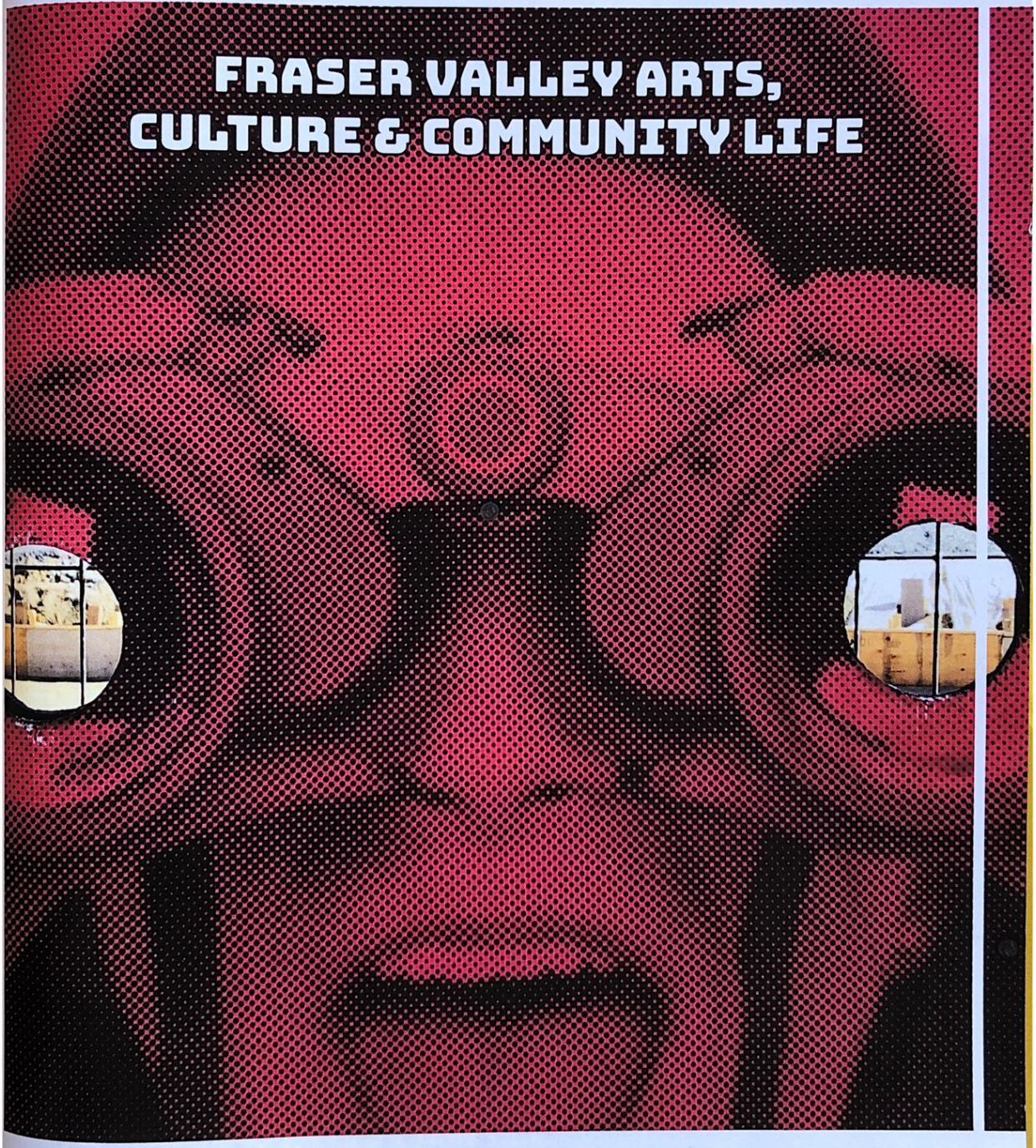
raspberry magazine



Published by redpress society

Fall 2019

Once & Forgotten

A Lake Drained & Reclaimed

BY HEATHER RAMSAY

Before the rows of blueberries were harvested and the dark factories churned out button mushrooms, the lake was essential to the local First Nations people's life.

