Acknowledgments

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Finally, we thank those people who are in the photographs, some of whom are deceased now. As elders, you have been far more than subjects in photography to us. You inspire all Secwepemc people with your knowledge and teachings. May these photographs be a tribute to that. As younger people, you are living evidence that the way of life of Secwepemc people is carried on and passed on to younger generations.

Yiri7 re skukwstep-kucw!

Dr. Marianne B. Ignace

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Re tsútets re Secwepemc: The Things We Do

An essay on Secwepemc photography, then and now
By Marianne Ignace, Ron Ignace and Gerald Etienne

Introduction

This exhibition belatedly marks the tenth anniversary of the enormously successful partnership in Aboriginal postsecondary education and research between the Secwepemc Cultural Education Society, located on the Kamloops Indian Reserve, and Simon Fraser University.

The partnership between SCES and SFU was created in 1988 in order to help train Secwepemc people, other Aboriginal people, as well as non-Aboriginal people, to research, understand, and write about the history, culture and language of the Secwepemc people and other Aboriginal peoples. Critical knowledge of the past, as painful as it is to come to understand processes and events of oppression, dispossess and cultural genocide, helps in shaping the future. The Secwepemc Cultural Education Society and the SCES/SFU Program aim to help younger people understand the culture from within, through students’ research with elders, through elders’ visits in the classroom, and through classrooms that are literally “in the field”. Younger people have studied the knowledge about the land from elders in the traditional territory, not as a subject alone, but with a view towards restoring such knowledge and the practices behind it. Such research has become an important tool in reviving Secwepemc institutions, communities and the things we do: Re tsútets re Secwepemc. Anthropologists have taught us to call it Secwepemc culture. We have chosen the Secwepemc term tsútets because our people knew and taught all along what anthropological theory has only concluded in this century: namely, that culture derives from daily and practical activity, “learning through doing,” as they call it in common terms, or “praxis as social reproduction of knowledge and activity” as social scientists call it.

Many of our students have found access to the ancient past of the Secwepemc through archaeological studies, literally in the backyard of the institution, on the hillsides of Chief Louis centre. Through courses facilitated by our University partner, many of our own people in different areas of Secwepemc country have learned and relearned our language, Secwepemctsin. In order to understand the present and contribute to a better future in Aboriginal communities, we need to come to a critical understanding of the past, for much that was written about the Secwepemc and other Aboriginal peoples was researched and written in the context of an era marked by the purposeful oppression of Aboriginal peoples through government policies.

In documenting the intersection of photography as research tool and as artistic representation of people and places, the project features photographs by faculty, former and present students and political leaders involved with the program. They document the way in which contemporary Secwepemc (Shuswap) people live their cultural traditions as part of an ancient and continuing way of life. The exhibit also gives a glimpse of the history of the photography of Secwepemc people by showing how early ethnographers tried to capture on film what they believed to be a vanishing culture. Several photographs will show photography documenting the oppressive era of the Residential Schools, and finally, how Secwepemc people, since early in this century have posed for their own photographs and photographed one another in pursuit of their daily activities.

The project represents the continuation of the Kamloops Art Gallery’s significant commitment to the culture of the Secwepemc and builds on such previous exhibitions as A Legacy of Survival: Contemporary Arts of the Shuswap (1993) and Making an Impression: Contemporary Moccasins of the Shuswap (1997).
Secwepemc People and Culture

