archives, Sepass Canoe Catalogue Card; Paul Ferguson, Personal Communication, June 14, 2011. Paul Ferguson of the Chilliwack Archives kindly supplied me with the catalogue card and the explanation of the original accession number.



Figure 2. Sepass Canoe as displayed in the Chilliwack Museum in the 1960s.
Chilliwack Museum and Archives, Chilliwack Historical Society exhibit documentation collection: 1977 – 1986.

OBJECT Canoe		Classification Indian Artifacts	I-1 CM1924 Accession/Catalogue No.
Accession Date November, 1962		Source Oliver Wells, Sardis, B. C. Made by Chief Billy Sepass 1915 Once belonged to Casey Wells.	Gift X
Location Museum display area			Purch.
Value			Loan
Condition Good; worn; used; chipped; cracked.		Sketch or Photograph Neg. No.	
Description Wooden, dug-out. Four bars of wood of various widths - secured across width of canoe with nails or screws and bolts. Three plugs - 2 wooden, 1 metal - on inside of one side. Each end has piece of wood nailed to top of canoe. Near one of these pieces is a piece of metal nailed onto canoe (repair?). First width-wide base has hole in it; directly beneath it in base of canoe is attached piece of wood, also with hole in it. Canoe rests on three stands.		Dimensions L. 665, W. 77, H. 28cm	

Figure 3. Original catalogue card for the Sepass Canoe.
Chilliwack Museum and Archives, catalogue card files.

Bill Sepass remembers seeing the canoe his great grandfather carved while it was exhibited in the museum in the late 1970s:²⁷

When I first seen that canoe, I was about 16. Me and my friends were going through the Chilliwack Museum and happened to see it there. I remembered grandpa talking about it, and that's why I went to see it there. It felt something special, that they had something I had a family connection to.²⁸

Like his grandfather, William Sepass' son, Bill felt a connection to the canoe. Although he never had the same experience of riding in the canoe or going fishing in the canoe, it was and still is important for him because of the connection to his family. The family significance of the canoe comes out even more strongly later in the canoe's history, as I will discuss below.

In 1985, the Sepass canoe was displayed again, as part of a touring exhibit called *Wild Harvest*, curated by the British Columbia Provincial Museum (see fig. 4). The exhibit was shown in Evergreen Hall from February 16 until March 23. On opening night, the exhibit, a "historical account of food plants harvested by British Columbia's native Indians," received 85 visitors.²⁹ Local media coverage did not discuss the exhibit to the same extent that they had the 1961 Arts Festival, and made no specific references to the canoe itself.

Four years after this exhibit, the Sepass canoe was then included in an exhibit co-curated by the Chilliwack Museum and by Stó:lō Tribal Council, called *Sto:lo: The River People*, which was open from May 24 until June 26, 1989. Though exhibition photographs demonstrate that the canoe was displayed in the exhibit, press coverage did not mention it (see fig. 5).³⁰ Included on the curatorial team were Louise Shaw, Brenda Paterson, Randall Paul, and Sonny McHalsie. This collaborative curation of the canoe and other aspects and objects of Stó:lō cultural heritage

²⁷ This date is recreated; Bill Sepass told me in 2011 that he was 50 years old, so he would have been 16 in 1977.

²⁸ Bill Sepass, interview by author, May 10, 2011.

²⁹ "'Wild Harvest' opens," *Chilliwack Progress*, 20 February 1985, 13B.

³⁰ "A land in four walls," *Chilliwack Progress*, May 24, 1989, B10.



Figure 4. The late Tillie Gutierrez reads to students visiting the *Wild Harvest* exhibit with the Sepass canoe in the background. Chilliwack Museum and Archives, Chilliwack Historical Society exhibit documentation collection: 1977 – 1986.



Figure 5. The Sepass canoe as exhibited during *Sto:lo: The River People*. Chilliwack Museum and Archives, Chilliwack Historical Society exhibit documentation collection: 1977 – 1986.

is an early demonstration of the Chilliwack Museum's interest in and respect for local Aboriginal communities and their histories. Although today having a curatorial team made up of Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal people is common, in 1989 it was still an extremely progressive work practice for most museums.³¹

During the same time as the exhibits *Wild Harvest* and *Sto:lo: The River People*, the Chilliwack Museum further catalogued and documented the condition of the Sepass canoe. In the mid 1980s, the Chilliwack Museum and Archives began to renew their inventory of their collection. This involved centralizing information on old catalogue cards and expanding on it on new catalogue worksheets.³² On January 24, 1986, Anne Hugh described the canoe on a "Native Artifact Catalogue Worksheet," and either she or another museum staff member assigned it a new accession number. Whereas it had previously had the number "I-1," it was now given the reference number "CM1924" ("CM" stands for "Chilliwack Museum"; the four-digit numerals were assigned to artifacts based on the order in which museum staff processed them).³³ The Chilliwack Museum's decision to abolish subject-area accession numbers (such as "I," which stands for "Indian") in favour of more generic accession numbers reflects the trend in late 20th century museum collection management towards erasing divisions between different categories of objects which earlier museum professionals understood to be necessary. This has been especially important for collections of Aboriginal artifacts, which could receive different levels

³¹ It was not until 1992 that the Canadian Museums Association, in collaboration with the Assembly of First Nations, designated the museal sharing of curatorial authority as an important element in museum work. Assembly of First Nations and the Canadian Museums Association, Task Force Report on Museums and First Peoples, "Turning the Page: Forging New Partnerships Between Museums and First Peoples," (Ottawa: AFN and CMA, 1992), 4, 8.

