

Bulletin

Canadian Historical Association - Société historique du Canada

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THE SECWEPEME MUSEUM AND HISTORY

The Secwepeme Museum and Heritage Park in Kamloops is the first native-owned and operated museum to be developed in the interior of British Columbia. The museum derives its mandate from the Shuswap Declaration of 1982, an agreement signed by the 17 bands of the Shuswap Nation to work in unity, preserve, perpetuate and enhance the Shuswap language, history and culture. The Secwepeme Cultural Education Society was officially registered in 1983 to carry out these objectives. The museum, established in 1986 in one of the buildings of the former Kamloops Indian Residential School, carries out part of that mandate: to collect and preserve both historical and contemporary artifacts and archives of significance to the Secwepeme.

The Secwepeme, more commonly known as the Shuswap, are a distinct First Nations people who traditionally occupied a large part of south-central British Columbia extending from the Rocky Mountains to the Fraser River and from the headwaters of the Columbia River to the upper reaches of the Fraser. While the population was much larger in the past, today seven thousand identify themselves as Secwepeme people. Despite European diseases and attempts by the government to divide the Shuswap Nation into separate regional districts or bands, Shuswap ties within the Nation have remained strong. However, Secwepeme like many other indigenous languages, is only spoken by a minority of the population.

The culture is still very much alive, with revival of (and conservation measures to preserve) a fishing and forestry economy, as well as traditional crafts and techniques such as basket-making. Artifacts of Shuswap origin are found around the world. Luckily, the knowledge of much of the traditional culture was preserved and recorded by James Teit, an amateur ethnographer who published a monograph on the Shuswap in 1909 (besides other tribes) and whose collecting efforts are found in the American Museum of Natural History in New York, as well as other museums today. While Secwepeme repatriation efforts have been mainly limited to burial remains, found as far away as England, the inventory of artifacts scattered in various museums is well under way.

Unlike its American counterpart in New York, however, the Secwepeme Museum not only exhibits artifacts but actively seeks to use that knowledge in the preservation of the culture under the management of the Secwepeme themselves. The museum is visualized as a vital tool of the Secwepeme to rejuvenate their culture and language. History is utilized to understand the past, to work in the present and to plan for the future. The story of the residential schools at Kamloops (ironically a place where the Secwepeme language was banned, where culture was eradicated and families broken apart, and now a place of cultural rejuvenation) is a story that has not been fully told or exhibited. The Secwepeme Museum is an important place for the Secwepeme to tell that story — within the old school itself.

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The notion that history began with the arrival of Europeans contact and is based on written records (journals, letters, reports and maps) ignores the rich oral and traditions and indigenous knowledge that forms the basis of native history. The essential core of First Nations' culture is spirituality, centered around spiritual beliefs about the land, community and personal custodian responsibilities, kinship systems and ecology. Cultural lore and environmental knowledge is passed on by oral tradition through the language. Unfortunately much of that knowledge has passed away with the Elders, yet much has survived and is being used to develop curriculum materials.

The museum (and a growing archives) thus has become a repository for that knowledge, including oral histories, maps, photographs, and other documents. The ethnographic collections include both historical and contemporary materials. Archaeological materials linking the past and the present, represent the core of the museum's collections. Over 6000 years of history have been recorded in the vicinity of the museum itself and the finds of any dig within Secwepeme territory are deposited with the Secwepeme Museum. Certain objects within the museum, such as the eagle-claw staff representing the unity of the Shuswap bands, are used in powwows and at special gatherings. Regalia similar to that on display in the museum is also worn in powwows throughout the Shuswap country in the summer.

The Heritage Park, the outdoors component of the Museum opened in 1993, incorporates an archaeological site (EcRb77, revealing 20 circular pithouses and 50 storage pit depressions) and expands on the efforts of cultural renewal and education. Four reconstructed pithouses show the different phases of Shuswap construction over 5000 years from the time of the Egyptian dynasties up to the European contact. Outdoor cooking pits reveal how native food plants are still found in the area and can be used and shared.

A new technology — the Internet — now holds the possibility of a cultural revival through multi-media modes of interaction including digital sound and image. The "virtual museum" transmitting the history and language of the Secwepeme to anyone with access to the Internet, but most importantly to the Shuswap themselves, is the promise of the future. The ability to disseminate information about the museum's collections via the Internet amongst the Secwepeme is part of the process of developing their self-identity and nationhood.

Ken Favrholt,
Museum Director