

Life in the winter for the Secwepemc

A Shuswap Passion column for the Shuswap Market News

By Jim Cooperman

It is tempting to ponder what life must have been like for the Secwepemc people during the long, cold winter months, prior to contact with the Europeans in the early 1800s. While we now have no shortage of diversions from winter sports to multi-media opportunities, the original Shuswap people likely passed the time storytelling and playing games when they were not busy with daily subsistence activities.

Winters were spent in villages situated near lakes or rivers in pit-house dwellings as large as ten metres in circumference. One of the largest villages was on the north side of Shuswap Lake close to the Little River, where dozens of depressions can still be found. Although most village sites have long ago been bulldozed to make room for development, it is still possible to find the occasional site of an ancient pit-house or “keekwilee” as these were called in the Chinook jargon.

There was no shortage of projects to do: as there were tools and arrowheads to make, baskets to weave, firewood to gather, and skins to tan and sew into garments, moccasins and blankets. Some of the tools they made included adzes, bone awls, stone skin-scrapers, mortar and pestles, and weapons. Smoking pipes were also carved out of stone, sometimes with designs or animal shapes, as smoking of wild tobacco was common.

Travel and hunting was not limited by deep snowfalls, as they made snowshoes similar to the classic Inuit design. The frames were made of maple or fir saplings and the cross sticks were made of birch, while the webbing was made from either deer or caribou hide. They also had walking sticks that looked like ski poles with circular baskets made from hides and sticks. For icy conditions, pieces of skins were added to the moccasin soles to work as cleats. Small toboggans were made from pieces of bark and older people also enjoyed careening down the frozen hillsides, but accidents were frequent.

What is most intriguing is how they spent their leisure time during the long evenings or when the weather was stormy. Without a written language, they only had their memories and stories to share and no doubt they had vivid imaginations and strong spiritual beliefs. The children were likely taught about their ancestors and their culture, with their once countless number of legends the focal point of their communication.

Many of these stories have been preserved by the early ethnographers, James Teit and George Dawson. Almost all of these stories involve one or more animals that have either human or supernatural qualities. One of the most common animals in these legends was the coyote or trickster, who was considered responsible for many aspects of the natural world from the amount of time allocated for winter, to leading the salmon up the rivers, and to making women menstruate.

These stories show how interconnected their dream world was with their real world and with the natural world around them. Many of the stories are like descriptions of dreams,

with animals acting like people and transforming themselves into other animals, people or inanimate objects. For example, when Coyote came across some cannibals, he turned himself into a log allowing them to cross a river. But once they were halfway across, he rolled over and the cannibals perished in the torrent below.

In addition to the storytelling, there was also drumming, singing and ceremonial dancing during the long winters in the pit-houses. Dancers would strip off most of their clothes leaving only a breech-cloth and belt for the men and a kilt and belt for the women. Some adopted cedar-bark sashes and head-bands with long trailers for dancing and their bodies were often painted.

Games were also enjoyed. A dice game was popular with women and the dice were made from beaver teeth. The men played a game using sticks and there was even a type of card game with cards made from bark. They played a type of ball game in the snow similar to lacrosse with the sticks made with netting, which were also used by children to toss snowballs. The children enjoyed playing cats-cradle making figures from string that looked like tepees, eagles, sturgeons, mountain sheep and grouse.

As with most indigenous cultures, their spiritual beliefs included activities to give them power to attempt to impact natural forces such as the weather. When they were fed up with the cold and the snow, shamans were employed to work their magic. Another method was to let a young girl light a fire, heat some stones to red-hot and then use tongs to throw the stones into the snow while praying for warmer weather.