³² Paul Ferguson, personal communication, June 14, 2011.

³³ Paul Ferguson, personal communication, June 14, 2011.

of care than the non-Aboriginal artifacts from which they are frequently separated by curatorial divides.³⁴

This does not seem to have been the case at the Chilliwack Museum, however. On February 26, 1988, an unidentified museum staff member carried out a thorough investigation into the condition of the Sepass canoe. This condition report noted a significant number of marks due to wear and tear on the canoe associated with its pre-accession use by the Sepass and Wells families. This level of attention to the specific condition of the canoe, as well as its extremely good condition today, speak to the Chilliwack Museum's excellent custodianship of the physical object.

In the late 1980s, the Chilliwack Museum loaned the Sepass canoe and another canoe to the Seabird Island School. As Paul Ferguson, the Collections Manager at the Chilliwack Museum told me, this loan served two purposes. It was difficult to store the canoe at their small facility at Evergreen Hall, and there was a sense that the canoes could serve an educational purpose at the Seabird Island School.³⁵ Ferguson was involved with moving the canoes to Seabird Island School, but he did not remember exactly how long the Sepass canoe remained there before it was moved without notifying the Museum to Xá:ytem Longhouse and Interpretive Center in Mission, BC. As Bill Sepass matter-of-factly recalls, "the museum, I guess they lent it

³⁴ This is a tendency that is apparent in many museums not only in Canada but abroad as well, and reflects the development of museums during the period of the Enlightenment in Europe, an era in which intellectuals, academics, and scientists created extensive typological systems to better name, study, and understand the world around them. I can provide an example from my research at the Museum of Vancouver. Collections at the museum were separated on the basis of subject areas, where objects with white creators or white provenance were placed in the "History" collection and objects made by Canadian Aboriginal or other worldwide Indigenous people were placed in the "Ethnology" collection. From 1968 until the late 1990s (when curatorial divisions were abolished and all collections placed under the equal care of one curator, a collections manager, and an assistant), these objects were cared for by separate curators, who saw different levels of value in these apparently divergent categories of objects, often predicated on the racial logic behind the curatorial divisions. Madeline Knickerbocker, "The History of the Lipsett Indian Museum: Changes in Museum Practice Regarding Aboriginal Cultural Heritage," (master's thesis, University of Toronto, 2010), 29-30.

³⁵ Paul Ferguson, personal communication, June 20, 2011.

out to Seabird one year, and then one day it ended up down in Hatzic there, so, that's where it is today."³⁶

Xá:ytem, which opened in 1991, was a more public venue for the interpretation of the Sepass canoe and Stó:lō culture and history, which was in keeping with the museum's goal for ensuring that the public at large and the Stó:lō community have access to the canoe.³⁷

Accordingly, museum curator Ron Denman changed the terms of the loan from Seabird Island to Xá:ytem, and so the canoe found a place there. Despite what museum staff could have been understood as a breach of protocol, they remain on good terms with Seabird Island School, Xá:ytem, and the larger Stó:lō community, as evidenced by their continuing cooperation with the relocation of the canoe to the Stó:lō Research and Resource Management Center (SRRMC).³⁸

The museum's goodwill in retroactively transferring the loan from Seabird Island School to Xá:ytem perhaps demonstrates a number of things about the relationship between the Chilliwack Museum and the Stó:lō community: that the Chilliwack Museum is able to be so flexible demonstrates the extent to which they value their relationship with local Stó:lō people and educational institutions, and that they acknowledge that while they might hold legal title to the canoe, its exhibition and interpretation might mean more to the community in the context of one of those institutions than within the museum itself, especially because the Sepass family in particular and the Stó:lō community in general own the cultural and historical rights to the canoe and therefore have a strong claim to be significantly involved in its curation. Through this action, the Chilliwack museum was able to further strengthen their friendly relationship with the Stó:lō community, but it also brought them practical benefits: by essentially transferring the care-taking of the Sepass canoe to the Stó:lō community, the Chilliwack Museum knows that it is serving a

³⁶ Bill Sepass, interview by author, May 10, 2011.

³⁷ Ron Denman to Dave Schaepe, electronic mail, January 20, 2011.

³⁸ Dave Schaepe, interview by author, May 17, 2011; Paul Ferguson, personal communication, June 20, 2011.

purpose on display, and saves them the financial costs and storage space the canoe would otherwise consume.

At Xá:ytem, the story of the Sepass canoe was told to school groups and other visitors by a team of interpreters. Just as he had earlier seen the canoe displayed at the Chilliwack Museum, Bill Sepass also saw the canoe at Xá:ytem.