For some time, the Secwepemc - one of the Salish-speaking Aboriginal nations of the Interior Plateau - were dismissed by ethnographers as having little by way of “authentic” culture; instead, Secwepemc culture was seen as at the intersection of Northwest Coast and Plains culture, and as a paler version of both. More recent ethnographic research has validated what Secwepemc oral traditions have stated all along, that Plateau culture in its distinctiveness and uniqueness is one of the ancient cultural traditions of North America. Different from Northwest Coast culture with its prominent visual art, and different from Plains culture with its public ceremonies, Plateau culture is subtle and private, much of it expressed in verbal art and knowledge. What ethnographers erroneously perceived as a “lack” of forms of visual representation - i.e. art, decoration, architecture - is indeed related to cultural and spiritual beliefs and concepts: In the past, Secwepemc people, in order to find equipment for living as adults and community members, went to train in solitude, what Secwepemc ancestors call etxem or the “guardian spirit quest”. Etxem is a unique social institution which combined the practical training towards self sufficiency and necessary skills to survive in Society and not be a burden, with the training for powers which give personal strength and spiritual helpers to face emotional, physical and social difficulties through life. The essence of Secwepemc spirituality existed in this personal connection with nature, the Creator and the sources of power which individuals found could help them in their journey through life. In order to remain intact, however, these individual sources of power, a person’s sumec, had to remain private. Displaying them, flaunting them, representing them in visual art that is connected to individuals, their faces and bodies, alienated and destroyed them. Even pictographs, tattoos which people wore in the past, decorations on drums, baskets, clothing and other items, many of which are connected to past experiences of etxem, merely hint at visual form. Most of Secwepemc traditional art is non-visual. It exists in the arts of story-telling, the artful and skillful production of clothing, sometimes adorned with symbolic decorations.

The sense of sumec plays an important role in past Secwepemc elders’ reactions to photography, or, for that matter, any recording of a person’s essence in photography, on film, or on tape. Secwepemc people of the past strongly believed that their face being captured on film, or their voice being captured on tape, meant the loss of their sumec. Elders of the recent past and present, however, have themselves reinterpreted the power that comes with photography, film and audiotape as a meaningful and powerful form of preserving knowledge, to educate younger generations and to educate the public about their knowledge, skills and practices. They have come to appreciate and actively support being photographed, filmed and taped as they demonstrate their skills and knowledge. Whereas in the past, photography as used and introduced by White people, was interpreted as taking power away, Secwepemc people have turned the tables on photography and other forms of recording. They are now seen as tools of empowerment through which knowledge, and the spirit of Secwepemc culture, can be passed on to the next generation.
The Secwepemc - anglicized to “Shuswap” by Europeans who had difficulty pronouncing and writing Salish sounds - have lived in the Plateau of South Central Interior British Columbia for several thousand years, perhaps since the time when glaciers retreated after the last ice-age, and came to occupy a vast territory of 180,000 square kilometres stretching from North of Williams Lake across to Jasper, to southeastern British Columbia, the Arrow Lakes and north of Okanagan Lake across to Ashcroft and West of the Fraser River. According to Secwepemc oral traditions, Old One, the Creator, in a remote and distant age, brought order to the land and introduced many of the plant and animal species to it, modifying it so it would be hospitable to humans. Old One sent Coyote (Sk’elep) the Trickster to Earth to finish his work, and Sk’elep left the marks of his work, still visible, throughout Secwepemc territory.

The homeland of the Secwepemc thus put into shape by Sk’elep is an ecologically diverse one, ranging from the rivers and river valleys in the Thompson, Fraser and Columbia drainage, to rolling grasslands and forested plateaus, wet rainforests of the Columbia and Quesnel highlands, to the subalpine meadows and snow peaks at the edges of the territory. For thousands of years, Secwepemc people have travelled the land during their annual seasonal round, hunting, gathering vast amounts of root plants and berries in plots that were tended like gardens, and gathering many other plant crops for food, medicine, and to manufacture most items they needed. Several thousand years ago, as the current Fraser and Thompson River system stabilized and as salmon runs became established, salmon fishing with weirs, nets and harpoons became a major focus of subsistence.

