

# **“That’s How I Became Xéytelég”**

## **The Life Stories of Stó:lō Elder Ray Silver**



Stories by Ray Silver [Xéytelég]  
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Final Draft Submitted October 10, 2007 for completion of the Ethnohistory Field School  
To  
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## Introduction

“I’m a nobody. What do I know?” This was the first thing that Ray Silver [Xéyteléq] said to me when I called him to ask if I could meet with him and talk about his life. In June, 2007 I traveled to Chilliwack for one month to participate in the Ethnohistory Field School with the Stó:lō Nation. This is a community-based research program in that the Stó:lō Nation leads the research topics and assists the students in their work. The research is based more on ethnohistoric evidence gathered from within the community than the published works of scholars from the past. Stó:lō Nation wanted to gather information on the life stories of some of its prominent Elders and I was asked to work with Ray.

The task of recording and writing a person’s life story is a daunting venture. Trekking through the clay muck, up stairs, down ladders, searching for Ray Silver at the Sumas Clay Products brick plant on the Sumas First Nation Reserve I could not have felt more like an outsider. When I introduced myself and explained why I had come to meet him I started a journey with a 78 year old Sumas man who was eager to share his experiences with a young non-Native woman with whom he had very little in common. It turns out that I learned that he is far from a “nobody” and that he knows an incredible amount about his people and the place where they live. I quickly understood why the Stó:lō staff had identified him as someone worthy of a biographical study.

## Methods

This project is the telling of Ray's life on paper and as much as possible in his own words. I entered the interviews attempting to share as little of what I had already discovered, or thought I knew, in research about Ray's current life, hereditary name, traditional role, and history. The most interesting lesson I learned in speaking with Ray is that there are multiple parallel stories about the ancestors who carried hereditary names, the spiritual stories, and the historical stories from different communities. Ray's relation to his hereditary name Xéyteléq was different than the stories I had heard of Xéyteléq. There is not one historical Xéyteléq but there are many Xéyteléq's as this name has been passed down within Ray's family resulting in many different people with the name Xéyteléq. Ray associates his name with a specific warrior and not with an earlier Xéyteléq related to the story of the origins of the Sxo'exo'e story. He also has a story of the origins of the Sxo'exo'e mask story which may be attributed to the location of his community being further down river and away from the canyon. As a result, I am choosing to tell Ray's story the way he has told it. I will represent the Xéyteléq and Sxo'exo'e stories in the way that he believes them to have happened. I will mention the multiplicity of these topics between communities but I do not represent one story as being more true or correct than another.

Law Professor and cultural theorist Michelle LeBaron discusses in her lectures the notion of a "landscape of the heart". This landscape is the physical place in which you are at home and feel connected. This landscape is instrumental in who you become and the way you relate to the world as it forms the foundation for identity and belonging.<sup>1</sup> The Stó:lō are connected to the Fraser Valley in a way that is different from others who have lived there because the Stó:lō have always been in this place. Ray is also closely connected to the brick plant he has worked

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<sup>1</sup> Michelle LeBaron "Landscapes of the Heart: How the Places We Call Home Affect our Conflicts." (University of Victoria, Institute of Dispute Resolution Public Lecture), June 6, 2006

at since his youth. As part of this project I wanted to relate Ray's life not only through written word but also through silent images. An image can speak volumes both visually and emotionally. I captured images during my time with him and also received some images from him with permission to use them for this project.

My approach and methodology for this project is ethnohistorical in its basis but is also an attempt to focus more on the story that Ray tells and to convey that story authentically and less on an analysis of what the story means or how it is to be interpreted. There are multiple approaches that I have observed in the historical field and were discussed during the field school: 1. That it is the task of historians to compare and contrast events and promote an analysis of the evidence; or 2. To present the information as it was delivered to you without injecting your own analysis or views on the information.

An example of the first approach when applied to recording oral history would be the field notes that Crisca Bierwert studied in her article "I can Lift Her Up' ... Fred Ewan's Narrative Complexity" in which she studied field notes of students and scholars working with the Stó:lō during the 1940's and 50's. Throughout her article Bierwert comments on the field notes arguing that they stand in parallel to the other evidences in his life that have now disappeared, decayed, or changed in the landscape. She does not include very many of Fred Ewan's own words from the field notes in her article. The field notes are an analysis of how he viewed his people, culture, and the way he told his stories and may be infused with the slant of the recorder.<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>2</sup> Crisca Beirwert, "I can Lift Her Up' ... Fred Ewan's Narrative Complexity," in *Be of Good Mind Essays on the Coast Salish*, ed. Bruce Miller (Vancouver: UBC Press, 2007), 185, 207-209.

An example of the latter approach would be the work that Julie Cruikshank completed in her telling of the stories of Elder women in the Yukon. In her work, aside from an explanatory introduction, she presents the stories told to her exactly as she recorded them without analyzing, contextualizing or re-organizing them to maintain the authenticity of their telling. She states her process as:

Instead of working from the conventional formula in which an outside investigator initiates and controls the research, this model depends on ongoing research collaboration between the interviewer and interviewee. Such a model begins by taking seriously what people say about their lives rather than treating their words simply as an illustration of some other process.<sup>3</sup>

While she describes the outcome of her work as empowering for the women to be given the forum to tell their stories and have them presented exactly as they told them, the finished piece does not lend itself to accessibility to readers who are not fully immersed in the culture and life of those telling the stories.

In this project, I have taken Cruikshank's work into consideration but have not left the recorded text as completely intact as she does. The audience for this piece is not only for Ray Silver and his family but also for Stó:lō Nation and those who seek to learn more about Stó:lō people. As a result I have organized the texts into related themes and topics. Ray's life was not shared with me from beginning to end chronologically and as a result I have not forced that template into this narrative. I also did not form too many specific questions but tried to ask about larger themes and events so that I was not controlling the content of information being told. I have chosen to place emphasis on those events that Ray emphasized in his telling of his story. The segments that are rich in detail are so as a result of Ray's detail and intentions in telling them. I have left some long segments of Ray's narrative intact at times so as not to interrupt the flow and meaning of the

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<sup>3</sup> Julie Cruickshank, *Life Lived Like a Story: Life Stories of Three Yukon Native Elders* (Vancouver: UBC Press, 1991), 1.

story as there are often multiple points of connection within several stories told at once. I have tried to analyze the text as little as possible and also not to go outside of the information Ray has provided to honour the truth and trust in which the stories were given to me.

### How to Approach Hereditary Names

I had been informed in the briefing for my project, before meeting Ray, that the name Xéyteléq was the name of the boy from the Sxo'exo'e Mask story as told in the Stó:lō Historical Atlas.<sup>4</sup> When I began to ask Ray about the meaning of his name and its relationship to the Sxo'exo'e origin story he said that he did not know about that boy, but that Xéyteléq was a warrior. The Xéyteléq that Ray is named after is not the same Xéyteléq as the one sometimes linked with the Sxo'exo'e origin story. Stó:lō Nation staff Archaeologist Dave Schaepe explained to me that there are multiple Sxo'exo'e stories and that multiple people have been given the name Xéyteléq through time.<sup>5</sup> The boy from the Sxo'exo'e story was a carrier of the name in the same way that the warrior Xéyteléq and Ray Silver inherited the name. The Sxo'exo'e story has variant details in different communities. The elements of plurality of these stories should be viewed as differences that are equally valid and true for their teller.

The way that Ray lives and the example he sets in his community appears to be closely connected to his responsibility to live up to and “fill” the name he has been given. Field school alumnus Anastasia Tataryn completed her research project on the topic of ancestral names

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<sup>4</sup> Keith Carlson, et al. *A Stó:lō-Coast Salish Historical Atlas* (Vancouver : Douglas & McIntyre; Seattle : University of Washington Press, 2001), plate 3.

<sup>5</sup> Dave Schaepe, Personal Interview, June 27, 2007.

and examined their importance and purpose in the community. She found that to carry an ancestral name is a great responsibility not to tarnish the name. She states: “This responsibility is arguably the primary issue motivating people to receive or not receive ancestral names, as one must live carefully to do the name justice and neither dishonour the elders that gave the name, nor the ancestors implicated and reflected in that name.”<sup>6</sup> She also comments that “an ancestral name does not belong to the person; rather the person belongs to the name.”<sup>7</sup> I would take this analysis further and argue that in the case of Ray Silver, the acceptance of the name Xéyteleq and his desire to be able to fill the name and carry it with pride changed the course of his life. All of the elements of his life that he takes pride in are also characteristics he has used when talking about Xéyteleq. I have devoted a significant amount of time to the presentation of the Xéyteleq stories as the telling of Ray Silver’s life is also the telling of Xéyteleq’s life because they are one in the same. Ray refers often to how a certain activity or action is like Xéyteleq or is something that Xéyteleq would do. The Old Ones trained Ray in the stories of Xéyteleq so that he would know him when he received his name. To be named Xéyteleq has provided Ray with a map or blueprint for the type of person he should be.

I want to thank Ray Silver, his wife Millie, and his grandson Bryce James for the time they spent with me telling me about his life. Ray’s eager and open spirit to share so much with an outsider was truly remarkable. He is very passionate about many of the topics and issues that he shares and this passion was very evident in his concern for his community and its future. There is much to learn from those who have come before you. In the closing ceremony of the feast, hosted by the ethnohistory field school students for the community, Ray

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<sup>6</sup> Anastasia Tataryn, “What is in a Name: Identity, Politics and Stó:lō Ancestral Names” (Ethnohistory Field School Research Paper, September, 2005), 20

<sup>7</sup> Ibid., 21.

was called to witness. When he spoke, he said that never in his life did he think he would have the young students, who came to his office at the brick plant, wanting to know about his life and that seeing the connections made between the students and the people of the community made him “kind of glad that Simon Fraser discovered us.” I am grateful for the opportunity to have learned so much about Ray and to assist him in telling his story.