I started work here at the Sto:lo Nation in '97, and I drive a school bus for them. I would take people down to various field trips throughout the Valley. I remember Gordon Mohs, one of the founding members of the [Friends of Hatzic] Rock, knowing it was there and bringing, I guess, our clients or whatever to Hatzic, and they would go through the Interpretation Center and near the end of the program, they would always come to the canoe, which is hanging above there, and me sitting off as part of my work group, I guess, I would sit to one side. They would start telling the story about the canoe and that's when I became a little more interested in knowing it was there...³⁹

As Lisa Hiwasaki asserts, heritage interpretation at Xá:ytem was individualistic, because each interpreter emphasized different things over the course of a visit.⁴⁰ Although interpretive tours at Xá:ytem attempted to give a broad introduction to Stó:lō culture and history, the main focus of the tours was the discussion of the site's archaeological evidence and the Transformer Rock. This is not surprising because it is on the basis of these two elements that archaeologists were able to successfully argue for the protection and recognition of Xá:ytem as a provincial and national heritage site. From my own experience as a practicum student at Xá:ytem during the winter of 2010, I remember interpreters discussing the Sepass canoe as a vehicle used for transportation or for fishing. Only sometimes would the canoe be connected to William Sepass, although a black and white photograph of him does hang near the canoe. So although it served a purpose within the context of heritage interpretation, the canoe's carver and its history of use were not programmatically, explicitly mentioned during each Xá:ytem tour.⁴¹

³⁹ Bill Sepass, interview by author, May 10, 2011.

⁴⁰ Lisa Hiwasaki, "Examining Stó:lō Representations and Interpretations: A Report on the UBC Ethnographic Field School," (University of British Columbia, 1997), unpublished report available at the Stó:lō Archives, 11.

⁴¹ As part of my Master of Museum Studies program, I completed a practicum at Xá:ytem. There, I was supervised by director Linnea Battel and worked with interpreters Terry Horne, Alanna Jurgens, Justine Raymond, and administrative assistant Ashley Rinas. From January until April 2011, I spent one day a week on site, following and

On November 4, 2010, Xá:ytem closed down, for financial reasons, as there was no longer any funding to sustain it.⁴² Although local newspapers reported that it would reopen in the spring of 2011, this did not occur, and at the time of writing, Xá:ytem remains closed.⁴³ After the site closed, Bill Sepass began to take concrete steps to have the canoe moved to the SRRMC. He contacted Dave Schaepe, who agreed to help move the canoe and provide a space at the SRRMC where it could be displayed and interpreted.⁴⁴ Then, Sepass wrote a letter and started a petition to be sure that the canoe could be moved. As he explains,

hearing of the program being shut down I became concerned where it was gonna go, seeing on their website that they were going to become more of a ... I was unaware for sure of what they were gonna do but it seemed from one website that they were going to become sort of a healing center, so I was quite concerned about where [the canoe] was gonna go or what was gonna happen, so I told a few of my family members what I wanted to do, and so I put it into a petition form and had a few people sign it.⁴⁵

Sepass and Schaepe inquired with Ron Denman at the Chilliwack Museum, who agreed to the relocation of the canoe. The petition, with an accompanying cover letter signed by Sepass and Schaepe was then sent to the Stó:lō Heritage Trust to seek permission from the board members for the relocation, which the board granted on March 4, 2011.⁴⁶

As Schaepe says, the museum's willingness to expediently transfer the loan from Xá:ytem to the SRRMC once again speaks to the "very good relationship" that the Chilliwack

eventually assisting on the interpretive tours. My research project, which I worked on with the interpreters and which I submitted to my Museum Studies professor and to Linnea Battel, was to report on and assess the heritage interpretation techniques used on site, especially how archaeological objects and evidence are used to activate Stó:lō histories. Although of course this does not mean that I have a definitive comprehension of the interpretive tours, I believe that this experience help me achieve a certain level of understanding of the work that interpreters do there.

⁴² *Ibid.*

⁴³ Jason Rossele, "Xá:ytem Closed Until Spring," *Mission City Record*, November 22, 2010, p. 1; "Xá:ytem's Doors Shut Till Spring," *Mission City Record*, December 30, 2010, p. 1.

⁴⁴ Dave Schaepe, interview by author, May 17, 2011.

⁴⁵ Bill Sepass, interview by author, May 10, 2011. See Appendix 1 for a copy of the petition.

⁴⁶ Dave Schaepe and Bill Sepass, letter to Board-members of the Stó:lō Heritage Trust, dated February 26, 2011, signed March 4, 2011.

