

‘Mimkwamlis and The Cultural Sharing Project

by Frank Purdon, Port McNeill Teacher

On May 19, 2017, a group of students, Aboriginal elders, friends, administrative staff, and pets departed from Port McNeill, Sointula, and Alert Bay for the approximately 22 nautical miles to Village Island. Located in the Broughton Archipelago, a vast labyrinth of islands between the mainland and Queen Charlotte and Johnstone Straits, Village Island—or ‘Mimkwamlis—is the ancestral home of the Mamaḷiliḷa people of the Kwakw̓aḷa’wakw Nation. It is the site of the last coastal potlatch that took place in 1921 in contravention of the Indian Act. 45 people were arrested, and 22 men and women were sent to prison for refusing to give up their masks, coppers, and other ceremonial pieces. The village continued to exist until 1970, when the last families moved to Alert Bay. Today, the majority of the Indigenous students that I know in School District 85 come from ‘Mimkwamlis. Many live in Alert Bay.

The aim of the project was to engage our students and friends in an event that would foster a greater understanding of the Indigenous culture that was once in the crosshairs of brutally repressive laws. The project also aimed to celebrate Indigenous youth practising their culture, and to remind us of our responsibility to be better stewards of our territory.

I arrived at the breakwater in Rough Bay, Sointula at 6:45 in the morning. The Sointula students arrived just as the Naiad pulled up to the dock. What a treat to be up on the bridge with Captain Bill and his family, looking out at the snow-covered mountains of the Nimpkish Valley, the Broughton Archipelago, the expansive Kingcome Glacier, and impressive twin peaks of Mount Stevens. Approaching the dock at Alert Bay, we could see a large crowd ready to board. There was considerable anticipation in the Alert Bay group, not only for the trip, but also for the Mountain potlatch that was to start that evening.

Then we were off, heading east to the entrance of Knight Inlet, and then south to ‘Mimkwamlis, which means “rock or island out front” of the village beach. At high tide, it is possible to take a boat right up to the beach below the village site. At a low tide, however, the basin becomes an expanse of sand and mud flats that extend one kilometer and are described by the old adage, “When the tide goes out, the table is set.” In the past, this physical feature served not only as a rich clam garden, but also as protection against the Haida war parties arriving on a flood tide by allowing the people time to flee inland to hide. Approaching the village site and the protective island, we spotted Chief John Macko with a group of participants he had shuttled to the beach in his herring skiff. In no time, John had transferred the rest of us ashore, along with all the provisions for the luncheon. Chief Arthur Dick, who

was raised on the island until he was 14, welcomed us in Kwak’wala and then in English. As we stood in silence in front of a 14-foot midden on a beach composed of sand and clam-shell fragments polished smooth by the tides, we could sense that this place had been inhabited for a long time. After the welcome, John quickly jumped into action to prepare the fire for the salmon. Ricki McCrae, our foods teacher, started putting together the kitchen while the rest of us moved into predetermined groups

that would rotate through three workshops: dance, drumming and singing, and history and culture.



Chief Arthur Dick



Chief John Macko

Chief Arthur Dick and Diane (Honey) Alfred led the history and culture workshop. Arthur talked about growing up on Village Island and the transition of moving away to Alert Bay to attend secondary school in Port McNeill. Stepping off the ferry from one world to another became a daily physical

battle because of the racism that he experienced. Today, Arthur’s battle is against the salmon farming industry. One-third of all fish farms in British Columbia are operating in this territory. These fish farms are considered illegal by members of the Kwakw̓aḷa’wakw Nation, who have never given their permission for the farms to operate on their territory. Even just beyond this protective island at ‘Mimkwamlis, in this remote paradise, are several salmon feed lots, each holding hundreds of thousands of Atlantic salmon swimming fin-to-fin within an open net containment system anchored to untenured provincial seafloor leases. Everything sinks to the bottom: dead salmon, undissolved fecal matter, uneaten antibiotic-enriched food, and who knows what else. Arthur pointed at the sand flats, becoming more prominent with the quickly receding tide, and focussed our attention on the mottled, thick, green algal growth. “No one clams here

anymore because the accumulation of salmon farm waste on beaches leads to explosive algal growth. The algal mats suffocate the clams and prevent the baby clams from settling and repopulating our beds. Our clam beaches are turning into dead zones.”

It is not just the clams that have been affected, but the wild salmon as well. One-third of all wild Canadian salmon must travel twice in their lifetime through Broughton and Discovery Islands. In doing so, they are exposed to sea lice, toxins, and a number of diseases. Sockeye salmon is no longer the diet staple that it once was. Last year, many families did not receive their annual quotient of food and ceremonial fish. For someone whose people once had access to such bounty, Arthur does not seem angry, just determined.