Drained or reclaimed? I craned my neck to read a commemorative panel at a rest area on a flat patch of highway between Abbotsford and Chilliwack. The sign, festooned with a dogwood (British Columbia's provincial flower) and a date (1967), rises high above the path to the cinderblock bathroom.

SUMAS LAKE RECLAMATION

In 1924, by a system of stream diversions, dams, dykes, canals and pumps, 33,000 acres of fertile land were reclaimed from Sumas Lake.

The wind wrestled my hair as I tried to understand words written in Canada's centennial year.

"Few areas in BC have such rich soil with transportation and markets in close proximity. . . Produce… mixed farming… important factor[s] in the economy of our mountainous province."

It sounded wonderful, but I had the feeling that something was wrong.

I'd never heard of Sumas Lake before pulling up stakes and relocating to Chilliwack, BC, an hour drive east of Vancouver. In the years I'd lived in Vancouver and later in northern BC, I hadn't thought much about the Fraser Valley, or its bounty of dairy cows, Brussels sprouts, and broccoli farms. I'd driven through the area on the way to somewhere else. Past the manure stink that farmers say is the smell of money. Past the poultry pens and the pumpkin patches. But now that I lived here I wanted to find out more about this once and forgotten lake.

That's how I discovered that this flat stretch of road hounded by hour upon hour of droning traffic was once an ever-changing waterway used by generations of Stó:lō. Before the rows of blueberries were harvested and the dark factories churned out button mushrooms, the lake was essential to the local First Nations people's life. But, less than 100 years ago, as settlers trickled into the area, the wetland was drained and the lake became a garden of rich black soil and land available to those who were willing to pay.

The rest area commemoration revealed a snippet-like story about the draining. But I wanted to know the other story about Sumas Lake: one that hadn't been honoured with a 10-foot tall sign.

After a bit of research I found someone who might remember the lake. I took an exit on the other side of the freeway and followed the winding North Road to Ray Silver Sr.'s sage-green split-level on the Sumas Indian Reserve.

"Find the longhouse, and I'm the next one up," he told me over the phone.

As I pulled into the driveway, I could see him, framed by the picture window, leaning on a cane.

"Come up. Come up," he called from

the top of the stairs. "Don't worry about your shoes."

When I talked to him, Silver, at 86, was one of the oldest members of the Sumas Band. The tiny reserve where he lived (Silver died in 2016), hugs the base of Sumas Mountain, on the eastern edge of Abbotsford. Now hemmed in by an onslaught of cars zipping past on the highway, his people's lands were once considered the heart of Stó:lō territory. Before the crisscrossing roads and the factory chicken farms, more than 10,000 people lived in the area. Before the lake was drained, Stó:lō people came from villages up and down the Fraser to gather and feast at Sumas Lake.

The lake provided

Silver was born in 1929 in his parent's house located just up the slope and across what is now four lanes of traffic from the roadside stop that used to be the bottom of a lake. He hadn't witnessed the draining. The last water was squeezed out of the marshy wetland in 1924, five years before his time. But he'd been told stories.

"Millions of salmon spawning. Fish. Sturgeon. Everything. The lake provided for the natives. That was their SuperValu."

The lake was also their highway. They paddled on the wide glassy water body and down tributaries like the Marshall, the Sumas, and the Vedder rivers to the Fraser. Silver's people visited their neighbours via the lake for countless generations, and they followed the cycles of fish, game, and waterfowl.

"When they wanted sturgeon, one guy would sit up the front end of a canoe with a spear. Another guy would paddle along on the lake and the [first] guy would keep moving the pole up and down," said Silver.

The lake was shallow. When the hunter touched a sturgeon he knew it and he would thrust the weapon in. The spearhead, attached to a rope, would come off the pole and the huge fish, a remnant of a 200 million-year-old species straight out of the Triassic age, would run. A sturgeon can weigh up to 600 pounds. Getting one fish meant feeding the entire community.