Museum and Stó:lō heritage institutions have worked to cultivate and maintain with each other.⁴⁷

It is the case of, as Schaepe explains,

a museum who are the owners of the canoe, being very welcome, willing, to accommodate the interests of the family who it's intimately associated with. It's a huge part of their family and their history, and if their interest was in having it closer to home, the Chilliwack Museum was willing to accommodate that, which makes it very straight forward, that whole approval process very easy to deal with.⁴⁸

Again, as with their initial shared curation of the canoe, and their response to the relocation of the Sepass canoe from Seabird Island school to Xá:ytem, the Chilliwack Museum demonstrated their desire to work towards meeting the needs and desires of the Stó:lō community, and in this case, the Sepass family in particular. These actions and motivations fit in the expanded field of collaborative museum practices advocated by the 1992 Task Force Report on Museums and First Peoples,⁴⁹ and are also aligned with what Christina Kreps calls “appropriate museology”:

Appropriate museology is an approach to museum development and training that adapts museum practices and strategies for cultural heritage preservation to local cultural contexts and socioeconomic conditions. It is a bottom-up, community-based approach that combines local knowledge and resources with those of professional museum work to better meet the needs and interests of a particular museum and its community.⁵⁰

Also notable here is how the Sepass canoe consistently figures in the creation and maintenance of harmonious cross-cultural relationships between the Chilliwack Museum and Stó:lō community members and educational institutions. Functioning as a hub in a network of historical and ongoing relationships, the Sepass canoe connects both Stó:lō people and other local residents with their shared history, encouraging a public understanding and appreciation of Stó:lō cultural heritage, and a commitment to developing and maintaining productive cross-cultural relationships based on mutual respect and curiosity.

⁴⁷ Dave Schaepe, interview by author, May 17, 2011.

⁴⁸ Dave Schaepe, interview by author, May 17, 2011.

⁴⁹ Assembly of First Nations and the Canadian Museums Association, Task Force Report on Museums and First Peoples, “Turning the Page: Forging New Partnerships Between Museums and First Peoples,” (Ottawa: AFN and CMA, 1992).

⁵⁰ Christina F. Kreps, “Appropriate Museology in Theory and Practice,” *Museum Management and Curatorship* 23, no. 1 (March 2008), 23.

Bringing Home and Interpreting the Sepass Canoes

While Xá:ytem's closure probably facilitated the quick decision to relocate the Sepass canoe to the SRRMC, both Bill Sepass and Dave Schaepe emphasize that the relocation project was part of an idea which dates back much further. In fact, the Sepass canoe that will be moved to the SRRMC is the second William Sepass canoe that Bill Sepass and Schaepe have worked to bring home to Chilliwack. In August 1999, Schaepe and his family were hiking near Lindeman Lake and found "what looked like an odd looking log," but which Schaepe realized, despite it missing about three quarters of its hull, was probably a canoe. Schaepe "had heard enough stories about old Billy Sepass and had read enough of Oliver Wells and other background sources to consider, or to know, that Billy Sepass had frequented that area," so he consulted with Bill Sepass. As Sepass says, at that point,

I told him the story that my grandpa had told us, and grandmother, how we tried to save that canoe because people were abusing it, setting it on fire, and chopping it up, trying to use it for wood and whatnot, I guess. I told him the story that we had sunk it with rocks, and I guess it eventually found its way to the beach one day, part of it anyways.⁵¹

Like the Sepass canoe, the Lindeman Lake canoe has a history of use outside of the Sepass family. Probably at some time between the Sepass family sinking the canoe and Schaepe finding it, Dalton Silver, then a student at St. Mary's Residential School, found the canoe when he was on a camping trip in the area with some of his classmates in 1975. Silver told me the story of the afternoon he spent with the canoe:

At the end of the lake, there's like, in most lakes in the wilderness, there's a place where all the driftwood flows to, and we were out there, walking around on the different logs that were big enough. These guys found this canoe and said, "Hey, look, a canoe," and we pulled it out. It was beat up; the front end was cracked, but still the sides were on it. We took it over along the shore where we were and found a couple of pieces of driftwood that were kind of flat and said, "Oh yeah, we can paddle this." And I said, "It's gonna sink!" The front had a crack in it so we took a big rock and put it in the back, and my friend, actually his name's Abby Peters, he was saying, "Yeah, here I go!" He got a little ways into the lake and he sunk. The water is really cold; it's cold

⁵¹ Bill Sepass, interview by author, May 10, 2011.

there in the middle of the summer, but this was this time of year and the water's really cold. But I teased him about how loud he yelled, echoing off the mountain up there.⁵²

Later, when Silver asked his grandfather, the late Richard Malloway, about the canoe, Malloway told him that William Sepass must have been the carver of the canoe that he and his friends played with, because the area around Lindeman Lake was known to be a region where Sepass spent a lot of time hunting and fishing.⁵³ Malloway told Silver that Sepass “probably made it right on the site there, from a log off the side of the mountain there.”⁵⁴

The Lindeman Lake canoe, in addition to being used extensively by Sepass in the area around the lake, also features strongly in Silver's memories of his youth, and perhaps those of other Stó:lō and Coast Salish men who found the canoe. Silver says that during a recent meeting with one of his friends from Cowichan who was also on that camping trip, they both laughingly recalled the trip and finding the canoe.⁵⁵ Silver's recollection of finding the canoe and playing with it is especially striking as it was part of one of the camping trips he attended as a St. Mary's student, which he looks back on as some of the most positive experiences of his time in residential school.⁵⁶ Like the other Sepass canoe, the Lindeman Lake canoe is thus a hub in the larger network of local Stó:lō history, as it is a point of connection between people despite the passage of time.