Before Europeans arrived in the Interior during the early 1800s, perhaps as many as 20,000 or more Secwepemc lived in this territory, centred around thirty communities and within seven geographic divisions. Epidemics brought in by Europeans during the nineteenth century brought forth a population loss of nearly 90% by 1900. Catholic missionaries began their work among the Secwepemc during the 1860s. In the 1870s, the Federal government put people on reserves comprising only about 1% of the territory without treaties or consent, something which Secwepemc people have protested and tried to address ever since. The oppressive era of the late nineteenth century which lasted well past the 1950s, through the Indian Act forbid peoples’ cultural, spiritual and economic self-expression and self-reliance; the Residential Schools literally beat Aboriginal culture and language out of successive generations of Secwepemc children. In the public discourse about Aboriginal peoples during this time, all that mattered about the fact that we had lived here for near 10,000 years was that Europeans, a mere 200 years ago, “discovered us”. Our lives and culture were seen as obstacles to “modernization”, and indeed were pronounced nearly extinct at the turn of the century.
The History of Secwepemc Photography

Photography came to Secwepemc country during the 1860s, when photographer Benjamin Baltzly, on an expedition down the North Thompson and Thompson Rivers, took photographs of an “Indian encampment” at Bonaparte. Further photographs of Secwepemc country were taken by George M. Dawson during his geological surveys of the Interior of British Columbia during the late 1870s. A substantial photographic collection of Interior Plateau - including Secwepemc - people, dwellings, and artifacts were made between 1898 and about 1918 as part of the Jesup North Pacific Expedition. This research project, financed by and named after American railway magnate Morris Jesup, set the ambitious task to document the cultures of the aboriginal peoples along the northern Pacific rim, from British Columbia and Alaska to Eastern Siberia. Headed by anthropologist Franz Boas, this project, in a “vacuum cleaner operation” (Lyle Rexer, “Doctoring Reality to Document What’s True”, New York Times, November 9, 1997) tried to salvage the knowledge and relics of the culture among these peoples before they were believed to disappear. Like other anthropology projects during this age, the Jesup Expedition collected everything in sight, from stories and songs to masks and baskets, to skeletons of people; photography was another vehicle of collecting. As those who have studied the anthropologists’ photography of this expedition have shown (see Drawing Shadows to Stone: The Photography of the Jesup North Pacific Expedition, 1897-1902 by L. Kendall, B. Mathe and T. Miller), these photographs are not “scientific” documentation as they claimed to be, but reflect as much the researchers’ views of their subjects. The native people in the photographs were often carefully, and artfully, posed in a make-believe pristine environment which hid the impacts of colonization with blankets and through the angle of the camera. The native people in the photographs, however, had no voice in the way their culture was represented.

These prognoses turned out to be false, thanks to the efforts of past generations of elders, who in turn left their legacy with our present generation. Today, seventeen Secwepemc communities remain: Soda Creek (Xats’ull), Williams Lake (T’xelc), Alkali Lake (Esk’et), Dog Creek/Canoe Creek (Xget’tem’), Canim Lake (Ts’qescen), High Bar (Llenileney’ten), Clinton/Whispering Pines (Peltiqu’i’), Pavillion (Tskw’eylecw), Bonaparte (St’u’xtew), Sketchetan, Kamloops (Tk’emlups), North Thompson (Simp’cw), Adams Lake (Sxstelx), Neskonlith (Sk’atsin/Selew), Little Shuswap (Qw7ewt), Spallumcheen (Splatsin) and the Shuswap Band (Kenpeq’i) near Windermere. While Secwepemc people have adapted increasingly successfully to modern economies, the connection to the land, and the harvesting of resources following the traditions taught by generations of the past, are continuing. Ways of socializing, celebrating and maintaining spiritual union with nature, the Creator and one another are continuing and, after decades of oppression, have been revived. The photographs of this exhibit, organized around the themes of ancient seasonal rounds, the knowledge of elders and continuing practices rooted in the past, celebrate Secwepemc culture, now and then.
In the British Columbia Interior, Boas recruited James Teit, a Scotchman who had settled in Spence’s Bridge and married among the Nlakapamux people, to collect as much information as he could about what was believed to be the vanishing culture of the Plateau. Teit went on to make important contributions to the ethnography of the peoples of the Interior plateau, and, in a life apart from his research, also became an ally and helper to the native people in their struggle to address their Aboriginal rights and title. In collaboration with Franz Boas, he wrote monographs of the Shuswap, Lillooet, Nlakapamux (Thompson) and Okanagan peoples. Photography, which Teit learned during the 1910s, became a research tool for him.