Clarence Pennier and Ray Silver participating in an honouring ceremony for Sonny McHalsie at the Stó:lō Field School community appreciation feast.

## The story and meaning of Xéyteléq

### **Xéyteléq**

Ray carries the hereditary name of Xéyteléq. This name is a very well respected and wealthy name in that it carries a lot of history and personal responsibility. There are numerous Xéyteléq's as the name has been passed down through generations in some families but Ray and other members of his family were named after the Sumas warrior Xéyteléq. Ray describes Xéyteléq as, "a warrior and he respected, looked after his people. He fought for his people, nobody would touch his people."<sup>8</sup> Being named Xéyteléq had a great impact on Ray's life and the role that he would fill in his community. The following are three stories about Xéyteléq. The first was told to me by Ray's grandson Bryce and the last two were told to me by Ray. These stories shed light on why it is such an honour and a responsibility to carry and fill the name of Xéyteléq.

### **Xéyteléq and Qwa:l**

The Sumas people, they had a lot of spiritual people, but they were also the warriors of our people, and in order to get to anywhere you had to go through there. And the only way you could get through there is if Xéyteléq and Qwa:l were off guarding somewhere else. And one of the stories I hear about is that there used to be a look out on top of Sumas Mountain where uh these people were looking out over the river to see if raiders were coming to uh to fight and try to steal the women and children and if they see the raiders coming the person on the look out would run down to the village and let all the people know and all the women and children and some men would go and hide in the pit houses. And near the bottom of the lake [Sumas Lake] near the lake Xéyteléq and Qwa:l would go and dress in dresses, they would put on cedar dresses and look like they would be picking berries down at the lake [ ... ] In the marshes you could actually run across the reeds and it would look like you were running on the water but if you stopped you would sink, and that is one of the tricks that

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<sup>8</sup> Ray Silver, Personal Interview, June 26, 2007.

Xéyteléq and Qwa:l would do and Xéyteléq and Qwa:l would look like they were picking berries and these raiders would come in and stop off and run across the beach to get these two women that they saw and Xéyteléq and Qwa:l would, just as they got to them, they would stand up and would throw the dresses off, they were big men, and underneath the dresses were war clubs [...] They would stand up and the war party would stop and sink in the reeds and Xéyteléq and Qwa:l would just slaughter them.<sup>9</sup>

### **Xéyteléq, Qwa:l and the boy Slave**

Xéyteléq was a warrior and a provider. And uh him and Qwa:l traveled together also and uh Xéyteléq was on that, never took slaves eh. But Qwa:l did and, uh Qwa:l went out on a raiding party or way out on the coast somewhere, canoes, and how long he was gone is beyond me but when he came back he went and saw Xéyteléq and said “Xéyteléq I brought you a gift.” He is a little boy, a little guy. Xéyteléq told Qwa:l “You go gather the people, gather up all the people I am going to adopt that boy as my son, he’s not my slave he’s my son.” So had a ceremony and Xéyteléq adopted him made him his son. That family lives down in the States now.<sup>10</sup>

### **Xéyteléq’s Death**

Xéyteléq went up there [the Fraser Canyon] with a bunch of people from here from the valley here from Sumas I guess I don’t know from where else and they were up there drying salmon and they had raiding party. They came up. The Saltchuck<sup>11</sup> they were from way out. They’d come up and raid up here and these guys they’d got out there and raid to uh for different things. These people they were down there drying fish the Xéyteléq people. And a runner came, they had runners eh, to deliver messages. The runner come and says a raiding party’s coming up the river, so many canoes coming up, warriors so Xéyteléq he was old then he was an old man so he told his people to go up in the mountains and to stay up there till the raiding party left. And he stayed down at the beach and fought the raiding party. And they done him in and I don’t know how long it was afterwards that the people came down from the mountains after the parties left, the raiding parties left the people came down and Xéyteléq was laying there, he’s full of arrows. So they took him and they buried

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<sup>9</sup> Bryce James, Personal Interview, June 30, 2007.

<sup>10</sup> Ray Silver, Personal Interview, June 26, 2007.

<sup>11</sup> I have been told by Field School instructors that Saltchuck means “ocean people” in the Aboriginal trade language of Chinook jargon.

him down here but he wasn't buried he was uh they put him either on a tree or something or in a little house eh, they had cedar houses they put him in and I believe that was down here on the mountain here [Sumas].<sup>12</sup>

## The Naming of Xéytelég

Traditionally, naming ceremonies would be marked with a potlatch attended by all of the family and individuals from surrounding villages. A feast would be held that could sometimes last for several days and those who attended would be asked to witness and remember the events that took place and the work that was done. The consent of the people who gathered to witness the ceremony was required for the naming ceremony to be completed.<sup>13</sup> As a result it was the community who gave a name and therefore a named person would be responsible to that community to carry that name. The Elders in Ray's community prepared him for his name from the time he was a child by telling him stories about Xéytelég so that when he was named he would know who he was, his history, and the responsibilities that came with that name.

### **Xéytelég's Naming Ceremony**

They [the Old People who named him] didn't know how to lie. When I was a little boy I didn't even know how to swear. And in all the stories they told me about Xéytelég. And one day they were having a feast down here right about where our longhouse is here. And they were my Grandfather and them they used to salt fish and smoke fish and that and all of the guts and everything they got out of the fish that they didn't use they put it in uh they had a hole dug in the ground eh a hole so big. In the ground that's where all those guts and everything went. They had a cover on it. They had this cover on that, over that hole. And um, they had tables and everything, food, you know cakes pies and stuff like that and coffee. And they took me, a couple of elders. They opened that hole and it was just all maggots and they dipped me in it. I don't know how

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<sup>12</sup> Ray Silver, Personal Interview, June 29, 2007.

<sup>13</sup> Tataryn, 7.

far up, they put me in there four times. Took me out and the old ladies grabbed me and they took me, I was crying but I don't remember swearing at these guys, but I was really mad eh and I was crying. The old ladies they took me and they cleaned me off, they probably washed me down. And they told me then "Now you are Xéyteléq" that's how they named me, that's how they baptized me. They told me many stories about him eh, many stories that I forgot.<sup>14</sup>

Carrying a wealthy name is a heavy responsibility. Ray took his name very seriously. Bryce James described his Grandfather, when he was young, as being known as mean and hard but that he could be soft and he always provided for his family. He says that his Grandfather has gotten a lot softer in his old age<sup>15</sup>. Ray also talks about when he was "meaner then" and was an alcoholic. Ray spoke often with me about how he felt a lot of shame when he was younger, shame for who he was, and that the shame lifted when he realized that he was Xéyteléq and that he was living like Xéyteléq when he felt pride in himself and who he was. In the following passage, the acceptance of his name and the actions he took to fill the name were instrumental in restoring Ray's pride in himself and his role in his community.

### **Becoming Xéyteléq**

RS – And they told me what Xéyteléq did, some of the war parties, some of the things he did for the people. How he tried to look after them. But they didn't tell me they were going to give me that name till they gave it to me (laughter).

EC – So you were happy to receive that name?

RS – Oh Yeah, I wasn't for uh many years. I didn't think I could fill the name. I didn't think I uh I didn't think I was capable of carrying it. Uh you see they told me to respect it and I didn't think I respected it for many years and then all of a sudden I thought well by God I guess I am a part of that. I'm a trapper, hunter, fisherman. I was walking up this CN railroad track one day my son and I, going back to my truck. It was about a mile down the railway track parked. I had an otter, a couple of beaver, and a couple of mink. I looked up and it was dark, night time, snowing, and I said my God I think I am a part of that Xéyteléq guy. I am doing something that he did. So I guess I accepted the name and since that time, and

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<sup>14</sup> Ray Silver, Personal Interview, June 26, 2007.

<sup>15</sup> Bryce James, Personal Interview, June 30, 2007.

that was about 1972 or 73 I respect it very much. I give my son that name and my grandson that name so they'll carry on after I am gone.<sup>16</sup>

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EC – What does it mean to carry the name, when you felt you were really carrying it?

RS – I think uh to be proud of yourself like I said, I gotta be proud of myself, I gotta be proud of my accomplishments, I gotta be proud of how I try to treat my neighbours, and how I try to support them. And even this plant here you know I've been working, I've worked here since 1944 and uh I want to see it going because we're Native people and I've got native people working here and I want them to be successful and want them to have employment so what I do what I'm trying to do is I guess sacrifice me if there's such a word, I'll do anything to keep it going.<sup>17</sup>

Like Xéyteléq, Ray places a great amount of responsibility on himself to provide for and protect his community. He has worked his whole life to provide for his family and share with others in the community. In subsequent passages there is further evidence of Ray's commitment to fulfilling the name of Xéyteléq through his traditional activities, community involvement, leadership, and environmental awareness.

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<sup>16</sup> Ray Silver, Personal Interview, June 26, 2007.

<sup>17</sup> Ray Silver, Personal Interview, June 26, 2007.



Ray Silver at the Sumas Clay Products Brick Plant where he has worked since his youth, June, 1007.

## Sxo'exo'e

The Sxo'exo'e mask dance is one of the most sacred rites held by the Stó:lō people. The Sxo'exo'e is performed for its healing powers. It is an incredible honour to be given the right to dance the Sxo'exo'e. Unlike the winter dances the Sxo'exo'e can be performed at any time of year at ceremonies such as weddings, memorials, puberty rights etc. Ray says that “The women carry that, the women are the head of the mask and I think it is one of the, they say anyway, is one of the most sacred things in our culture, the most powerful thing in our culture is the mask.”<sup>18</sup> The mask is passed to males through the matrilineal line. The Sxo'exo'e can only be danced by the men who have been chosen by the family whose women carry the mask. Only women can sing the Sxo'exo'e and men perform the dance. There are multiple Sxo'exo'e stories but most of them have the common theme of the Mask being given to the people from the water as “the natural elements of air and water (associated with many Stó:lō healing rites and spirit power stories) are closely connected to Sxo'exo'e origins.”<sup>19</sup> The Sxo'exo'e origin story told to me by Ray differs from the one presented in the Stó:lō Atlas<sup>20</sup> in that it does not include the story of the boy with sores who receives healing, and subsequently the mask, from the beings under the water. Ray is aware of this story but the following passage is the origin story that he connects to his community.