After deciding that the Lindeman Lake canoe would have a place at what was then the Stó:lō Nation Rights and Title Department (now the SRRMC), Sepass and Schaepe worked together and with the BC Parks Board to bring the canoe down to Chilliwack. Coincidentally, Chris Gadsen, a local resident, came to film the arrival of the canoe at Chilliwack Lake, where it was flown to by helicopter to be transported by car to the Chilliwack, where it has since been

⁵² Dalton Silver, interview by Caitlian Copage, Ashley Forseille, and author, May 19, 2011.

⁵³ Dalton Silver, interview by Caitlian Copage, Ashley Forseille, and author, May 19, 2011.

⁵⁴ Dalton Silver, interview by Caitlian Copage, Ashley Forseille, and author, May 19, 2011.

⁵⁵ Dalton Silver, interview by Caitlian Copage, Ashley Forseille, and author, May 19, 2011.

⁵⁶ Dalton Silver, interview by Caitlian Copage, Ashley Forseille, and author, May 19, 2011.

stored at the Stó:l̓ Nation's Coqualeetza Longhouse. It is in this video footage, shot on September 28, 1999, that Bill Sepass not only asserts that the relocation is an important milestone for the Ts'elxw̓eyeqw people, but also that he sees it as the first step in a process which would include bringing home the canoe at Xá:ytem and a third canoe which is being used as a planter in the Chilliwack Lake area.⁵⁷ Though Bill Sepass told me that he would appreciate having all three known Sepass canoes brought home, Dave Schaepe explains that bringing the Chilliwack Lake canoe into the collections at the SRRMC is unfeasible due to the conservation issues associated with the bugs and organic material that are likely to be now systemic throughout the canoe.⁵⁸

Regardless of whether or not all three canoes are eventually brought back, Bill Sepass articulates their significance and the importance of their relocation to Chilliwack in the video footage, in interviews with him, and in the text of the petition. Primarily, Sepass consistently emphasizes the significance of the Sepass canoe as an educational tool.

I'm just glad that we came to this point to be able to eventually bring it here to this building, and for other people to view it and see the history of our people, and how the transportation, and what they used the transportation for, getting back and forth. I think it will be a good educational source for all people.⁵⁹

Sepass thus sees the canoe as being a source of information about Stó:l̓ history that is valuable for “all people.” Central to this idea is that the canoe would be exhibited publically at the SRRMC; although the petition frequently uses the phrase “bring home the canoe,” the “home” which is referenced is a public venue in Chilliwack, not the Sepass private domestic home. Bill Sepass wants it to be displayed in public so that people can learn from it:

If we kept it at home, we have a large, large garage that we would put it into and it would be... it would just sit there. Just a few of our family members would see it and acknowledge it. But being, it coming to this building, everybody's gonna see it, and people will be able to see, you know,

⁵⁷ Bill Sepass, Sepass canoe footage, September 28, 1999.

⁵⁸ Bill Sepass, personal communication, May 16, 2011; Dave Schaepe, interview by author, May 17, 2011.

⁵⁹ Bill Sepass, interview by author, May 10, 2011.

again, what our people used for transportation, for what purposes they needed transportation for, to gather for food, or just get from A to B, right?⁶⁰

This idea of its holistic, cross-cultural public educational value is also apparent in the petition to relocate the Sepass canoe, in which Sepass states that its display at the SRRMC would “provide an opportunity for students or Visitors to experience and explore Stó:l̓ō history, culture and archaeology.”⁶¹ I have also discussed above how the canoe has been central in the negotiation of harmonious relationships between members of the Stó:l̓ō community and staff at the Chilliwack Museum. Interpreting the canoe to cross-cultural audiences could also further the creation of bonds between different groups of people.

In addition to the value of the canoe as an educational tool, Sepass also highlights its uniqueness as a shovel-nosed canoe both in the petition and in interviews I conducted with him. The rarity of these canoes makes them important to preserve; since they are no longer frequently made, the display of the Sepass canoe would ensure that the knowledge of this type of Stó:l̓ō canoe is saved. Dave Schaepe says that this is of particular interest to staff at the SRRMC because in 1996, the Longhouse Extension Programme and the Rights and Title Department commissioned a Stó:l̓ō canoe carver to make a shovel-nosed canoe, but the final result was not entirely representative of shovel-nosed canoes.⁶² Displaying and interpreting the shovel-nosed canoe at the SRRMC would, in Schaepe’s opinion, help re-educate people as to what a shovel-nosed canoe is and its important place and distinctive uses in Stó:l̓ō history.⁶³

In addition to the canoe’s value for cross-cultural education and the preservation of a distinctive part of Stó:l̓ō heritage, the Sepass canoe’s significance is always linked to the importance of the family connection it represents. As Bill Sepass told me,

⁶⁰ Bill Sepass, interview by author, May 10, 2011.

⁶¹ Bill Sepass, “Bring Home the Canoe” petition, January 18, 2011.

⁶² Dave Schaepe, interview by author, May 17, 2011.

⁶³ Dave Schaepe, interview by author, May 17, 2011.

