

James Teit - Shuswap's under-appreciated scholar

A Shuswap Passion column for the Shuswap Market News

By Jim Cooperman

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Even though James Alexander Teit could well be considered the foremost expert on Shuswap native culture and one of British Columbia's leading anthropologists, he has still not received the recognition his legacy deserves. During his short lifetime, Teit produced comprehensive ethnographies of the Thompson, Lillooet, Shuswap and Okanagan Indians as well as many monographs and sound recordings. In addition, Teit made many invaluable contributions to the early Indian Rights movement.

Teit was born in 1864 in the largest of the Shetland Islands north of Scotland, where his father ran a general store and was a strong promoter of public education. At the young age of 19, Teit immigrated to Canada to help manage his Uncle John Murray's store in Spence's Bridge. He supplemented his income by trapping, farming, and big game hunting and guiding throughout the province. Teit integrated quickly into the local Indian community, by first marrying band member Susannah Lucy Antko who passed away childless in 1899 and then Leonie Morens, with whom he had six children.

In 1894, the now famous German-American anthropologist, Franz Boas, stopped off in Spence's Bridge during one of his ethnographic field trips where he met Teit and instantly recognized his potential as an ethnographer who was not only fluent in the local Thompson Indian language, but also had close ties to the local indigenous people. Within four years under the direction of Boas, Teit had prepared his first ethnography, a 216-page report on the Thompson or Nlakapamux people.

The study of the Pacific Northwest Indians was not without controversy in those early days. There were two schools of thought then. The prevailing view in Canada was based on "Social Darwinism" which applied Darwin's survival of the fittest theory to human races, thus legitimizing the government's policies devoted to the extermination of native culture and peoples. Boas subscribed to the competing view that human destiny was contingent on history rather than the inevitable consequence of heredity and geography.

In the late nineteenth century, British Columbia was considered a treasure trove of Indian cultures. There was a flurry of activity to document the province's indigenous peoples' customs, languages and stories; collect artefacts, art work and even skeletons; and take measurements of body parts. Scientists of that era were amazed at B.C.'s incredible diversity of languages and cultures and there was an urgency to learn as much as possible before it was too late.

In 1897, thanks to funding from the American Museum of Natural History's president Dr. Morris Jessup, Boas returned to Spence's Bridge for an ethnological expedition across the Chilcotin Country as far as Bella Coola with Teit as his guide and assistant. Prior to their departure, Teit made the first of his many Edison wax-cylinder recordings of songs. Over the next two decades, Teit went on to make many more recordings of all types of

songs, including lullabies, love songs, dance songs, stick-game songs, and mourning songs. And he took time to carefully catalogue each one with as many details about the songs, locations and singers as possible.

Teit's appreciation of native culture and concern about its imminent extinction meshed well with his political philosophy, as he was a practicing socialist and believed strongly in Marxist ideals. He began his involvement in the native rights movement in 1908 when he assisted a group of 30 Interior Indian Chiefs at a meeting in Spence's Bridge where he drew up a list of grievances for Ottawa. The next year, Teit helped organize the Interior Tribes of British Columbia and the Indian Rights Association. In 1910, he helped these Chiefs prepare the now famous Memorial, presented to Prime Minister Laurier during his stop in Kamloops.

Over the next 12 years until his early death from cancer in 1922, Teit worked tirelessly for the Indian Rights movement, which often took time away from his anthropological work. This was a frustrating effort that only produced one success, the federal government's reversal of conscription for Indians in WWI. Since they did not have the rights of citizenship then, many native leaders considered conscription to be like enslavement. There were however, Secwepemc men that did volunteer and some did not return.

In his short lifetime, Teit managed to publish 2,200 pages of ethnological research and produce nearly 5,000 pages of unpublished manuscript material. In addition, he was a skilled, self-taught botanist and entomologist, a photographer, and a linguist fluent in several tribal and European languages. His 300-page study of the Shuswap people edited by Franz Boas and published in 1905, is this region's most comprehensive ethnography ever written. Unfortunately, unlike his first paper on the Thompson Indians which was re-published by the Nicola Valley Museum Archives Association, only a few copies are available. Hopefully, one day this seminal work will also be re-published and Teit's contribution to our understanding of the Shuswap people will become more appreciated.