An hour later as we moved down the beach, a couple of students found trading beads, a grim reminder of our colonizing past. Vera Newman, Arthur’s older sister, Ida Miller, an Aboriginal education specialist at North Island Secondary, and representatives from the student T’sasala Dance Group hosted the dance workshop. They made everyone welcome, and soon we were dancing around an imaginary Big House fire, always turning toward our hearts and the fire. Vera and Ida were very motivating teachers. While protocol matters in the Big House, and people are penalized financially for breaches, it is not wrong to make mistakes while learning. Seeing the dancers adorned in their button blankets that flowed as they twirled about our fire reminded me that 18 years ago, when I arrived at the secondary school, there was no open expression of Indigenous culture. Back then, even though there had been a renaissance of cultural pride thanks to U’mista Cultural Society’s efforts to repatriate stolen ceremonial regalia, Indigenous students kept their culture back in Alert Bay. Things are a lot different today at North Island Secondary School, with a thriving cultural club that welcomes special guests with dancing, singing, and drumming. Everyone is made to feel at home at the club in Pearl and Ida’s room, the home of the drum log.

Further down the beach toward the creek, where the giant, three-headed sea serpent named Sisiutl lives, the singing and drumming

group’s drums were becoming strong, indicating that the group was wrapping up. The button blankets were carefully folded for the next group. The sun was breaking through to illuminate the blinding, late spring white of the clam-shell beach. A breeze ruffled the leaves and petals of the wild rose hips that thrive on the bank. It was so quiet. There is no cell phone connection on Village Island!

We gathered around Ernest Alfred, a young teacher, hereditary chief, and powerful orator, who spoke of the importance of cultural identity and how it was nearly lost because traditions were not being passed on to youth. He expressed appreciation for William Wasden, a talented and successful artist, who shifted his focus to traditional singing in order to help preserve a dying culture. Ernest connected with the youth who have joined him at the drum log in the Big House for many years, squaring the corners between identity, language, habitat, and culture, and reminding us there is still much to be done. We learned three songs, with everyone drumming while Ernest and Grade 12 student Roy Mountain sang. Of the three songs, one would be performed with the other three groups after lunch.

John had a dozen sockeye on sticks that were being pulled from the fire. There was roast elk, venison, prawns, crab, and five large garden salads—what a feast!

We shared a song and dance of gratitude and spent the early, sunny afternoon hanging out and talking on the beach. I talked with Devery Svanvick, a Grade 9 student who had been fasting for three days. He planned to break his fast the next morning during the



Devery Svanvick



Drumming Workshop



Frank Purdon, Vera Newman, and Wallace Watts

Mountain Potlatch. I watched Roy and a Grade 3 lad, Peyton Brotchie, dance the powerful Hamat'sa, a winter ceremony dance. Roy was dancing like a super-human, and Peyton was feeding off his energy. The chills that came from the hard, slow, rhythmic drumming truncated by the primal screaming and powerful posturing of the dancers were humbling. Wallace Watts, known as Captain Seahawk, came up from Seattle for the Mountain Potlatch. As a Seahawks fan, I have seen him at least twice on my television. He recently learned that he is a close relative of Robert Mountain. Culture has come late to Wallace. He went to Port Alberni Residential School, where he said his cultural identity was beaten out of him. Now, it is more important than ever. He told me that he was the first Aboriginal pilot to fly a 787 for United Airlines. He shared some great stories and made the commitment to come back and possibly facilitate a workshop in 2018.

The day slipped by and I noticed the little channels of water remaining in the basin. With less than two hours to go until low tide, the skiff looked like it might become stranded. The prospect of having to lug all our gear for over one mile to the other side of the island made for some motivated helpers. Much appreciated was help from Michael Tynjala, a Grade 10 student from Sointula. Michael is a descendant of a Finnish immigrant who settled on Malcolm Island and married a Mama liliḡa la woman. His father,



Ernest Alfred

Tommy, sent the family tree with Michael and his sister Sophie to present to their close relatives, Vera and Arthur. Great sharing takes place during our Village Island trips! In spite of moments of despair that the skiff might become stuck, through teamwork, we managed to drag that large chunk of metal through the ever-diminishing escape channel.

The thing about Captain Bill Mackay is that magic always seems

to happen when he's around. Up on the bridge, Wallace spotted a cruise ship and Bill advised everyone to be on the lookout for the humpbacks. Sure enough, one breached 300 metres off our port side. Bill slowed to a crawl, and just as the wake passed, the whale breached again from less than 50 metres away.

Thank you, Bill, Donna, James, the 'Namgis Band Council, North Island Secondary School Parent Advisory Council, Vancouver Island North Teachers' Association, Literacy Now, and the BCTF for making another memorable Village Island day possible!



Dance Workshop