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<sup>18</sup> Ray Silver, personal interview, June 27, 2006

<sup>19</sup> Keith Carlson, plate 3.

<sup>20</sup> Ibid.

## Sxo'exo'e Origin Story

And uh, they [the Old People] said to me they were telling me about the mask they said uh a long time ago there was a young man and his sisters, three or four sisters. Uh, they were, they had a village here and um a little ways from the village there was a great big back eddy, great big back eddy where they parked their canoes where they put their canoes in this back eddy. So one day this young man and his sisters went down to the canoes you know in this great big back eddy. They saw a baby basket going around and around in this back eddy. See this baby basket, the baskets that they made in those days were waterproof eh, they float and that was one of them eh a baby basket. So the young fella the young guy the baby basket is going around out there and the baby is crying, crying in that basket. So he pushed the canoe out and he went out and got it and brought it in and it was the mask. The Sxo'exo'e mask they told him well 'Put me, put me on you wear me, you're the dancer, you dance and your sisters here are the carriers of this mask they're the leaders and they could because they are girls if the move or marry into another family they become carriers of this mask, the women do, and the men could dance the mask. And uh it taught the girls some songs, they sang, the boy put it on, the young man, they danced. It told him what it was for healing, weddings, memorials, funerals stuff like that and uh they told me that's the way they got the mask and they didn't tell me where or how long ago they didn't know I guess they didn't know. It was a long time ago that happened.<sup>21</sup>

The mining Engineer, Brian Steven's from the Clayburn Mine told Ray that originally the Fraser River flowed through the Fraser Valley on the south side of Sumas Mountain down towards Bellingham. He believed that at the time the Fraser flowed in this direction there was a large back eddy where the Sumas reserve is currently located. Ray interprets this information in relation to the origins of the Sxo'exo'e mask:

I was sitting up in the mines eh my clay mines, I had clay and I start thinking about the Sxo'exo'e mask was that where they found the mask in that big back eddy? That was a big back eddy hundreds of years ago. How old is the mask? Nobody knows. So you know, that's a most sensible thing that I could think about was that thing coming down the river and going into this back eddy because there was a big back eddy here. But our people would never claim something like that. Maybe some other tribes and that, I'd mention it to different ones they'd look at me you know 'That old puke is trying to claim the mask' I'd like to know the hell it come from or how did we get it. But I think there's other one's too, there's

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<sup>21</sup> Ray Silver, personal interview, June 27, 2006

other ones that came like up in the Harrison River way up there there's carving in the rock up there of the mask. Up in Chehalis. So there's probably others too. [...] Anyway that's how I was told and that's the closest thing because the river did run through here and there was a big back eddy and those people they were telling me they were probably telling me the truth but they wouldn't say where it came from. See that's something the Natives never did too much of, the Old People, especially if it was spiritual, they never tried to claim it, it belonged to everybody if it helped you or helped people let it be, that was good."<sup>22</sup>

### Importance of Sxo'exo'e to Ray's Family and Community

The Sxo'exo'e is especially important to Ray and his family because the women in Ray's family carry the mask and some men in his family are Sxo'exo'e dancers. In this passage Ray talks about passing the tradition of the mask on to his grandsons and places the mask within the historical context of his family.

I brought out two masks to two of my grandsons, the old ones they were, these actually are replicas of really old ones that were taken see when our people would destroy those things, burn them. These people, my people here, sent them to Vancouver Island and those Natives out there had them so I got the replicas yeah and uh how the mask come there's a lot different kinds of stories about it.<sup>23</sup> And you know the people here they didn't lie, that's one of those things I realized years after that the things that they were telling me when I was a little boy it was the truth. They weren't lying to me. They told me about the mask and we belong to it and I think everybody they way they spoke I think everybody belonged to the mask. Because the mask was for healing, healing and ceremonies its for funerals, weddings, memorials, its for a lot of different things in our culture. Like a preacher, a priest or whatever.<sup>24</sup>

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<sup>22</sup> Ray Silver, personal interview, June 27, 2006

<sup>23</sup> The Potlatch and all ceremonies and dances related to the Potlatch were banned through federal legislation in 1884. Anyone caught practicing or hosting a potlatch could be arrested and imprisoned. The ban forced many people to practice in secret or to abandon the practice for fear of punishment. The ban was lifted in 1951 but by then many of the traditional masks and regalia had been lost.<sup>20A</sup>

<sup>20</sup> Jean Barman, *"The West Beyond the West A History of British Columbia."*(Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1999), 160, 308.

<sup>24</sup> Ray Silver, personal interview, June 27, 2007.

Bryce James is one of the men in his family who dances the Sxo'exo'e.<sup>25</sup> As a Sxo'exo'e dancer he has a responsibility to know his history and his lineage. He can trace his lineage to the last personal carrier of the mask in his family which is over 50 years ago.<sup>26</sup> The mask was passed down to him through the matrilineal line of his grandmother Irene Miller, Ray's first wife. In Ray and Bryce's family the mask is passed along matrilineal line but as the leader of the family and because Irene had passed away Ray decided who would be the next generation to dance the Sxo'exo'e. Bryce explained to me that this process is different in different families and does not have a strict protocol but that the mask is passed through matrilineal lineage.<sup>27</sup> Bryce does not know why it took so long for his Grandfather to pass the dance to someone in his family but he is very honoured that he was chosen to carry this tradition from those who came before him to those who will come in the future.

### T'ixwelátsa

One of the other figures that is very integral to Stó:lō culture and the culture of the people of Sumas is the stone ancestor T'ixwelátsa. T'ixwelátsa was once a man but was transformed by X:als the Transformer in the area of Chilliwack. T'ixwelátsa came to Sumas with a woman from the family who cared for him when she married into a family in Sumas to make amends between families in Sumas and Chilliwack. He was last seen in the Sumas area when he was identified by local farmers in 1892<sup>28</sup>. Sumas is the last area that

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<sup>25</sup> Sometimes it is customary for Sxo'exo'e dancers to keep their identity a secret but Bryce gave me permission to share this information as many know his role through the cultural work he does in the community.

<sup>26</sup> Bryce James, personal interview, June 30, 2007.

<sup>27</sup> Bryce James, Personal Telephone Interview, October 9, 2007.

<sup>28</sup> Dave Schaepe "Stone T'ixwelátsa Repatriation Report" (Stó:lō Nation, October, 2005), 16

T'ixwelátsa was found before he disappeared around the time of the lynching of Louis Sam in 1884.<sup>29</sup> Ray told me that after Louis Sam died families, such as the Commodores, who had lived near Whatcom Rd. near the border moved further north as a result of fear. Ray says that T'ixwelátsa “he came from here” and that “when the people left there they left that there. They didn't have time to take it, T'ixwelátsa.”<sup>30</sup>

At some point later T'ixwelátsa disappeared and was then found in the Burke Muesum in Seattle. T'ixwelátsa was repatriated to the Stó:lō community in the fall of 2006 when the Stó:lō were able to successfully submit a repatriation request, with the Nooksack Tribe in Washington, through the Native American Graves Protection and Repatriation Act.<sup>31</sup> T'ixwelátsa stands as a reminder to Ray that you should live a good life or you may become like him. The following are excerpts from my interviews with Ray about T'ixwelátsa.

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<sup>29</sup> For more information on the this event please see:  
Keith Carlson, “The Lynching of Louis Sam” *BC Studies*,109 (Spring 1996): 63-79.

<sup>30</sup> Ray Silver, Personal Interview, June 26 2007.

<sup>31</sup> Burke Museum, “Fall 2006: Burke Museum Assists Nooksack Tribe in Return of the Stone T'ixwelátse,” *Burke Museum*, October 6, 2006 <<http://www.washington.edu/burkemuseum/events/stone/index.php>> (20 July, 2007).

## T'ixwelátsa

RS – I think he was some kind of a like, good and bad like maybe like ... I mentioned it down here at the long house I said that he must have been like Jesus Christ. Something like that because they told us stories, told me stories never to be lazy, never lie, and all those good things, the things that we're not supposed to do. If I did those things I could be turned into a rock.<sup>32</sup>

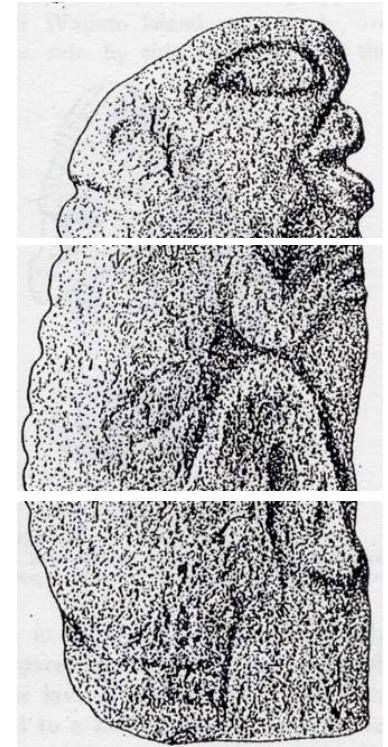
RS – See that was something to ... he was something that uh they didn't want the children to be.

EC – Do you know why he was turned into rock

RS – Because he was ... he was lazy and he lied and maybe stole, I think mostly he was a liar eh and maybe went for the other guys woman or whatever, stuff like that eh. You could be turned to rock so you had to be a good boy you had to be a really good person. If you weren't you could be a T'ixwelátsa. So nobody wanted to be a rock (laughter) so they wanted to be good.<sup>33</sup>

EC – What did it feel like for your community to have T'ixwelátsa brought back?"