The last water was squeezed out of the marshy wetland in 1924.

"They'd get these sturgeon and then they'd cut them in large strips and smoke them. They smoked everything," he said.

Today, most members of the Sumas Band get their food at the supermarket. But while I sat on Silver's aging brown velour couch, he continued to paint a different scene.

"There were millions of ducks that used to come out here, they say. Ducks, geese, everything. The young men would go out in the waist-high water carrying pouches and sneak

through the trails in the long grass to catch waterfowl diving in the weeds. When the ducks were startled, they'd get tangled in the grass, and the young men would grab them, wring their necks, and put them in the bag. When they got enough they'd bring them home. It was very easy. The lake provided."

But change was coming.

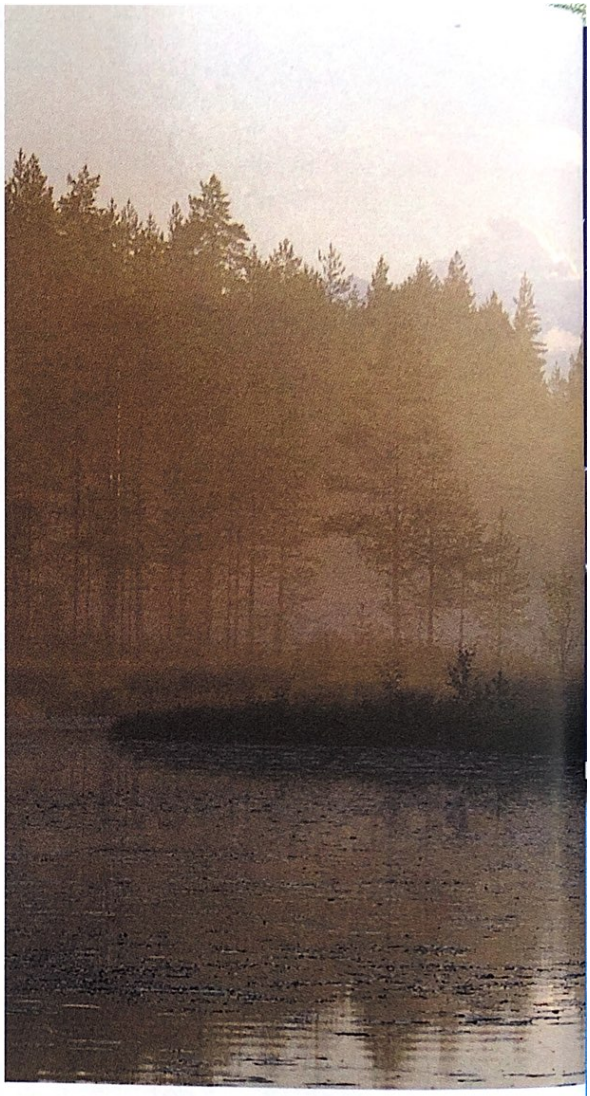
It was during these early days that government and settlers decided Sumas Lake was a nuisance.

Then came the Hungry Ones

The Stó:lō called the first Europeans who came to their territory, Xwelitem, or Hungry Ones. In the beginning there were only a few fur traders. Fort Langley was built in 1827, a day's paddle from Sumas Territory, and for several decades the balance of power between the First Nations and the Hudson's Bay Company employees remained relatively stable. The fur traders needed product and the First Nations supplied them.

But settlers who started arriving later in the 1800s became focused on acquiring and clearing fee simple land for farming.

Keith Carlson, a historian who has worked extensively with the Stó:lō over many years wrote in his book, *You are Asked to Witness: The Stó:lō in Canada's Pacific Coast History*, that the Hungry Ones believed the Stó:lō way of life was incompatible with theirs. The new colonial governments decided assimilation was the only thing that would save the first peoples, and they made rules that forced them to abandon their ways and live on reserves.



It was during these early days, that government and settlers decided that changeable body of water known as Sumas Lake was a nuisance. Every spring, the snows thawed up the Fraser canyon and the freshet flooded 30,000 acres of rich soil and potential farmland in the low-lying lands between Abbotsford and Chilliwack, extending all the way to the US border.