I guess it would just be a great significance to family ties to see who we are, you know, as a group, and when we come together on the day when it comes here, it'll reunite people here again that haven't seen each other for maybe three, four, or five, maybe a year, months, or whatever.⁶⁴

So, the canoe, a historic object, will continue to unite and connect Sepass family members in the present. This point is also articulated in the conclusion of the petition, when Sepass calls for “the Return of Our Family History” for the benefit of “students or Visitors and Family Members.”⁶⁵ The importance of this to the Sepass family is manifest in the petition as a whole, which relates the story about how William Sepass would take his son Robert and niece Dorothy fishing at Lucky. In the petition, Bill Sepass concludes that story by saying, “There are other stories that Grandpa told me about his dad and I am very fortunate to hear them,” underscoring again not only the canoe as a point of intergenerational connection for the Sepass family, but also the importance of oral tradition in passing along family histories.⁶⁶ Further, 20 members of the Sepass family signed the petition, demonstrating their desire to bring the Sepass canoe home, which implies a sense of relatedness to the object as something which represents their shared heritage and their connection to William Sepass.

Conclusion

Today, though Bill Sepass continues to hope that the third Sepass canoe will also be brought home, he remains happy about the process. While it is uncertain whether the Chilliwack Lake canoe will ever be brought home, the Lindeman Lake canoe sits safely in the rafters of the Coqualeetza Longhouse, and the Sepass canoe from Xá:ytem will soon join it on the grounds of the SRRMC. This represents at least partial fulfillment of Sepass' desire since the relocation of the Lindeman Lake canoe over a decade ago.

⁶⁴ Bill Sepass, interview by author, May 10, 2011.

⁶⁵ Bill Sepass, “Bring Home the Canoe” petition, January 18, 2011.

⁶⁶ Bill Sepass, interview by author, May 10, 2011.

And, as Schaepe argues, the Sepass canoe from Xá:ytem is the best one for the interpretation of all of the elements that Bill Sepass is concerned with sharing with a broad audience:

It's the most finely made canoe, it's a specific type of canoe, it's a shovel nose, it's got a history of use that we know more about, some specific histories about its use and who was using it at what times, and yeah, it's condition is not an issue as far as curation goes, so it does offer the best opportunity to match what I've heard Billy express as his interests and apparently what he was expressing back in 1999 as in returning, bringing home the canoe and interpreting it, educating people about something that's a core part of Stó:lō culture. And the shovel-nose canoe is quite specific to the area, it's a great example of one of those types of canoes that not every body recalls anymore. I'm glad it's worked out the way its worked out.⁶⁷

Bill Sepass echoes those sentiments: "My point of view is I'm glad it's coming here... I'm just kind of happy it's coming here."⁶⁸

The Sepass canoe has moved through time and space, and between cultures, and has come to have different meanings for the many people who have encountered it. The canoe's display at the SRRMC means this individual meaning-making about the canoe will likely continue in the future. We can understand the canoe as the central point in a relational web which links Stó:lō people and other residents of Chilliwack through the mutually-enriching project of cultural and historical preservation and education. Particularly, the canoe is also representative of the historical and ongoing development of positive cross-cultural relationships between the Chilliwack Museum, various Stó:lō educational institutions, and the Sepass family. Each of these players in the history of the Sepass canoe have repeatedly demonstrated their commitment to ensuring that the cultural heritage information it holds will remain accessible to as many people as possible in the future. This history shows that the Sepass canoe represents different themes which have ebbed and flowed depending on its historical context: the Sepass canoe furthers cross-cultural education and relationships, exemplifies a unique aspect of Stó:lō cultural heritage,

⁶⁷ Dave Schaepe, interview by author, May 17, 2011.

⁶⁸ Bill Sepass, interview by author, May 10, 2011.

and represents an important intergenerational family connection. It will be on a strong confluence of these currents that the Sepass canoe makes its journey from Mission home to Chilliwack.

APPENDIX: Approach, Theory, and Methods

Researchers do not often get the chance to work in such close collaboration with community members. To maximize the positive creative potential of this circumstance, and because this research project stems almost directly from the Sepass family, I have tried to consciously frame this paper in a way that demonstrates how I see myself as their partner in the process of attempting to determine the significance of the Sepass canoe. Even beyond the Sepass family, there is a larger network of people who are also stakeholders in this project, and their concerns and knowledge are likewise significant to me. Though I am the author of this paper (and thus take full responsibility for any errors or lapses in it), I understand my role in its creation to be partly that of a facilitator: I have had the good fortune to benefit from meeting people, hearing their stories, and encountering other evidence, which I have tried to articulate here. As Mildred Shackelford told her interviewer, Alessandro Portelli, the role of the interviewer is “to gather a little knowledge” from different people and different places and to centralize it in their research.⁶⁹ This statement resonates with me, because all the knowledge presented in this paper was already known by the people I interviewed and spoke with; in the context of this paper, my role has been to gather these pieces of information together, and then to offer an interpretation of the whole which respects the people who have each contributed to it. This approach is inherently a relational one, founded on the principle of cooperative dialogue and knowledge-sharing between interview partners, other community members, and myself. In carrying out this relational approach, I have been guided by an ethics of respect for the people I encountered while doing this research, whether I met them face-to-face or only through the historical archive.

⁶⁹ Alessandro Portelli, “Tryin’ to Gather a Little Knowledge: Some Thoughts on the Ethics of Oral History,” in *Battle of Valle Giulia* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1997), 63.