RS – I guess it's a good thing, I guess it's a good thing that the uh I don't know uh it would be like the white man talking about, as far as I'm concerned Jesus Christ. I think it's a good thing provided the people realize why that man was turned into a rock stone and uh you know the people start teaching their children that they better not lie or steal or anything like that or be lazy that they could be turned to stone. Like Jesus Christ there if you'd done those things he'd put you in hell [laughter]. But uh for our people there's no hell there you just turn to be a rock.<sup>34</sup>



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<sup>32</sup> Ray Silver, Personal Interview, June 29, 2007.

<sup>33</sup> Ray Silver, Personal Interview, June 26, 2007.

<sup>34</sup> Ray Silver, Personal Interview, June 29, 2007.

So I was never, I never tried to waste anything, never waste, I was taught that. Never throw things away unless they were really no good and always be active.<sup>35</sup>

You live, you have a chance to live a long time. If there is something you are ashamed of you haven't got too much chance of having a long life. Because you are never happy you are always ashamed of your family, ashamed of this, ashamed of that. I used to be ashamed of myself at one time, not anymore, I look in the mirror and I'm pretty god-darned happy with what I see. And that's the way it should be. And those words that I'm telling you are preached in the longhouse to our children. Not only by me but by others, to be good to your neighbour and uh I think that's what T'ixwelátsa was all about, about how people spoke in the longhouses. Never to be like that guy that was turned into a rock.<sup>36</sup>

When T'ixwelátsa was returned from the Museum Ray hosted the homecoming celebration in the longhouse at the Sumas Reserve. This was the first place that T'ixwelátsa came when he was returned home.

EC – How did you become the one to host the ceremony when he was returned.? Didn't you host it in your big house here?

RS – Yeah our tribe, when they brought T'ixwelátsa back yeah. I don't know I wasn't, uh you could feel uh something there. And not only the native people felt something but the white people as well. You see I've got a lot of white people in my family daughter-in-laws son-in-laws stuff like that. All my half-breed kids they don't even look native a lot of them their red head blonds and everything. And uh they all felt that strange relief when the brought T'ixwelátsa here. I felt it in Nooksack when they brought him there I went down to Nooksack as well my wife and I and he uh you could say maybe something like something like from outer space or something like that.

EC – Supernatural?

RS – Yeah, something like that. I believe it was a good thing. I don't think that anyone would believe it now that they could be turned into rock, especially the young kids. They're educated in the white man's way. So they'll never believe

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<sup>35</sup> Ray Silver, Personal Interview, June 26, 2007.

<sup>36</sup> Ray Silver, Personal Interview, June 26, 2007.

that, oh you could be turned into a rock if your no good there's so damn many of them that's lazy and no good now and they're not being turned into a rock they're not even being put in jail.<sup>37</sup>

Ray's status in the community and his commitment to his culture and traditions is evident in this act of hosting such an important event. It is also evident in this text that it was a very important event for the people to have T'ixwelátsa returned to them. This stone is an ancestor that was lost and has now come home.

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<sup>37</sup> Ray Silver, Personal Interview, June 29, 2007.

## Young Life before becoming Xéyteleq

Ray Silver was born Ambrose Silver March 1, 1929 into the Stó:lō community of Sumas where continues to live today. His ancestry on his father's side can be traced back four generations to Roberto de Silva who was a "Spaniard from Chile" who came to the West Coast when he "jumped ship in Laidlaw" and met Stó:lō woman whose identity is unfortunately not known.<sup>38</sup> They had two children, Pete Silva, Ray's Great grandfather and Margaret who became Mrs. August Jim.<sup>39</sup> Around the time of 1938 Ray was walking home from the public school near the Sumas reserve when he and his brother were picked up by the Indian Agent and taken to Coqualeetza Indian Residential School in Chilliwack which is now the site of the Stó:lō Nation offices. He attended for one year and was then transferred to the Port Alberni Residential School on Vancouver Island when Coqualeetza closed. This is Ray's account of his experience in residential schools:

We went to Port Alberni in I think it was 1939 and, uh I never learnt nothing in Residential school. All I learnt how to do was steal food, we were starving. And uh finally one day they said me and my cousins were gonna come home, I guess that was in June or something I don't know. They brought us home and I asked the "Principal where's my brother?" and he said "He's coming." And when the ferry was getting into Vancouver he said your brother was down in the bottom here in a box, he died. So that was the end of my schooling. I said if this is the way the schools are I don't want no more to do with it. So I never did go back to school I went to work.<sup>40</sup>

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<sup>38</sup> Ray Silver, Personal Interview, June 26, 2007.

<sup>39</sup> Mrs. August Jim is strongly connected to the communities of Iwowis and Lhileltalets. These locations are also the site of many of the Sxo'exo'e. Ray's only knowledge of his connection to these places is that some of his ancestors came from that area of the canyon. For more information on Lhileltalets see Devon Drury's Ethnohistory Field School report on this topic, 2007.

<sup>40</sup> Ray Silver, Personal Interview, June 26, 2007.



Peter Bolen, Margaret Silver, June Silver, Cousin Dalton, and Ray Silver's Brother who died at residential school. Photo provided by Ray and Millie Silver

Ray started working out in the farms, cutting mining poles for the clay mines, cutting wood, haying for the farmers. He took whatever work he could find. When he wasn't working he spent his time fishing, hunting, and trapping in the rivers and streams near Sumas, around Sumas Mountain, and on the Fraser River. These hunting grounds are now all gone as a result of development.

### Brother, Husband, Parent, Grandparent, Great-grandparent

Ray is very committed to providing for his family and providing an example of hard work and ethics. He took responsibility for his family of 10 siblings and his ailing mother when he was just a young teenager. He retrieved his infant brother from a relative and made sure that his family was provided for. His current wife Millie said that he has always worked and cared for his family.<sup>41</sup> Ray married Irene Miller in 1951 and they raised 11 children together.<sup>42</sup> The Millers were one of the old families of Sumas but Irene was the last one still there. Irene was on her way to becoming a nun at the convent at St. Joseph's Mission near Williams Lake.<sup>43</sup> She returned home and



Ray and Irene Silver three of their children.  
Photo provided by Ray and Millie Silver

<sup>41</sup> Millie Silver, Personal Interview, June 28, 2007.

<sup>42</sup> Ray Silver, Personal Interview, June 26, 2007.

<sup>43</sup> Millie Silver, Personal Interview, June 28, 2007.

eventually married Ray instead. Irene passed away in 1988 and is described by her Grandson Bryce James as being the “nicest, sweetest, never said a bad think to anybody. I think that she was the glue that held the family together. And when she passed on it was really, really hard for my grandpa and the family because she was the glue. My grandpa provided for the family and he was strength in that way, but she was the heart of the family.”<sup>44</sup>

In 1989 Ray married Millie Phillips who was originally from Chehalis. Their blended family has 52 grandchildren and 12 great grandchildren. Ray feels concern for what their future will look like and what the world will be like for them:

You know a lot of things I think about like that, that’s why I love children, I love the young people, young kids. I take my little grandkids and hug them my great grandkids and love them up and they don’t like me because I do that [laughter]. But its just, I get sorry for them, they’re here and they’ll never experience this world or see it like I did, never.<sup>45</sup>

Some of Ray’s children still live in the area and some live far away. The community he lives in has changed and grown over time. In his community there are many new families and many of the old family names he knew when he was young such as Poole, Jimmy, Miller, and Commodore are gone from his community. When he was young he said that there were only 50 or 60 families on his reserve and now the community is much larger and he does not recognize many of the names on the current band list.<sup>46</sup> Ray and Millie are very active both in their work, their family, and their community.<sup>47</sup>

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<sup>44</sup> Bryce James, Personal Interview, June 30, 2007.

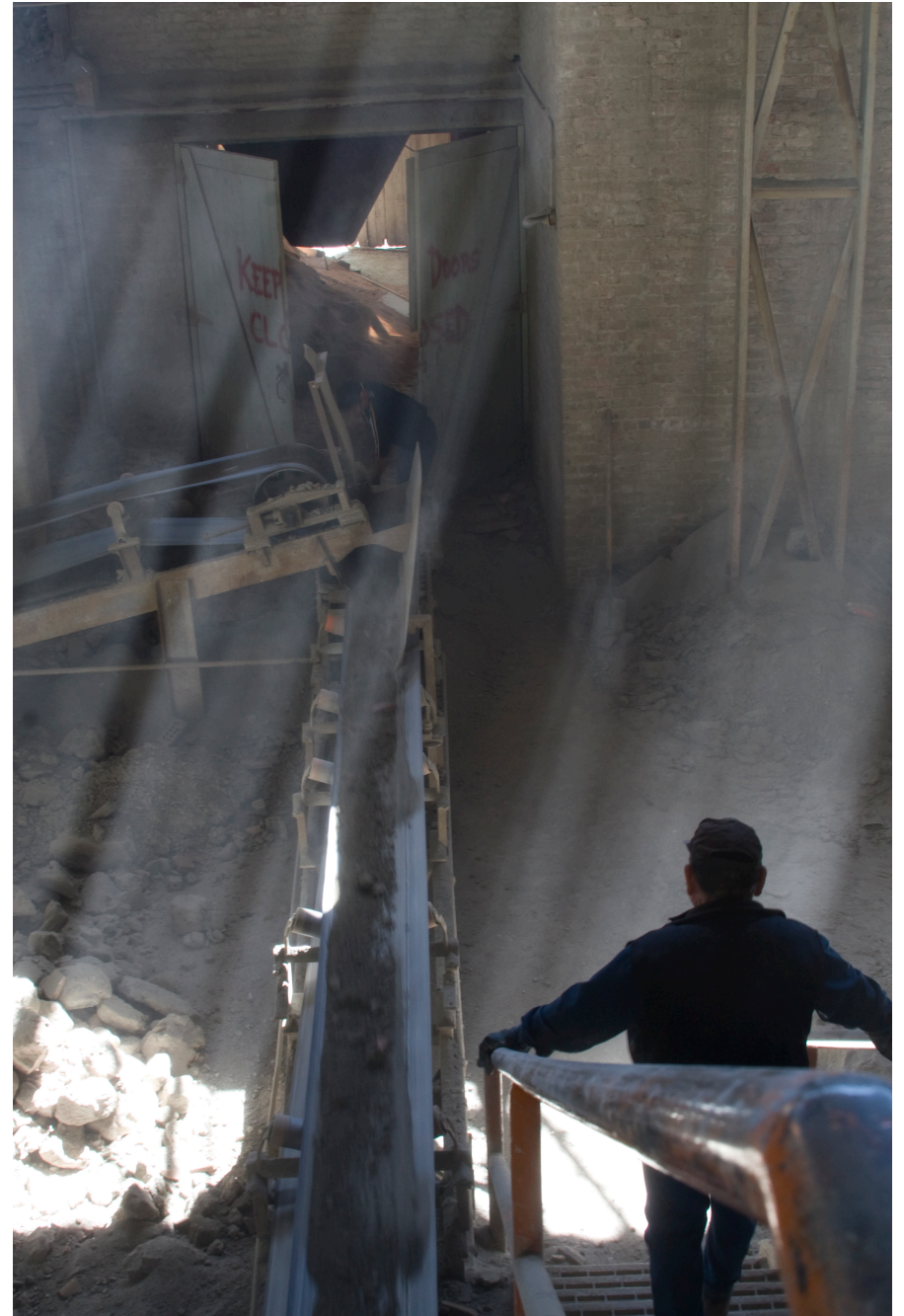
<sup>45</sup> Ray Silver, Personal Interview, June 27, 2007