Not only that, but the shallow wetland nurtured masses of mosquitos. According to Carlson, the bugs got so bad in the summer that the Sumas and Chilliwack people adapted their lives to survive the onslaught. Mosquitos don't fly across large bodies of water, so some people moved out to islands on the Fraser River in the worst times and others lived on platforms in a type of stilt village in the middle of the lake.

But some settlers, driven mad by whining buzz of the needle-nosed pest, made the case that the dyking and draining of the flood-water breeding areas was essential for human health. At the time, there was a debate among the newcomers. Some enjoyed the wetland for what it was, but in the end the arguments for drainage won.

Silver describes how this impacted his people. "They came and told the native people they were going to drain the lake. Our people got worried about it right away. They were downhearted. The old people talked and one of the big chiefs said, 'The white men are crazy. There is too much water out there. They'll never drain it. Don't worry, it's too big.'"

Much to everyone's amazement, the huge task of redirecting rivers and building the Sumas and Vedder Canals started in 1920 and was completed by 1924. Carlson admits that when looked at through the settler's lens, the engineering that went into the dyke system — the "reclaiming of Sumas Lake" — was a wonder of modern ingenuity.

"In some ways, they have a right to a story that celebrates that history. It's just that we don't ever hear the other stories. And the other stories are just as important as those that have been commemorated over time."

So here is the other story

Once the lake was drained, everything changed for the Sumas people. New strategies for getting food had to be found. In the fall, this meant travelling several kilometres to the Fraser River to get salmon.

It was heartbreaking for the old people, Silver said, to see how difficult it had become. "But we had to do it or starve."

The biggest barrier was at Barrowtown or Pump Town, as Silver calls it. This facility controls the levels of water in the Sumas River. The dam and pump system helped stop the flooding Fraser River from flowing back onto the land.

"That was a hard thing for us paddling canoes. My grandfather had a big heavy dugout ... We'd load everything, all of our clothes and bedding and some food and get down to Pump Town ... We had to pull up the canoes and pack all our stuff over the dyke to the other side, over the pumps. Then we'd come back [from the Fraser River] and pull the canoes over to the other side and reload them. It was a lot of work."

Silver and his family would stay at their smokehouse for a month, preparing salmon for the winter. "We put them in little bales after they were smoked ... They kept, eh, you didn't have to freeze them or anything. They were smoked really hard."

The richness of the area still provided, but after the draining of Sumas Lake, people faced hungry days as well.

"It was tough to be a native then. We weren't recognized as humans really, by Europeans. We weren't allowed to do very much of anything. We weren't allowed to speak our language or practice our culture. That was still in effect when I was a little guy," said Silver.

His voice slowed as he remembered the days when elder ladies in his village hid behind blankets to whisper their language to one another.

"They didn't want me to learn because they were afraid I would go to jail. Or they'd go to jail for teaching me."

We paused to look around his modest home, the living room walls covered in works by his artist son, Ray Silver Jr — items like carved dance masks, painted canoe paddles and cedar basket weavings, once forbidden or burned by the newcomers.

"The elders lost their culture, they lost their lake, they lost everything," he said. "They didn't know whether there was a future for us."

The future turned out to be pretty bleak. The recently released Truth and Reconciliation Commission report made no bones about what happened when Silver was a boy:

> Cultural genocide is the destruction of those structures and practices that allow the group to continue as a group. Land is seized, and populations are forcibly transferred and their movement is restricted. Languages are banned. Spiritual leaders are persecuted, spiritual ractices are forbidden, and objects of spiritual value are confiscated and destroyed ...
>
> In its dealing with Aboriginal people, Canada did all these things.

A rich life lived

Even when the lake was gone, the Sumas hung onto their ways. As young men, Silver and his brother-in-law became the hunters and fishers of the village travelling to Elk Mountain for game, to the back side of Sumas Mountain to trap beaver, otter, and mink on the Fraser River as his people had always done for salmon and sturgeon. But around every turn, the Hungry Ones found ways to thwart them. Regulation after regulation stopped them from hunting and fishing on their territory.

