

Shuswap's sacred Mount Ida

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By Jim Cooperman

At just 1574 metres (5164 feet) it is hardly a real peak; nonetheless Mount Ida has been a significant feature for our region since time immemorial. Over 80 people recently attended a meeting of the local Questers to hear Neskonlith Band member Louie Thomas talk about the mountain's legends. Known to the Secwepemc people as Kela7scen for its funny coloured rocks, the mountain is considered by Secwepemc people to be sacred ground.

Louie was raised by his grandparents who along with teaching him how to fish and hunt, passed on many of the legends that help define some of Shuswap's geographical features. Louie described one legend about a hunter who became lost on Kela7scen and was found by "little people" who steered him home by shortening the distance to there. Because of these little people, many were frightened to go up the mountain; however hunters would go up there to fast and sweat to ensure their success in hunting.

Very likely it was an early surveyor in 1871, possibly J. Richardson, who named the mountain after Mount Ida in Greece. And there is one more Mount Ida in this province. This 3189 metre 'real' mountain is located in Kalwa Provincial Park near the northern B.C. - Alberta border.

Many people think that Shuswap's Mount Ida is an extinct volcano because of the volcanic rock and deep holes at the top, but these rocks and holes are what remain from a basalt lava flow that occurred many millions of years ago. It was actually erosion that created the mountain, as underneath the ancient lava is a very hard layer of granitic rock.

It was this layer of igneous rock that attracted the eccentric mining prospector, Jack Thornton to spend years searching for molybdenum and platinum in the 30's and early 40's. Jack dug two tunnels into the mountain and lived there during the winters in a log cabin. He was only seen in town occasionally getting supplies and delivering rock samples for analysis. During the summers he prospected in the North Shuswap on the Adams Plateau and in the Cottonbelt country above Seymour Arm. In 1943, after an extended absence from town, searchers went up the mountain to find that Thornton had passed away. They buried him in one of his tunnels, which they blasted shut to prevent the potential for accidents.

Another reason for the volcano myth is the supposed "hot springs" located on the mountain. In actuality, there are only a few ponds with somewhat warm water, despite the often heard rumours about plans for a proposed hot spring resort.

In the early 90's, controversy surrounded the plans to clearcut log the mountain, which was also proposed for park status. Special features besides the hiking trails and views included the mountain's hanging bogs. Located near the top, this wetland was created by rainwater and snowmelt trapped by the underlying impermeable rock layer. The

clearcutting controversy ended in 1998 when the massive, 5000 hectare Fly Hills fire burnt the forest set to be logged and destroyed the hanging bog.

Following the fire, Louie's Mother and famed Neskonlith First Nation elder Mary Thomas led the resistance to the plans for salvage logging the burnt forest as well as logging green wood on the backside. Besides its spiritual values, Mary and the entire Shuswap Nation were concerned about the potential impacts to the water supply. Negotiations were held between the Shuswap Tribal Council, the forest company and the forest service. The result was an agreement to leave the burnt trees intact on the mountain top, to hold off logging for five years, to use selective logging instead of clearcutting, to increase the stream buffer widths, and to preserve the birch trees.

It has been a few decades since I last hiked the trail up to the top of Mount Ida with my family and marvelled at the views and the knife-like edge of the ridge that extends to the western peak, which limits access. Although the western summit looks to be the highest from the highway, the eastern peak is actually higher by just three metres. The Mount Ida trails are now part of the Shuswap's Trail Alliance network, with a map and directions on the hiking guide available at tourism centres and on the website, [shuswaptrails.com](http://shuswaptrails.com). However, hikers must remember to use extreme caution as there are many dangerously steep cliffs.