<sup>46</sup> Ray Silver, Personal Interview, June 26, 2007.

<sup>47</sup> Ray Silver, Personal Interview, June 26, 2007.



The Sumas Clay Products Crew in June 2007

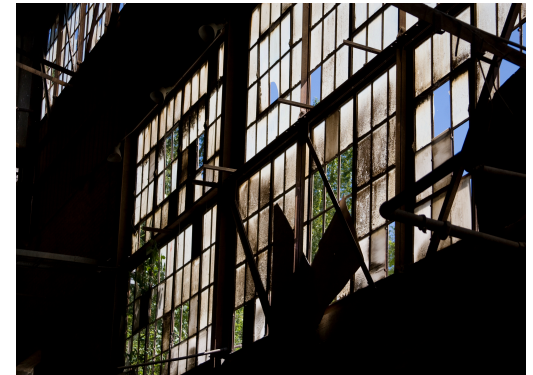


Images of Ray and the Sumas Clay Products Plant

## Brick Maker, Community Leader, Hunter, Fisherman

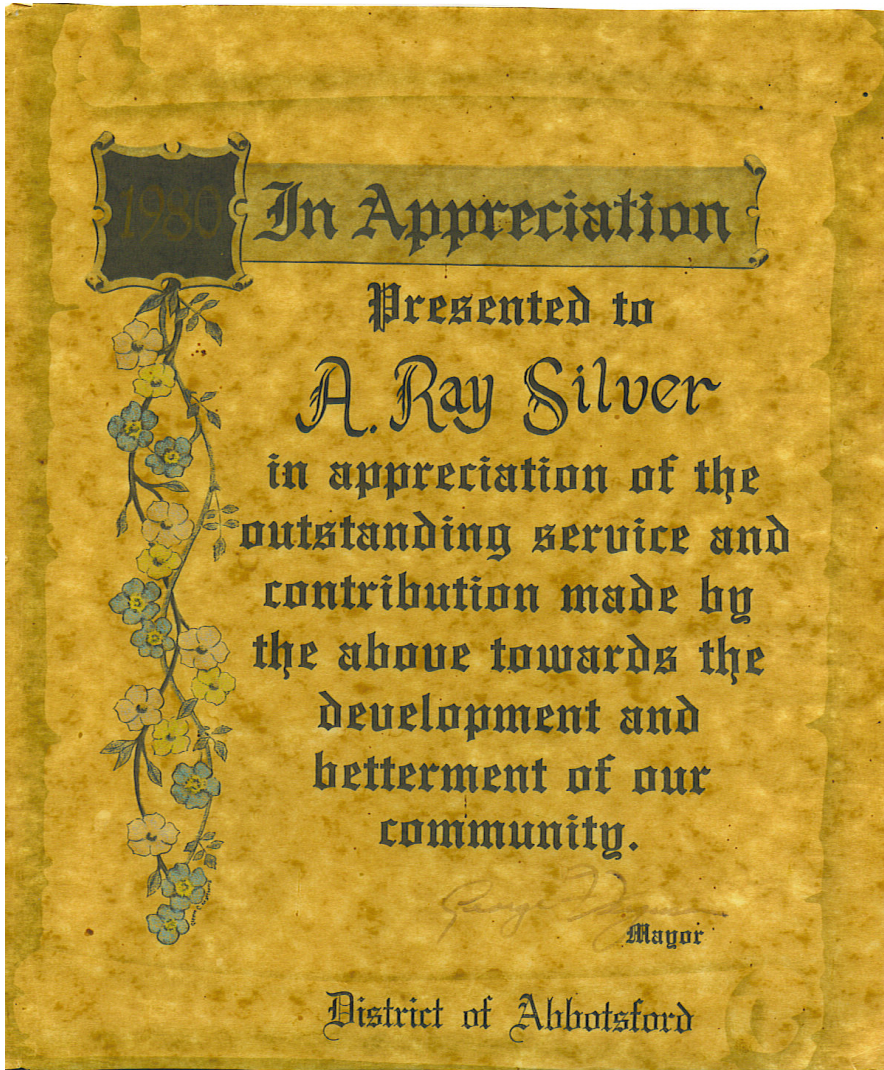


Sumas Clay Products Plant June 2007



On weekdays, Ray can be found at one of his favourite places, the Sumas Clay Products Plant just over one hundred yards from his house. At the age of fifteen he started working at the Clayburn Brick (now Sumas Clay Products) plant located on the Sumas Reserve and he knows the entire history of the place like no one else could. Even with his failing eyesite he can navigate through the old buildings, ladder stairways, bricks, and machinery with ease. Ray truly takes pride in his work. Aside from a short period when the plant was partially destroyed by fire, this is where Ray has worked and still works every day since his youth. The Sumas Band took over operation of the plant in 1978 and then started mining clay. The jobs completed using Sumas bricks since 1978 include places and projects such as the Harrison Hotel, Skytrain stations, the L'Ecole Polytechnique Massacre memorial in Vancouver, and many fireplaces, homes, and sidewalks in the Fraser Valley, Lower Mainland, and other areas. Business has declined in recent years as a result of both the loss of Ray's son-in-law, who was the sales representative and passed away from cancer, and the increased restrictions on wood burning fireplaces as a result of air quality control. Brick production dropped almost by half between 1989 and 1990 with the decline of wood burning brick fireplaces.

On the right: Trophies from Ray's boxing club days. The one in the centre was to recognize his contribution to the community



Above: Ray received this Community commendation for his work with the boxing club

Right: The recognition of Sumas Clay Products by the Ethics in Action Awards.



Today the brick plant is just getting by as Ray worries about its future and questions why more people don't invest in local business. He feels a strong responsibility to keep the plant going as a source of employment and pride for the community.<sup>48</sup> The plant is not just his place of employment, it is a part of his home and community. Ray is the leader of the community in many different ways, as an Elder, a Chief, a boxing coach, and also as a senior staff at the brick plant. In the 1950's he was the Chief of the Sumas First Nation for two terms. When Ray was Chief, they were not paid for the work that they did and they had to pay all of their own expenses if they had to travel.<sup>49</sup> His wife Millie says that it was important to Ray to listen to the people because it upset him that over time decisions were often made for them instead of with them.<sup>50</sup>

For a number of years Ray was the coach of the Fraser Valley Boxing Club. He was a member of both the Police Athletic League and the Amateur Boxing association. He trained young boxers in the old school near the reserve. His boxers were quite successful and won at matches such as the California Golden Bear in Sacramento in the early 1970's. He started boxing for money when he was young but then started coaching as he got older. Millie said that he put a lot of his own time and finances into the boxers. If they didn't have enough money for equipment or needed transportation he was known to help them out.<sup>51</sup> He was recognized for his commitment to the community through coaching with a citation from the Mayor of Abbotsford for community service. He stopped coaching in the late 1970's when he felt that

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<sup>48</sup> Ray Silver, Personal Interview, June 26, 2007.

<sup>49</sup> Ray Silver, Personal Interview, June 27, 2007.

<sup>50</sup> Millie Silver, Personal Interview, June 27, 2007.

<sup>51</sup> Millie Silver, Personal Interview, June 27, 2007.

politics in the organization of the sport had become too predominant. Ray is also involved with Alcoholics Anonymous and often speaks at local meetings. He recently received recognition for 37 years of sobriety. He feels very concerned for others in his community, especially the young people, but he does have hope for their future: “You never know, maybe we’ll be turned into singers not rock ... I believe we have time left to do something.” Ray has also used the brick plant to contribute to other communities.<sup>52</sup> The plant donated bricks just south of the border for a war memorial in Whatcom County. In 1997, the Sumas Brick Plant was nominated as a finalist for the Ethics in Action Ethical Decision Making award for businesses as a result of the plant’s contribution to the L’Ecole Polytechnique Memorial.<sup>53</sup> Bryce James said the following about his Grandfather’s role in his community:

He’s kind of always been the leader of our community we have longhouses like what you are staying in now but it seems like he has always had the biggest one. He’s not a dancer but he’s always been the head of the home, he’s always been the hunter, the trapper, a fisherman. And he’s always provided for the people in our home and people throughout the valley. I think a lot of them still value what he gives because still his sons are wonderful hunters. ... When they go home, they still give what they get to not only elders in our own community, but others throughout the valley.<sup>54</sup>

Ray is very active in his community as he is often called to witness at events at the longhouse both in Sumas and in other communities in the area. He is very respected in both Native and non-Native communities and that respect, I think, has been given to him because of the respect he has given to others.