“Among the pictures held in the photographic archives of the National Museums of Canada are over a thousand images portraying the Interior Salish of British Columbia at the turn of the century. These photographs are almost entirely the work of one man, James Alexander Teit. Using the camera as a tool for documentation, he was among the earliest Canadian anthropologists who attempted to systematically and extensively photograph a vanishing culture. Where the anthropological evidence existed he photographed it and where it was only tribal memory he reconstructed. His images were thoughtfully chosen, closely documented and carefully photographed” (Leslie Tepper, 1987, The Interior Salish Tribes of British Columbia: A Photographic Collection).

Teit took photographs of the remains of pit-houses, basketry, people in costume and plant gathering. Although the majority of his photographs were taken among the Nlakapamux people, he took a series of portraits of Secwepemc chiefs, including Chiefs Basil David (Dick) from Bonaparte, Louis and Eli LaRue from Kamloops, Clement Arnouse, Francois Selpaxhen (Sélpéxen), Antoine TaxEelEst (Tëxwelst) from Chase, William Baptiste from Williams Lake. The photographs, often taken in a series which shows front view, profile and three quarter profile, were taken to show “facial types”, and “costumes”.

In some instances, Teit lent the native people traditional costumes from his own collection to be photographed in, and on one occasion purchased a wig to illustrate traditional hairstyles: “I thought it would be a good idea to use a wig on some Indian who is willing to have his photo taken frequently and show his face under various of the old styles of hair arrangements.” (Teit, letter to Edward Sapir, December 16, 1913). Some of the chiefs’ portraits of this time, taken by Teit or other photographers from whom he apparently purchased photographs, are included in the exhibit. They include a photograph of Chief Louis and his grandson, taken in 1918, weeks before the Chief and his entire family were killed during the 1918-19 influenza epidemic.

Another ethnographer and archaeologist who contributed to the Jesup North Pacific Expedition was Harlan I. Smith, who took the photograph of the woman tanning a hide at Kamloops in 1898, included in this exhibit. This photograph served as the model for a diorama of Plateau tanning using mannequins which is on exhibit at the American Museum of Natural History in New York. In the Smith photograph, the woman wears the dress which Secwepemc women of the turn of the century usually wore: a long dress and kerchief; in the diorama at the New York Museum, the tanner is dressed in buckskins.

During the first half of this century, an increasing number of photographers captured Secwepemc people in photography. We have included a few examples of this portraiture, including the studio photographs of Mary Isaac Thomas from Chase, Chief Joe Thomas from Skeetchestn, a World War I veteran, and families posing for photographs. One photograph in the exhibit shows Chief Eli LaRue as the “First B.C. Indian passenger in an airplane.” The priests of the Residential School often stood behind the lens of the camera, taking group photographs of students, and documenting some of the activities at the Residential Schools. Some copies of these photographs made it into the collections of Secwepemc people, and a few of them are reproduced in this exhibit.

As photographic equipment and film processing became more readily available, an increasing number of snapshots of activities and events were produced by Secwepemc people themselves, documenting and commenting on life in Secwepemc communities throughout the first decades of this century.
Photography as Research Tool, as Art and as Power

Photography can be, and has been, a powerful research tool in understanding the past and documenting the present. But it provides more than a mere record of people’s activities, if we keep in mind that photography is always representation, both in the context of history, power and culture, and in the context of the aesthetic perceptions of the photographer. Photography is at the intersection of art and social documentation. Its meaning derives from the relationship between the photographer, the subject and the viewer, including the historical, political and cultural contexts all three function in. The person behind the camera controls and composes the image, and, much like recording on the written page freezes an oral story in time and space, photographic images are such frozen slices of time. But more than that, they trigger memories of past times, that represent our oral histories. How we interpret photographs, the messages that we read into them as viewers, and the meanings and emotions that the images trigger, depend on our own experiences.