Silver and others tried farming too.

"There are farms out there bigger

We weren't recognized as humans by Europeans. We weren't allowed to speak our language or practice our culture.

than our reservation and the pioneers got them for nothing," said Silver. Nevertheless, there were four dairy farms in the village when he was a boy. At one time he had a herd of cattle and later he, Lester Ned and another man, farmed vegetables on a larger scale. They called their business Sumas River Growers and built a big produce stand with expensive refrigeration units out by the highway. Then in 1985, the BC government put an overpass a kilometre away at Whatcom Road and eliminated the exit leading to the Sumas reserve.

"They put [us] out of business. The traffic was going down the freeway and they couldn't come into our huge stand," he said.

After that, he had to shut the business down.

"I lost quite a lot," he said.

But for all of his losses, Silver said he had a rich life. He married and raised 11 children. He worked in Abbotsford at the Clayburn brick factory and at the Sumas brick plant up the road from the time he was 15 until he was 75 years-old. For thirty of those years, he was the production manager. He worked hard to show the white men that he was equal to them.

"I was no different. I worked beside [white men] and they liked me and I liked them. We were just like brothers. It is not them, it is the government. The law. Or what they call the law."

He hauled himself up off the couch and tapped his way with his cane to the hearth. "I want to show you this." He felt along the trophies — past the silver boxer on a tall pedestal, past another small shiny fighter, arm outstretched until he found the gold boxer on a wide wooden base.

Silver, who coached the Fraser Valley Boxing Club, organized a tournament in Chilliwack in 1980 that brought 127 young people from around the region together.

Silver's big regret was not pushing his children to pursue more education.

"It's getting better. The government is doing a lot [of] pretty good things for us. Like education. I think that's the most important thing for not only the native people but for all of us, all the nationalities, to get an education. Learn how to live on Mother Earth."

Silver's thoughts turned back to the lake. "It is sad but it happened. I guess we are accepting it now," he says.

I want to tell you about the lake

After an hour, Silver's daughter arrived to take him for breakfast. We waved goodbye and I promised to bring this story back to him.

As I pulled out of his driveway, I thought of the ravine up Sumas Mountain and how Silver explained that it is lined with different kinds of clay. Some of the clay is world-class, and was used to make the bricks that he built his life with. The lower-grade stuff is hauled away to mix in concrete. I drove up the road past a plastic factory and the boarded up band-run brickworks. "People don't build fireplaces anymore," Silver said. "So they shut it down." I climbed higher and higher above the once and forgotten lake and thought about how I'd only scratched the surface of the story beyond the sign at the roadside stop.

The Truth and Reconciliation Commission writes that "reconciliation is about establishing and maintaining a mutually respectful relationship between Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal peoples in this country. In order for that to happen, there has to be awareness of the past, acknowledgement of the harm that has been inflicted, atonement for the causes, and action to change behaviour."

Now that I'm aware, every time I stop to buy walnuts from the man with a small grove of trees near the highway, I think of the lake. Pumpkins continue to ripen in the fields and pale endives grow in the mysterious building on the side of the road. I ask myself how to reconcile these two stories — of a lake drained and a lake reclaimed.

Later, I went back to the rest area and let my dog out for a pee. A young First Nations woman glided by on a skateboard. A family waited as dad tinkered under the hood of their aging minivan. A greying RV couple emptied their tanks at the sani-station. A blonde man with two-day stubble leaned back in the front seat of his 1980s-era Camaro and smoked pot. Snow-topped Mount Baker loomed above the blue-forested hills on the border.

I wanted to tell them all about the lake. I wanted them to know about the pump house that keeps the river from inundating the reclaimed land — that it is always the first spot in the eastern Fraser Valley to get power restored after a storm. I wanted them to know that the lake, although almost forgotten, could still return.

I craned my neck up at the sign again and wondered if it was tall enough to withstand a true reclamation of Sumas Lake.