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<sup>52</sup> Ray Silver, Personal Interview, June 29, 2007.

<sup>53</sup> The Province, 1 June 1997, M6.

<sup>54</sup> Bryce James, Personal Interview, June 30, 2007.

When Ray was young, he said that if he was not at work at the brick plant than he was out on the river fishing or out in the woods hunting and trapping. Ray raised 11 children and he is proud to say that he has never been on welfare as he has always worked hard to provide for his family. Fishing and hunting are two of the ways that he used traditional activities to make ends meet. Even though his eyesight prevents him from hunting now he still likes to go out on the river to fish.

RS – Sometimes I go out, I am the oldest fisherman in the Fraser River. I got a fishing permit when I was 13 I think. I still fish a little bit but I'm blind, I'm pretty blind it's hard for me to get around the rocks. But I still, I love to go out there where we used to stay at Devil's Run. I am one of the last that stayed there. We had a smoke house there and a shack, a little cabin and that's where I spent a lot of my falls there, in the fall, in September. In August, the end of August, September we'd go down there and they smoked fish there, Salmon, they'd stay there for a month, maybe a month and a half and then they'd paddle all the way back up. Up the Sumas and up the Marshall, they parked the canoe's right down here in the little Marshall below this bridge here, that's where the canoes were.

EC – Oh, so how far is Devil's Run, up river from here?

RS – Uh no, you go down into the Vedder, down the Vedder and Devil's Run is just maybe a mile below the mouth of the Vedder.

EC – In the Fraser?

RS – Yeah, right on the mouth of the Vedder our people stayed there to, they used to live there. Down below that's where they canned there, they, Oh, they did everything there. They, later on they canned fish there, they still do that up in Yale I think.<sup>55</sup>

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<sup>55</sup> Ray Silver, Personal Interview, June 26, 2007.

Ray and his wife Millie enjoy natural and traditional foods the most. Ray hunted all of his life for meat to process and have through the winter. He also trapped for furs and helped others in the community when he brought home more than he needed. As a result of development in the Fraser Valley Ray had to start traveling north to Fort St. James in order to hunt.



Ray Silver's former hunting grounds now housing developments near Sumas Mountain. His house is marked with a yellow star. Image collected from Google Earth.

The following are excerpts of our multiple conversations about hunting.

There's so much happened. Like one day, uh, there was a write up in the Stó:lō paper and it had a picture of this place down here and it said "Ray Silver's Hunting Ground" and it was all houses (laughter).<sup>56</sup>

EC – I was going to ask you where your trap lines were?

RS – Uh, over on the other side, all of the flats here (points to Sumas Mountain behind the plant). I went right down to trapping beaver. [...] My trap line is on the other side of the mountain they got a bid rock quarry there.

EC – on the backside of Sumas Mountain?

continued on pg. 35

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<sup>56</sup> Ray Silver, Personal Interview, June 26, 2007.



Ray with a 150 lb Moose he hunted in the Fort St. John area. Photo provided by Ray and Millie Silver

RS – Yeah right by the Fraser River the, uh, streams run into the Fraser River. I go over the mountain and trap there. That was for beaver, otter, mink, some muskrat, fox, I even caught Lynx back there.

EC – Oh really, do you see many of those animals around anymore, now?

RS – No, there’s a lot of scabby uh mangy uh coyotes, they’re all over here. When I was trapping and we used to keep them cleaned out.”<sup>57</sup>

...

RS – Our hunting grounds, uh the White man comes and they used to come see me some old guys and they get permission to go out here and hunt ducks, shoot ducks, because there is no more territory left. Even not only for the Native people but for the White people as well, especially the old white people, the pioneers, the people that were born and raised out here, the white people, they got no more left [hunting area] gone.<sup>58</sup>

There’s so much happened. Like one day, uh, there was a write up in the Stó:lō paper and it had a picture of this place down here and it said “Ray Silver’s Hunting Ground” and it was all houses (laughter).<sup>59</sup>

EC – I was going to ask you where your trap lines were?

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EC – on the backside of Sumas Mountain?

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<sup>57</sup> Ray Silver, Personal Interview, June 26, 2007.

<sup>58</sup> Ray Silver, Personal Interview, June 26, 2007.

<sup>59</sup> Ray Silver, Personal Interview, June 26, 2007.

<sup>60</sup> Ray Silver, Personal Interview, June 26, 2007.

Yeah I used to trap, I guess I'm the la., my sons are the last trappers, they trap but they quit trapping after the animal lovers. Just like the seal lovers, they make me sick these people they don't know how to control our country with the animals. Trappers they got a good... they got... they're good environment people because they know how to read the animals, they know what the animals eat, they know how they travel, they read the signs. You gotta know that to be able to catch them, to catch them, and kill them right now. I uh, when I was trapping beaver, otter, muskrat, mink, I set traps so I could kill a beaver in water that deep I drowned them.”

EC – Oh so about 2 or 3 feet deep?

RS – “Yup, a lot of people they don't know how to do that and then the beaver will chew his leg of or something like and its pretty near impossible to catch them the second time. Beaver's they know, they're smart, eh. Actually they are smarter then a man (laughs).

EC – So you would put your trap underwater so that when the beaver got trapped it would drown so that it wouldn't be able to chew its...

RS – I had slides, I made slides, I learnt that from Fort St. James, uh a little wire with nails, they make traps like that now. I'd catch them in the shallow water and as soon as the beaver or any kind of an animal, water animal, as soon as they get caught the safest place for them is the deep water, so they'd go into the deep water, they get down there at the end of the nail or the end of the wire and I've got it so the nail would flip over and it won't come up the wire anymore, its stuck there, and the beaver he'd stay there and drown. So then in 2 or 3 minutes he's dead. I don't have them with their legs chewed off. I trained my kids my boys that too. Try to kill them as soon as possible, even the muskrat. Drown them.<sup>61</sup>

Everyone I have spoken to has said he was an exceptionally skilled hunter. Bryce James said that Ray's hunting friend Henry told him “Your grandpa could shoot the eye out of a duck.” Because of his eyesight he can no longer hunt but he and Millie still enjoy wild meat that others in the community share with them. Being a successful hunter was one of the attributes that made him feel that he could fill the name Xéyteléq. Xéyteléq is a hunter and a provider.

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<sup>61</sup> Ray Silver, Personal Interview, June 26, 2007.

## Spirituality

Ray is very concerned with how he lives his life and treats others. A dominant theme throughout our conversations was that of respect not only for people but all living things and for himself. He feels a very connected sense of responsibility to those around him. Respect is at the basis of his interactions with everything and everyone and seems to be rooted in his spiritual values. Ray says that he is Roman Catholic but he is also critical of the church's treatment of his people. He is comfortable being Catholic and also keeping ties to his traditional spiritual beliefs. The following story and statement are an example of his multiple spiritual beliefs, and the connection of the spirituality of his people to the environment around them.

### **The Preachers and the Garden**

One time I was working in my garden, my wife's garden, flower garden I was down on my knees on a Sunday going through the dirt. Picking the weeds out and that, flower garden, I don't fool with the flower garden too much because I always tell my wife I can't eat them bloody flowers. Anyway I was down in her flower garden this day and these two preachers come up my sidewalk there and I'm out here on my knees and I knew they were preachers. They drove in my driveway and they had suites on and everything, they were looking at me and they said "Have you people got a God?". I thought for a second "Oh, I don't know I'm not too sure". "Do you believe in God?" I said "I don't know I'm not too sure". He said "Have you guys have you people got a Jesus Christ?" I'm getting kind of annoyed there I'm still working in my ... and after a while I said "Yeah this is my Jesus Christ this is my people's Jesus Christ." What a, what a bloody devil I guess they thought I was eh. I said "This is Mother Earth, Mother Earth, respect Mother Earth, respect her blood vessels. She'll give you everything you need to live, everything you need to live it's alive. Mother Earth will provide for you that's my God that's our God that's our Jesus Christ" I says "You contaminate the streams you contaminate Mother Earth 's blood vessels." I says "you contaminate that guys blood vessels how long would he last? That's what we're doing to Mother Earth now we're contaminating her blood vessels." And uh they didn't know what the hell to say. They never come back to see me again. And I says, he was talking about Jesus Christ now, and all this good stuff I says "You see that longhouse down there that's our church." I says " Old people like me we go in there and preach to our young people to

respect and share with one another help one another we do that every winter we try and teach them to be respectful and when they look in that looking glass, that mirror, they kind of like that person eh. Don't be ashamed of him. You learn that from that longhouse. <sup>62</sup>

### **Mother Earth**

I always said our people, their god is mother earth, spiritually mother earth is their god, everything that we need to survive, mother earth would provide us with it, this is the way I was taught it. Provided we respect mother earth. Really respect mother earth and her streams, her rivers, her streams which are her blood vessels. Contaminate those blood vessels and you destroy mother earth. Look at the Vedder river look at the Fraser River and many, many other streams besides those two streams, the stream on the other side of the river, Deroche. I used to paddle up there. Now there is nothing left. In the winter time summertime maybe there is a foot of water there, the same with the Vedder. So you know it's a really sad world you know when you really stop and think about it. And their destroying it really fast today. <sup>63</sup>

Respect I think is the greatest thing we can have for Mother Earth and ourselves. We don't respect we don't have nothing and I believe that's the way my people have been for hundreds of years. This is what they were telling me when I was a little boy that's where that rock came into it. They didn't want me to turn into a rock. So I had to be good I had to respect everything and I wouldn't be turned into a rock and that's I guess that'd be like uh they tell you, they tell you in the churches today you know if you don't respect you could go to hell. I believe we create our own. The Great Spirit don't punish you, the Great Spirit don't punish people, we punish ourselves. That's what you learn in the longhouse. We are great people to punish ourselves. We are a great people to punish other people. <sup>64</sup>

During our interviews Ray spoke often of the spirituality of his people and culture. He told me two stories in which he experienced something spiritual or supernatural for himself personally. I am presenting these stories in one piece, as they were told to me, to maintain both the natural transition between the stories and the common themes that run through them. Between the stories he talks about an area of

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<sup>62</sup> Ray Silver, Personal Interview, June 27, 2007.