The photographs of this exhibit demonstrate the Secwépemc people’s changing relationship with photography over time. Initially brought among Secwépemc people as a foreign tool expected to freeze and capture images of what was believed to be a “vanishing race”, the composition of the images was strictly controlled by the photographer according to his perceptions of Aboriginal culture. With time, photography became a tool of documentation for Secwépemc people themselves. Beginning late in the nineteenth century, individuals and families began posing for local professional photographers, often sending the images to their families and relatives. Black and white images taken between the nineteen twenties and nineteen fifties by visitors, or by Secwépemc people themselves with simple cameras, of which a small selection is displayed in this exhibit, documented activities and life in Secwépemc communities. They show hunters on horse with their game, funeral processions, salmon fishing and processing operations, berry picking, farm work in the hop-yards and vegetable farms of the area, ranch and cattle work, games and past-times of the time. They also show life in the Residential School during its most oppressive era, between the 1920s and 1950s. The stern faces of the nuns and priests, the shaven heads and uniforms, still bear witness of this time, and stir memories of the hard times in the Residential School. The young faces in these photographs are our contemporary Secwépemc elders, although many of them passed on before ever becoming elders. These photographs of people lined up in front of the school, of being loaded onto the cattle truck to be taken to school in early September, trigger among them stories of hardship and suffering during those years, but never far from humour.

The photographs of this period provide a documentary record of the changing lifestyle of Secwépemc people, of the sad regime of the Residential Schools on the one hand, and of the continuing life of hunting, fishing, plant gathering, socializing on the other, which was now integrated into labour in the hop yards, on farms and local ranches. The themes and scenes captured in the photographs of Secwépemc community life also express the quiet but determined efforts of Secwépemc people to maintain traditions, to continue living on the land during a time when the legal pursuit of grievances about the dispossession of land was made illegal through the Indian Act. In light of the meaning of these times for Secwépemc people, including the suffering, but also the quiet persistence in daily activities which derived from past knowledge and practices, these photographs are more than mementos of the past for us: they represent symbols of persistence and resistance connected to elders, resources and the land, and connected to the stories that our elders continue to tell about this era.

Finally, the exhibit presents a section of Secwépemc photography of the last fifteen years. These are the forty colour images which represent the largest part of the exhibit. They are photographs taken in the process of research and education projects which led up to the SCES/SFU partnership. Others were taken during courses, research projects and activities in direct or indirect context of the program.
The Photographers and the Photographs

Between 1984 and 1989 Marianne Boelscher Ignace carried out several years of research on Secwepemc land use and knowledge in collaboration with elders and community members of the North Thompson Band. This research, focused around a fisheries court case, eventually extended to the Skeetchestn and Bonaparte Bands, where Gerald Etienne also worked on the project. Some of the photographs of elders and community members captured in photography while fishing, showing hunting and berry picking grounds and carrying out their harvesting of traditional resources. This research project was a milestone away from the Boasian salvage operations carried out at the turn of the century and the photography they produced. It was collaborative research in the true sense of the word, directed by community leaders, members and elders who ensured the researchers learned, lived and participated in the culture in order to understand it. Photography was directed by the community members, and the images were, and continue to be, displayed in the local band offices and recreation buildings. Records of this project are preserved in the photographs which show Sammy Joseph on Baldy Mountain; a portrait of elder Chris Donald, Pauline Baptiste with her mcey’ e (small berry picking basket) in the huckleberry patch above Raft River; the photographs of the late Nellie Taylor tanning. Other photographs taken by Dr. Ignace in more recent years, include the set of Virginia Donald and her mother Lizette Donald tanning buckskin, which to convey the beauty of this ancient tradition in a contemporary context, and the pride and hard associated with it; they also include photos of plant gathering during ethnobotanical excursions, where elders and younger people have worked together to practice and repossess knowledge and skills of the past among one another.

