

Poems of Chief Sepass brought to life

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A Chilliwack area chief who lived to almost 100 was the last of the great Coast Salish orators.

Chief William (Billy) Sepass of Skowkale would captivate listeners with his incredible poetry recited from memory, containing the very essence of Coast Salish culture.

Now that poetry by Chief Sepass, whose traditional name was K'HHalserten, is being brought to life with a new CD, an oral recording voiced by Gabriel George, grandson of Chief Dan George.

A special CD launch event is set up for 1:30 p.m. at Skowkale Community Hall on Chilliwack River Road, next Saturday, March 25.

Chief Sepass wrote 16 poems, Songs of Y-Ail-Mihth, the Ancient Singer, which run the gamut of emotion from tragedy, and jealousy, to love, hatred, and loyalty — all unfolding within the realm of traditional Coast Salish culture.

Sepass took on the monumental task of committing his poems to paper in 1911, with the assistance of his friend, Sophia White. It was ambitious, especially in English, a language that was not his mother tongue. The arduous translation from Halq'emeylem took four years, undertaken when the chief feared that the primacy of the oral tradition was near its end.

But he embarked on the project to fulfill a promise he made to see the poems published in a book one day, so that "Indians would remember their greatness for all time."



Chief Billy Sepass

Gabriel George of Tsleil-Waututh, grandson of Chief Dan George, took on the oral recording challenge about four years ago, rejoicing in his mandate to portray the voice of Chief K'HHalserten on the CD.

"His task was to re-tell these legends in a way that, like Chief K'HHalserten's narratives, would again captivate his audience," according to the launch organizers.

It took considerable "talent and a heartfelt understanding" of the poetry, as well as passion and respect for the remarkable cultural history, on the part of Gabriel George, as the one recording the poems, to pull it off with conviction.

The CD is introduced by Shane Pointe of Musqueam, who embarks on a journey explaining how the poems came to be translated from the original indigenous language.

The recording ends with the words of Steven Point, former Skowkale Chief, and former B.C. lieutenant-governor, who tried to convey the rich significance by explaining that the poems "contain the essence" of Coast Salish traditional beliefs and spiritual values, Xwelmexw.

The official launch of the oral recording, *Songs of Y-Ail-Mihth, the Ancient Singer*, starts at 1:30 p.m. on Saturday, March 25 at the Skowkale Community Hall, 7686 Chilliwack River Road.

The Sepass family and Longhouse Publishing will host an engaging seated program with light refreshments and CDs on hand, as well as the 2009 publication of the poems. Everyone is welcome.