Adopting a relational stance in Stó:lō territory and focusing on Stó:lō cultural history connected me to a series of new ideas and precepts. Of special importance among these is something Tillie Gutierrez told Sonny McHalsie: “xholmet te mekw’stam it kwelat,” meaning “we have to take care of everything that belongs to us.”⁷⁰ This precept directly applies to this research project: although I have the privilege of helping to share the story of the Sepass canoe, ultimately the narrative surrounding it, like the canoe itself, certainly belongs much more to the Sepass family specifically (and the Stó:lō generally) than to myself as an outside researcher. As such, the canoe and the story should be cared for and retold in a way that appropriately reflects Stó:lō values, especially as articulated by the Sepass family. I have tried to do this to the fullest extent I can.

A number of authors have developed critical theories that intersect with this type of approach. The Subaltern Studies Group’s influential contribution to postcolonial theory has inspired the way I understand the practice of doing history, especially in the context of the asymmetrical power relations in a state that still struggles with the process of decolonization. Like Dipesh Chakrabarty, who articulates a limit to the possibilities of historicization,⁷¹ Ranajit Guha, a noted member of the Subaltern Studies Group, argues that historians must openly acknowledge the impossibility of being able to wholly rebuild and reinterpret the past. “Then and only then,” Guha says, “might the distance between the [past] and the historian’s perception of it be reduced significantly enough to amount to a close approximation which is the best one could hope for.”⁷² While writing this paper, I consciously acknowledged that this would not nor could

⁷⁰ Naxaxalhts’i, Albert (Sonny) McHalsie, “We Have to Take Care of Everything That Belongs to Us,” in *Be of Good Mind*, edited by Bruce Miller (Vancouver: UBC Press, 2007), 85.

⁷¹ Dipesh Chakrabarty, “Minority Histories, Subaltern Pasts,” *Provincializing Europe: Postcolonial Thought and Historical Difference*, reissue (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2000), 112.

⁷² Ranajit Guha, “The Prose of Counter-Insurgency,” in *Selected Subaltern Studies*, Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, ed. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1988), 77.

not be a definitive history of the Sepass family and their shovel-nosed canoe; I can only help to tell part of the story, and the best I can hope for is a “close approximation.” This is strikingly similar to Frederick Hoxie’s assertion that “our scholarship can only approximate the reality we seek to describe.”⁷³ Assertions like these tie in with Hoxie’s larger thematic argument that ethnohistorians must become ever more aware that the human histories they seek to write are puzzling, complex and plural.⁷⁴ Guha and Hoxie work together here to reject the possibility of one absolute, all-encompassing history; these are reflections which I have kept in mind while piecing together and interpreting the history of the Sepass canoe.

Another problem that researchers in the field of Native-newcomer history must consider is that of their own identity. Racial background, for instance, is often called upon to (in)authenticate peoples’ experiences or (in)validate their knowledge. Two anecdotes from my own recent personal experience demonstrate this. The first happened at the 2011 Indigenous Studies graduate student symposium at the University of British Columbia. There, a white, male Masters student was preparing to give his talk, and jokingly said to the Aboriginal classmates of his in the audience that since they knew him, they knew he was just telling them what he learned, not trying to be the typical white academic who knows everything about another culture. A fellow student of his jokingly called out from the audience, “You’re not white, you’re just Aboriginally-challenged!” a comment which elicited loud laughs from many in the room. The humour in the comment came from how the audience member interpreted whiteness as a disability; a sarcastic recasting of the history of Aboriginal-white relations where Aboriginality, not whiteness, has been understood as a disorder or a deficit.

⁷³ Frederick Hoxie, “Ethnohistory for a Tribal World,” *Ethnohistory* 44, no. 4 (Autumn 1997), 613.

⁷⁴ Hoxie, “Ethnohistory for a Tribal World,” 608.

About a year previous to that, I worked at Xá:ytem Longhouse and Interpretive Center one day a week for a semester as a practicum for my Museum Studies program. As a brown-haired, brown-eyed, well-tanned intern at Xá:ytem, some visitors asked me where I was from. When I responded by saying that I grew up in North Vancouver, these visitors looked distressed and emphasized that they wanted to know *where* I was *from*. Though these visitors were asking about my racial or ethnic background, they framed their questions in terms linked to geographic origination. When I explained, on further questioning, that my family's heritage is European (German, Scottish, and Dutch), these inquisitive visitors would laugh or show signs of embarrassment; interestingly, they would often apologize for mistaking me for an Aboriginal person. Certainly to the visitors to Xá:ytem, who saw me helping facilitate programs but being unaware that I was a volunteer, I may have appeared to be an "insider," although of course both to myself and certainly to the Xá:ytem interpreters who worked with me, I was definitely an "outsider."