Gerald Etienne, who is from the Bonaparte (St’uxtews) Band, thinks of photographs as important to family and community in preserving memories. Photographs bring moments of time alive; through photographic images the photographer can make people see places or people in a new or different light, where they are perhaps not as taken for granted. Gerald also has a special interest in a quality photography, in that it gives him self-satisfaction to have some skills in that area, and to get an inner satisfaction about seeing good quality photos. Gerald has exhibited photographs at the Art Gallery before. Some of the photographs he contributed to the exhibit include his photographs of Secwepemc landscapes and old buildings, elders Nellie Taylor and Selina Jules, and buckskin work.

Ron Ignace is the Chief of the Skeetchestn Indian Band as well as President of the Secwepemc Cultural Education Society and Co-Chair of the SCES/SFU partnership. At bone-games and ethnobotanical outings, he has alternately stood behind the camera and in front of the camera, as can be seen in the photographs that document these themes.

Dr. Hari Sharma is the other Co-Chair of the SCES/SFU partnership and a Faculty member in the Anthropology/Sociology Department at Simon Fraser University. In collaboration with Secwepemc organizations, he carried out research in various Secwepemc communities during which his photographs of chiefs, of fishing and community life were taken. In this exhibit we have included, among other photographs, his striking colour images of Chief Nathan Matthew on the North Thompson River, of Chief Terry Porter on top of a reconstructed pithouse at Hat Creek, and of Terry Deneault spearing a salmon on the Thompson River. Dr. Sharma has exhibited his photography of India in numerous art galleries and photo exhibits.

Dr. Nancy Turner from the University of Victoria is an ethnobotanist who has collaborated for many years with Secwepemc people on documenting and understanding the indigenous knowledge and use of plants in the environment. The photography of Dr. Turner and her husband Robert Turner can be found in many of her books on Aboriginal plant use and knowledge. She has worked closely with elder Mary Thomas from Enderby, who is shown with her birch bark baskets in one of the photographs. Dr. Turner’s photography combines photography as a research tool in ethnobotanical work with the aesthetic dimension of photography: Her still-life of sasasem (soapberry) in its different forms - as preserve, juice, Indian ice-cream, arranged in traditional basketry containers - shows this.

Melvin Seymour is a former student in the SCES/SFU Program and a member of the Kamloops Band. His contribution to the exhibit is the image of teepees as shot from the opening of another teepee at the Kamloops Powwow.

Judy Banks graduated from the program in 1997 and is now enrolled in the Master’s degree program in Anthropology at SFU. Her contribution to the exhibit is the "skyline" view of teepees at sunset, also taken at the Kamloops Powwow.

Lorraine Aspden manages the publishing department at SCES and is the editor of the Secwepemc News. She contributed the photograph of elder Sam Camille commemorating his father Felix Camille who fought in the Boer War in South Africa, at the Skeetchestn Remembrance Day ceremony.
Arranging the Exhibit

This exhibit combines our reflection and representation of continuing but ever-changing Secwepemc culture, its strength to endure despite decades of oppression. We therefore saw it fit to arrange the photographs in a traditional seasonal round: Our exhibit begins with Fall time, *Pellic7ell7u7ilenten*, the “entering month”, when people long time ago entered their winter homes, as animals entered their dens. This set of photographs shows past and present dwellings and landscapes through the photographers’ eyes. The next set of photographs, symbolizing the time of *Pelleterangan’em* “cross-over month” and *Pellemt’min*, the “stay at home month”, shows portraits of elders, who are our connections with the past, and with our land through our stories and oral traditions. This set also shows games and past-times, in particular the traditional Secwepemc bone game or stick-game (*sleknem’es*). It is a guessing game played by two rows of players who face each other and who have to outguess one another in locating “bones” handled by designated players of each team. All the while the teams sing and beat the boards, trying to distract one another.