<sup>63</sup> Ray Silver, Personal Interview, June 26, 2007.

<sup>64</sup> Ray Silver, Personal Interview, June 27, 2007.

Sumas Mountain with “holes” or caves that are considered sacred and not to be visited by anyone. I have included this bridge between the two spiritual stories as it may provide an example of the outcome of obeying the spiritual laws of the community.

### **The Song, The Mountain, and Clarence Ned**

RS – Just like they [the Old People] talked about songs, spiritual songs, I forgot about it for years. I said “Where did they get the songs from how did they get them?” They said they come from the North they come from up here and they fly to the south in the fall and then early in the spring they go back and my god one night I heard one I could barely hear it and it just kept getting louder and louder and right above me and it started fading to the south. And I said to myself I says ‘By God those Old People were not lying to me.’ That’s the first thing I thought about, they weren’t b.s.’ing me. They were telling me the truth, that does happen, its happening today.

EC –When did that happen?

RS – Uh, probably 30 years ago 35 years ago it was still pretty well nice out here hey. There was nobody going up there, see I was never allowed to go up there hunting. When I hunted dear me and my brother in law we were the hunter here we never, we went underneath them and we went up above these holes up here but we never ever went into them. They just said don’t go there and that’s all they had to say so we didn’t go there. They never begged you and said well it’s bad to go there or something like that you know something will happen to you if you go there. They never said that, they all said ‘stay away from there.’ And we uh listened, I wish I could do that to my men here [laughter] they’d listen. But that’s the way we were in the old days, the people were. That’s the way I was brought up. My education wasn’t in the schools, I’m the only living man that was brought up the Indian way. Hunting, fishing trapping and providing for the people, that’s how I accepted the name Xéytelég.

EC – The Song you heard, did you know what it meant?

RS – No. I was told by, I mentioned it a couple times to different Old People and they said if you’d remembered that song you’d be dancing that song today. I’d be a spiritual dancer. A lot of things like that happened. My brother-in-law drowned in the Fraser River. He was a trapper and hunter and a fisherman, his name was Clarence Ned, my past wife’s brother. He drowned in the Fraser River in the 50’s and I don’t know I used to drink like a fish eh and he and I used to drink with him. He was gone for about a month and I was really down and out because I had nobody else. And I went one Friday night I went to the pub in Abbotsford and I sat in the beer parlour and I had a big bottle of whiskey in my car under my seat, I had a nice car. I sat in that beer parlour and I couldn’t enjoy myself I was all alone at the table and it seemed like I never had a friend in there and the beer tasted like hell. So I sat there for I don’t know how long and it must be getting

close to midnight and I got up and I walked out and got in my car and I went down to where my brother-in-law drowned. And I had to walk about a half a mile down along the Fraser River and I walked down to where he drowned and uh I looked out there and that must have been about 1:00 in the morning and there was a cotton log that ran, the river was here, and there was a cotton log that ran like that eh on the bank. Cotton logs about that high old log. So I crawled over that log and the minute I, the minute I got on the other side of it like a million bees in my head started buzzing just really buzzing real hard. So what the hell? So I crawled back over the log and after I crawled back over the log no more. No more, no more buzzing it was gone. So I walked, I was walking back towards my car I walked a little ways. What the heck happened here? So I turned around and I walked back to the log and I crawled over it again and the same thing happened. A real hard buzzing in my head. So I crawled back over it and I went to my car and I grabbed my bottle and I had the biggest drink I ever had [laughter] and then I went home and I told my wife I said “Clarence,” my brother-in-law “I know where he’s at, he’s still there where he drowned” and about a week later they found him there. His wife, he popped up and his wife was down below and she saw him when he came up. The tug boat got him. You know things like that happen I guess maybe I was kind of a spiritual person [laughs] maybe I am a spiritual person.<sup>65</sup>

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<sup>65</sup> Ray Silver, Personal Interview, June 28, 2007.



Sumas Lake, 1901. A picnic party, and sail boat at Sumas Lake Ridge.  
This photo was presented to the City Archives, 10 June 1945,  
by Mr. Thomas Fraser York, of Mustington, pioneer, of Port Douglas, Harrison Lake  
March, 1860. City Archives S. 377.

Photo originally from the Vancouver City Archives. Copied from [http://mqp.mcgill.ca/files/cameron\\_laura/picnic.html](http://mqp.mcgill.ca/files/cameron_laura/picnic.html)

## Threats to Culture, Language, Resources

Ray was born at an interesting juncture in Sumas cultural history. The Sumas people were having their culture and way of life attacked from many different angles. As mentioned previously, the potlatch ban was inhibiting their ability to host ceremonies and perform traditions, residential schools were trying to silence the language, and their land was increasingly being exploited by settlers and a government hungry to promote agriculture in the Fraser Valley. In 1929, the year of Ray's birth, the Sumas Reclamation Project, which entailed the draining of Sumas Lake by 1924, creation of dikes, and the rerouting of streams, had just been completed and Sumas Lake had been erased from the landscape. The lake was drained for agriculture and to rid the valley of the bothersome mosquito.<sup>66</sup> The marshy shore of the lake where Xéyteléq and Qwa:l tricked the invading raiders had evaporated. The name Qwa:l means mosquito and the mosquitoes thrived in the lake. Xéyteléq was born just after the lake was drained.

### **Sumas Lake**

That's something that pretty well destroyed our people. That's something that helped destroy them I should say. See when I was a little boy they told me stories see we had no radio, we had no television, we had no electricity, we had nothing. I used to lay on the floor, my grandfather and I on the floor down here and the Old People they used to tell stories. They were a sad people, very, very sad. See they had the .. what was it ... the smallpox that killed off thousands of them and uh that happened. And then we got all these priests and all them good guys all them guys that are going to go up there [points upward] come around here and kill us, for a bunch of savages, and take out culture away. They took our culture away ... all of our beliefs ... everything we believed they took and its an amazing thing you know when I look at it today. Our culture and of the things I was taught is in the Bible [laughs] our people new these things before the white people came. They were already practicing them, they practice those things in the longhouse today, we are allowed to. And now white

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<sup>66</sup> Laura Cameron, *Openings: A Meditation on History, Method, and Sumas Lake* (McGill: Queen's Press, 1997), 72-74.

man is realizing that our culture was pretty good and they are allowing us to do it now. [...] It's a sad thing you know, that Lake. The lake was full of fish, every type of fish, pacific salmon, sturgeon, humongous sturgeon, in this lake. It was a breeding ground for a lot of those, they spawned here. Ducks, geese, the lake was full of them, millions and millions of them.<sup>67</sup>

Oh yeah the lake, you know we were talking about the lake and I said my ancestor's they they'd had their culture taken their away, they weren't allowed to have powwow's they weren't allowed to have memorials, they weren't allowed to sing native songs, they weren't allowed to speak the language. I used to understand my language because the Old People spoke to me in Indian and I was able to speak quite a few words but I forgot 'em. Nobody else to speak to - so that was that. Well I mentioned about the lake, there were so many ducks... what it meant to our people. When those engineers came here and the Indian Agent come here and talk to our native people and told them we're going to drain that lake, our people got together and the chief and whatever and they said 'Those white people are crazy they'll never drain that lake so never mind, they can't drain it. They're crazy, it's too big, they won't be able to drain it.' In my ... well low and behold and I don't know how long after the lake was going dry. They lost everything, their transportation, they used to be able to travel all over. That was their main highway. They had their canoes out here and they'd paddle from the lake into the Fraser River and when that was gone all the ducks were gone all the fish were gone, everything. They say there were sturgeon out there in the mud. Maybe even a year later after the lake was drowned. The Native people lost everything, after the epidemic it killed a lot of them and uh they'd lost their language their culture now they'd lost the lake. They just didn't care anymore. They told me stories that I believe today that they thought I would never see, I would never see a long house, I would never see spiritual dancers, I'd never see the mask dancers, I'd never see none of these things that they were telling me. They said "that's the way our people were now we can't be that way anymore, that's that." So, I think that uh, they died as a very unhappy people, when they were dying. It seems to me the Old People they didn't live very long after, you know after they were telling me those stories and all that stuff. They didn't live very long, they had nothing to live for I guess. They just, they just passed away. I remember my grandmother going and laying on the bed and closing her eyes and dying. I was there.<sup>68</sup>

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<sup>67</sup> Ray Silver, Personal Interview, June 26, 2007.

<sup>68</sup> Ray Silver, Personal Interview, June 26, 2007.

At the same time that the Lake was drained the potlatch was being banned. Ray was not allowed to legally attend or hold a potlatch ceremony until 1951.

RS – We were scared shitless of jail. They used to have a cop, Englishman in New Westminster, I remember him Higginbottom, I never forgot these people. When they came out here the native people were scared, really scared of him. He might put them in jail. So they never tried to fight back or anything yeah, they never done anything like that. They were afraid of going to jail because they heard it was so bad there mmmhmm. So that was all lost, so when they told them to not, not to make drums, practice their culture they were scared. A lot of them buried their stuff and hid it away, their carvings and stuff like that.”