My own understanding of both of these examples, and the problems with associating the concepts of "insider/outsider" with those of "Aboriginal/white" have greatly benefitted from Kirin Narayan's article "How Native is a 'Native' Anthropologist?" Through an intensive interrogation of how her own racial background does and does not align with her identity, Narayan helps us understand that identity is never static; rather, it is incredibly supple.⁷⁵ As Narayan explains, while the appearance of an insider identity can add credibility and authority to our identities and to our work, if this insider-ness is an appearance only, its artificiality diminishes our own basic integrity. So, what can we do when these sorts of differences in perspective make us appear to be "inside" when we actually are not? In addition of course to clearly articulating our own subjectivities to our readers, cultivating a sense of open humility

⁷⁵ Kirin Narayan, "How Native is a 'Native' Anthropologist," *American Anthropologist* 95, no. 3 (September 1993).

about our experiences can also ensure that we do not unintentionally misrepresent ourselves. In this spirit of humility, I acknowledge that being born to white, middle class parents gave me access to material advantages I would not otherwise have had, which have largely enabled me to be in the position I currently am (despite the pop culture grievances about the graduate student lifestyle, I know that I am privileged to be able to read and write for a living). Being a woman, I have certainly experienced sexism both at work and at play, but it has not inhibited my actions or, to the best of my knowledge, placed limits on my choices. All of these elements of my identity impact my actions and my work.

A helpful concept for me throughout this field school has been John Lutz's iteration of the Bakhtinian concept of the "exotopic trick." As Lutz interprets it, "self-aware positioning in one culture (be it ethnic or academic) is necessary if one is to engage in effective conversation with another."⁷⁶ Reflexive self-examination is necessary or we risk an authorial imposition of our own systems of value and meaning on the histories we seek to understand. Observations I made during the course of the field school are, of course, mediated by my own preconceptions and thus offer no ultimate understanding of Stó:lō culture (and probably reveal more about myself than about the people around me). Since these observations are only helpful to the extent that they can be separated from my own subjectivity, I must cautiously and explicitly contextualize them as a part of my own experience, not as a manifestation of "the" truth. Here, keeping a critical eye on one's own culture can help denaturalize our own epistemologies, allowing (hopefully) for a fuller perceptual framework.

This paper is situated within the field of ethnohistory, which, as Keith Thor Carlson, John Lutz, and David Schaepe explain, is located at an academic interstice: straddling History's

⁷⁶ John Sutton Lutz, "Pomo Wawa," *Makúk: A New History of Aboriginal-White Relations* (Vancouver: UBC Press, 2008), 27.

archive and Anthropology's fieldwork, while also being increasingly buffeted by postmodern and postcolonial theory, ethnohistory draws from a wide base of research techniques.⁷⁷ Though this paper does draw on some material culture history because it is certainly object-centered, most of the research I have done has been with documents and, especially, people.⁷⁸ My main focus here has been on accessing oral history related to the Sepass canoe by conducting semi-structured oral history interviews. During these interviews, I had a number of questions which I was interested in asking, but for the most part, I generally relied upon my interview partner to direct the course of the conversation in order to ensure that what was important to them came through in the interview transcript. In my analysis of these interviews, I have attempted to take into account the problematics of interviews as occurrences which cannot be separated from a specific power structure, and which frequently mirror colonial systems of dominance, thereby potentially compelling interview partners to reveal more than they would normally wish to.

In structuring my own interviews, I was guided by Portelli's thoughtful discussion of oral history ethics, which to some extent connects thematically to the Stó:lō precept "xholmet te mekw'stam it kwelat." Portelli asserts that oral history should be based upon "commitment to honesty" which he defines as "personal respect for the people we work with and intellectual respect for the material we receive," and on "commitment to truth," which he sees as a "striving to know 'how things really are' balanced by an openness to the many variants of 'how things may be.'"⁷⁹ Both of these sets of ideas reinforce that "taking care" of people and of the knowledge they might choose to share with me amounts to much more than preparing a typed

⁷⁷ Keith Thor Carlson, John Lutz, and David Schaepe, "Turning the Page: Ethnohistory from a New Generation," *The University of the Fraser Valley Research Review* 2, no. 2, 1.

⁷⁸ Adrienne Hood, "Material Culture: The Object," in *History Beyond the Text: A Student's Guide to Approaching Alternative Sources*, Sarah Barber and Corinna M. Peniston-Bird, eds. (New York: Routledge Publishing, 2009), 176-198.

⁷⁹ Alessandro Portelli, "Tryin' to Gather a Little Knowledge: Some Thoughts on the Ethics of Oral History," 55.

transcript or ensuring the integrity of an audio interview file: physical caretaking must be complemented by equal measures of respectful intellectual custodianship. Portelli's work also influenced my own by highlighting the "intrinsic dialogic dimension" of oral history. I hope that readers will sense this dialogue as they come across the multiple sources, voices and interpretations in the body of this paper. I have attempted to represent this multiplicity of stakeholders and sources, though I fully expect that this dialogue will continue, and I hope to continue to learn about the Sepass canoe even after this paper is submitted to the course instructors and to Stó:lō Archives.

Over the course of the field school, I conducted two oral history interviews with Bill Sepass. He is the Sepass family member principally behind the relocation of the Sepass canoe, so much of the family story about it was told to me by him. I also interviewed Dalton Silver about his experience finding and playing with another Sepass Canoe at Lindeman Lake, and I interviewed David Schaepe about his experience finding the same Lindeman Lake canoe years later and helping to bring it down to Chilliwack for storage and preservation.

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