The next part of the seasonal round, *Pell7ell7e7iqteten* or “digging month” marks the beginning of the plant gathering season, which continues throughout spring with root-digging, the gathering of birchbark, and throughout the summer with berry picking and medicine gathering. Secwepemc elders and younger people are shown with harvesting off the land, and with the fruits of their labour.

*Pesgelqleiten*, the salmon fishing season, begins in mid-summer and peaks, in most parts of the territory, in early fall, before the salmon enter the creeks where they were born, die and ensure that a new life cycle starts. The photographs of this set show past and present Secwepemc of different generations catching fish with nets and spears, adapted from old indigenous technology, and still ideally suited to a modern context; they also show the processing and drying of the catch. In Secwepemc tradition, fish are not merely caught by the fisherman. Instead, they give themselves to the fisherman (or woman), who in turn has the responsibility to treat the resource with respect, without wasting it or torturing it.

Towards the end of the seasonal round is *Pesslwelesten*, the hunting month, when hunters, in the past as now, hunted the meat that provides for their families and communities throughout the winter months. During a hunt, there is no time to take photographs, nor does it seem appropriate. Our photograph of Chu Chuha elder Sammy Joseph, who showed younger community members his favorite hunting ground on Baldy Mountain in 1987, tries to convey the beauty of the subalpine areas as hunting ground, and the pride which elders take in the stories of past hunting trips. In the remaining photographs, it is the results of the hunt that are shown in photographs. The hard and intensive work of butchering are shown here in the photographs of moose-butchering taken at Deadman Lake in 1997. One photograph also conveys the teaching about hunting, its spiritual and practical connections, to children, who watch the hunters butcher their moose and listen to their stories.
Finally, at the end of the hunting season, and before winter sets in, comes the time to tan buckskin. For the expert tanner, the process of tanning begins with the quality of the hide, which in turn derives from the skill of the hunter in shooting the animal and stripping the hide off the carcass. The strange beauty of tanning is conveyed in the photograph of Nellie Taylor wringing a buckskin before stretching it: The photograph was taken by Marianne Ignace in Mrs. Taylor’s basement, and the sunlight which fell through the gap in the door onto the baby bathtub that served as receptacle for the liquid wrung from the hide, gives the photograph an almost supernatural quality. The photographs of Virginia Donald an Lizette Donald show mother and daughter at work tanning, with the elder examining the younger elder’s work.

The comparison between Harlan Smith’s photograph of the anonymous Kamloops woman tanning, and our contemporary elders tanning shows how little has changed in this ancient art over the last eighty years. Secwepemc traditional tanners, in particular elders, still refrain from using chemicals in the tanning process, relying instead on deer brain as tanning agent, and at best a sliver of sunlight soap. In the sk’et’at, the stick used to soften the hide after stretching it, stone age technology still finds a continuing use, unsurpassed by modern technology.

The photographs taken a hundred years ago served the intellectual interests of Europeans who collected them to display them. Those photographs that survive from this era allow us today to examine and re-examine that past and, in adding to them the stories of our elders, allow us to give our voices to our past. In the photographs of the present, we hear and recognize the voices of our past elders’ teachings, and they are continuing in the activities shown in them, documented for now and for the future. In the words of the late Nellie Taylor (translated from Secwepemctsin),

“Long time ago, Shuswap people looked after the land, and all the animals and plants, everything in it. That’s why they always had plenty to fish, deer to hunt and plants to gather for food and medicine. But they had to practice for it, and learn about everything on the land first for a long time. Then they knew how to look after it. It was also important for the elders to share each others’ knowledge. That was how they learned and built up their understanding.”
References