EC – How does it feel now that you are able to practice those things again and that your children are able to learn about those things?

RS – Well I think of people, people of the churches, I think, I think, I - the church, I am a Catholic I used to be a Protestant [laughter] I don't know what I am now [laughter] but I think they are the ones that destroyed, or tried to destroy the culture.<sup>69</sup>

The lake was not the only physical or cultural element of the landscape that was disappearing. The amount of usable land for the Sumas people has also been diminished. The fishing spot called Devil's Run was not included as a reserve for the Sumas people because they were not on the river when the reserves were marked out.<sup>70</sup> I have already discussed the disappearance of Ray's hunting grounds. These traditional places of use have been exploited by development since the time of Ray's youth. Even the reserves, set aside for the Sumas people, have had portions taken away at different times to suit the needs of others.

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<sup>69</sup> Ray Silver, Personal Interview, June 27, 2007.

<sup>70</sup> Bryce James, Personal Interview, June 30, 2007.

You see the last chunk of land they took from us was out here at Whatcom road close to the border and the natives wanted to keep that land, there was a forest there of huge forest trees. They wanted it because of that cedar the cedar meant so much to the native people. They made planks out of it to help build their houses. They made canoes a lot of things they made of cedar, cedar was everything. They made clothes out of it, a lot of things they made with cedar. That land out there meant so much to this reserve and they took it away from them. After uh the first world war it was supposed to go to there's hardly any people in this country but yet they said the veterans had no place to go to. My god they took the land. Gave the native's a little bit of money for it I guess, yeah. Cedar and all everything that was there they took. That's where they found that rock eh [T'ixwelátsa] and that's where that rock was taken from that uh that man that they made into a rock.<sup>71</sup>

Ray expresses frustration over not being consulted or listened to on matters that affected the reserve. At the root he feels a lack of respect for the people's knowledge of the land. Many decisions were made about the land without the consent or consultation with the community.

Xéyteléq is the protector of the community. The following story is an interesting example of this role and is best heard in person if given the opportunity.

### **Power Lines, Wells, and Shovels**

Yeah you see they were drilling for water and anything, anything the DIA got into we couldn't do a damn thing as the Chief unless the Indian Agent said it was good and it was right. We weren't Chiefs we just had the handle eh just b.s. and the governments way of saying "oh your are Indian Chief eh" They made all the decisions, even the power line came through the reserve here the Indian Agent made that decision, he said the power lines going through the reserve we're going to give these guys a few bucks and he says maybe in the late ... years and year from now they might put another power line through this. And uh we didn't know, they put the one power line in and about 2 years later they put another one in. And a few years later they put a third on in. We never knew about that it was done by the Indian Agents."

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<sup>71</sup> Ray Silver, Personal Interview, June 26, 2007.

Ray continues on to tell the story that some government engineers were drilling for drinking water near the Marshall slew. The people said the water there was no good and to drill higher up. They drilled where the engineer said and disregarded the people. The band office gave \$60,000 to put the water line in and the water was no good. They kept spending money trying to filter the water but it never worked.

RS – “I was half drunk and they came to my house on a Saturday, the biggest mistake they ever made. He comes and I went out and I met him and he says “Well we have to get some more money off of you so we can drill another well.” [laughter] I had a shovel outside my door and I grabbed that shovel [laughter] I said “I’ll wrap this right around you’re god-damned neck” I was really feeling dirty eh. And I said “Well you bastards dig it by hand.” They ran for their car, they ran for their car and they got in and away they went and they never came back here again.<sup>72</sup>

It seems that Ray was born at maybe the most difficult time in his community’s history. The Old People at that time did not hold any hope for the future because they were losing so much of what was important and vital. To lose the lake, a major part of your cultural landscape and the potlatch, the centre of cultural and spiritual expression, threatens a person’s very identity and ability to situate themselves in the world around them. While Ray has witnessed a lot of negative change, his lifetime has also seen improvements. That the language is being taught and the potlatch is being held is evidence that there is progress in the reclamation of the culture and language.

### Environment

I did not think that when I went to meet Ray that I was going to be finding an environmentalist at the Sumas Clay Products Plant, but in many ways Ray’s environmental values are an integral part of his identity. The Fraser River is not the same river that it was when Ray was

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<sup>72</sup> Ray Silver, Personal Interview, July 27, 2007.

a boy. He told me many stories related to the river and the changes he has seen; how the water has become murky and polluted and the decline in the numbers and quality of the fish:

We used to make tea with that water and today if you drank it you'd get poisoned. I am getting afraid about the fish that we eat from there now, poor things. Like the rest of us."<sup>73</sup>

We never wasted nothing, not only the native people but the white people that were here. Anything they killed they ate. If we had too much we shared it with somebody else. We shared all our fish, dear, stuff like that. Butcher them up, take a bit here and there give everybody some. It's too bad we aren't like that anymore, I try to be but sometimes I think its hopeless. I don't know there's ... we're not looking after the streams, the fish. <sup>74</sup>



Ray and the brick tumbler he had built to turn bricks with flaws into old looking bricks for restoration projects and antique style.

He is deeply concerned about the impact of humans on the earth and about what will be left for his grandchildren in the future: "It's kind of worrisome you know when I look back and, and look at young ones like you. The kids here, young girls and boys, nothing left for them. They'll never see this country like I saw, it's too bad."<sup>75</sup>

When speaking about the changes he has witnessed in the environment during his life Ray uses the metaphor of the longhouse in relation to global warming. He told me that when the long house is full of people and

<sup>73</sup> Ray Silver, Personal Interview, June 26, 2007.

<sup>74</sup> Ray Silver, Personal Interview, June 27, 2007.

<sup>75</sup> Ray Silver, Personal Interview, June 27, 2007.

sometimes there are too many you have to open the doors and let some out. The world she has too many people and because of this she is warming up.<sup>76</sup> While Ray is very conscious of the negative environmental changes around him he also fully acknowledges his own role in altering that landscape. He admits that he too is guilty of tearing up the earth as Sumas Clay Products extracts the clay that they use for their products from an open pit clay mine on Sumas Mountain behind the reserve. He recognizes that this is a negative impact on the local environment as it is not its natural state but at the same time he is making efforts to return that landscape to its natural form. He has been collecting dirt from nearby developments, which have leveled the land, with a plan to fill in the areas of the mine that have been used and to replant trees. At the brick plant every bit of clay is used. Fine dust that spills off the conveyor belts is collected and re-used, bricks that crack or do not fire properly are ground down for other products, the sandstone that is blasted between the layers of clay at the mine is sold for use in buildings' foundations. The need to have respect for everything around you and not waste anything that could be of use is one of his deeply held beliefs. He practices respect for everything. He still has hope that the landscape and river could improve and heal if people wanted it to happen.

### Looking Ahead

Ray speaks a lot about the younger people and his concern for them. While he is fearful about the environmental and cultural future he is also hopeful for continued growth and improvement. As an Elder he is now involved in passing his knowledge on to the next generation through his presence in the longhouse. These are his comments on the role of the longhouse and the rejuvenation of his culture and language.

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<sup>76</sup> Ray Silver, Personal Interview, June 27, 2007.

If you've got too much food give it to somebody don't throw it away. That's the way I was taught I was even, you know our people used to even invite us to their house, they got a lot of food there because people had no fridges you had to eat the stuff right away. Yeah, its too bad it can't be that way anymore. But I think the longhouses are bringing a lot of that back. They're trying to teach the younger people what's good for them, what's good for mother earth and to respect what you've got, especially your neighbour.<sup>77</sup>

EC – So how do you think things have changed with your people being allowed to do potlatches and your winter dances.

RS – Uh it brought us closer together. We're closer together now I believe by allowing us to have spiritual dances. Memorials and all these spiritual things here that we do to day, allowing us to get together. There are times I bet you we have a thousand people here in the Sumas longhouse and the people, the elder people they get up and talk to the younger people they make speeches you know telling them you know how they should be to one another and another thing that that's doing for us is getting to know one another trying to respect one another, trying to share with one another. All these things that we're supposed to do. Probably our ancestors did all those things years and years ago. Like I was telling you the archaeologist said there were ten thousand people here in Sumas. And uh today well ... when these Old People were talking to me and telling me stories there may have been 50 or 60 people on this reservation, that's all there was left.

They're [the people of the Catholic church] kind of sorry for it [loss of the language] now, they try to bring it back and I think its coming back its, its not too late I believe they can do it. There's a lot of children that are learning our language, they know more about our language than I do they're talking it, they're teaching it up a Coqualeetza or Stó:lō Nation."<sup>78</sup>

Much has changed in the Sumas community where Ray lives since he was born. Development has altered the landscape and changed the way the people are able to interact with their environment. As Xéyteléq he has worked over the years to live a life that he is proud of as a provider, a hunter, a hard worker, and a community leader. He is a recognized leader in his community and what he has taught his son Ray Silver Jr., who is also named Xéyteléq, is now being used in the future leadership of the community. Bryce James spoke about his uncle

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<sup>77</sup> Ray Silver, Personal Interview, June 26, 2007.

<sup>78</sup> Ray Silver, Personal Interview, June 26, 2007.

saying that people in the community also look to him for leadership. Ray has passed his knowledge of not only hunting and fishing but also leadership down to his children. The cultural and physical landscape of Ray Silver's heart has changed and evolved through his life. As the nearby Fraser River rises and falls with the season, time does not stand still and neither does culture. The stories Ray has told and the experiences he has lived are what he knows to be true. In a broad sense, he is representative of a time and a place but this is how he has experienced the world in connection with his people and environment. Ray is concerned for the future of many things and only time will tell the rest of the story but he has a life lived full and a name he has filled to stand as an example to those who are next to come.



Xéyteléq called to witness in the Stó:lō Nation longhouse June 2007

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▮ Audio copies, interview transcripts, and additional photos are available at the Stó:lō Nation Archives.