Context:
Gabriola, history

Citations:
Jennie Wise with Beryl Cryer, Last fight of the Cly-Altw, *SHALE* 4, pp.5–8, June 2002.

Errors and omissions:

Date posted:
January 3, 2017.

Last fight of the Cly-Altw

Jennie Wyse with Beryl Cryer

The following story was first published by Beryl Cryer in "The Daily Colonist", a Victoria newspaper, in the 1930s. It tells of a battle between the people who lived on Gabriola Island at False Narrows in the village called Cly-Altw [tle:ltx^{w}]*, and the Ukul-Tah* [Lekwiltok]. *The battle probably took place in the 1840s.*

The Lekwiltok are a Kwakw<u>a</u>k<u>a</u>'wakw (Kwakiutl) people who, starting at some time shortly before contact, moved down from Johnstone Strait into the Discovery Passage-Desolation Sound area, taking over the northernmost part of the Strait of Georgia from the Comox (Northern Salish) in the first half of the 19th century. On Vancouver Island, they moved as far south as the Englishman River at Parksville, which was formerly the traditional territory of the Pentlatch, another Salish group. At the time, the Lekwiltok were the enemies of the Coast Salish people; though nowadays they are the best of friends.

EDITOR

"Today," said Tsass-Aya [*Ts'tassia*],[1] as she placed a chair for me, "I am going to tell you the story of the last big fight over at Cly-Altw. Now the Cly-Altw lived on a big island, I think it is now called Gabriola Island. They were a large, strong tribe living in fine houses by the water's edge. Such big times they had? Such feasting and dancing, and for those times the hunters would bring in so many deer, sometimes as many as fifty or sixty, and canoes full of duck and fish. It was easy to live then; no money, no trouble, not even clothes!

"Well, I can't tell you how many years the Cly-Altw had lived on that island, growing stronger in numbers and winning many fights until, my man's father told him there were heads set up on poles all about the houses. But at last the end of that fine tribe came.

"Very early one morning before it was light, an old hunter waked up suddenly. He lay very still listening, but there was no sound to be heard only the people about him breathing and moving in their sleep.

"What had wakened him? He felt very troubled and could not go to sleep again. At last, he got up and went out to the beach, listening, listening! It was very quiet out there, no wind, and the water was very smooth and still. 'Ah!' thought the old man, 'I was mistaken. There is nothing here!' He turned to go in again, when a sound came softly over the water and, as his quick ears heard it he dropped to his knees looking into the darkness; listening for the sound to come again. 'Ah, there!' Again and again it came. He knew what it was. The sound of water against quickly moving canoes, of many paddles dipping deeply, and now voices were heard—enemy voices. The Ukul-Tahs[2] were coming!

[1] Ts'tassia (Jennie Wyse), 1858–1942, was married to Sugnuston (Joe Wyse) and the couple have many descendants among the present-day Snunéymux^{w}. Geraldine (Gerry) Manson, who works with the Gabriola museum from time to time, is a great great granddaughter, and her name is also Ts'tassia.

[2] Wilson Duff's *Euclataw*, the HBC's *Yucletaw*, and Hill-Tout's *Yukwitltaq*, now written "Lekwiltok" or "Laich-kwil-Tach" (*lig^{w}iłda'x^{w}*), a word full of sounds unfamiliar to English speakers.

Awakens the Village

"The man thought quickly; he was very old; it would take too long for him to go inside every house and waken the people, they must be warned quickly. He gathered up a lot of large rocks and threw them hard against the walls of his lodge, and [as he] threw he ran on to the next lodge, and the next, throwing his rocks and calling as he ran, 'Come out! Come out! The Ukul-Tahs are here! The Ukul-Tahs are upon us!'

"Inside the houses all were hurrying and shouting. The women calling their children to them, giving each child a handful of dried fish or clams to carry with them as, clinging about their mothers they crept through the thick woods at the back in the hills. For, should the fierce Ukul-Tahs catch them they would be carried off as slaves and possibly torture and death would come to them.

"The braves had no time to help their women, they were putting paint upon their faces, finding their fighting things, their clubs and spears, their knives of stone with which to cut the heads of their enemies, that they might prove to all what great fighters the Cly-Altw were. And as they got ready they shouted of the heads they would take, and of how they would teach the Ukul-Tahs to come disturbing their rest.

"But they were too late. Already the great war canoes from the North were upon the beach and more and more coming in every moment whilst the cruel warriors in their feathers and war paint rushed upon the lodges shouting their war cry of the Ukul-Tahs.

"Never did Indians fight more bravely than did the Cly-Altw, but they had been taken by surprise and there were three Ukul-Tahs to every Cly-Altw, so it was not long before the fighting was finished and the only sounds to be heard were the shouts of the Ukul-Tahs as they hunted the woods for the women and children and for a few of the old men who had gone to hide when they found the enemy was too strong for them.

Scene of Desolation

"The Cly-Altw had good hiding places for their women and not many were found. So, growing tired of hunting, the Ukul-Tahs went back to the beach and there they broke down the houses, and made great fires of them, and not until they were burned away did they get into their canoes and, taking the women and children that they had found, leave for the North again.

"Now three of the Cly-Altw were away fishing when all the fighting happened, and not long after the Ukul-Tahs had left, these men came paddling home, their canoes filled with fish. But what did they find when they got to the Island? No friends shouting to them from the houses, only the bodies of those friends lying on the beach, and the houses smoking piles of black logs! What enemy had done this? Where were their families—their women and their loved little ones? Nothing left alive—not even a dog.

"With sad hearts they started towards the woods hunting and shouting to the women and children, hoping that a few might have been left by their cruel enemies. Soon the poor little ones and their mothers began coming out from their hiding places, a few here, a few there, and with them came the old men, until the three had quite a lot following them to the beach. There, they fed them with the fish they had brought back, and whilst they sat eating, talked of what they would do.

" 'We will leave this place,' said the men 'and start a new home together in a place that we know of.' The women thought this a good plan, and so the next morning they

took the canoes and paddled over to this beach. Along near where the coaling wharves are now, and near Soch-Whol [*x^{w}sol'x^{w}əl*], the village where Quen-Es-Then's people lived, they made their homes.[3]

"Well, some time later, news of the killing of the Cly-Altw got to the Cowichans, and all these people got together to go and punish the Ukul-Tahs. I can't tell you how many canoes there were, but every village sent three or four, each filled with their strongest and fiercest fighting men. When they were all ready, away they paddled and got to Ukul-Tah early, early in the morning."

"Was there a village of that name?" I asked Tsass-Aya.

She nodded emphatically. "Yes, there was a village called Ukul-Tah", she said. "It was built on a piece of land with the sea in front and water running round to the back, like a lagoon.[4]

"Very quietly they paddled close in to the shore, and waited. Nothing moved. All was quiet. Everybody inside the houses were asleep.

Battle of Revenge

"Now the Chief of the Cowichans had told all the men what they were to do. To Chief Suquen-Es-Then, the father of my man Jo-Ez, he said, 'Take your canoes round to the back, the rest of us will stay here in front. You must go past the houses where they stand beside the water, and leave your canoes where the trees begin. Every canoe must have on[e] man left in it. Hide in the bushes until you hear me shout, then run to the houses and we have them all, even as they killed our friends the Cly-Altw.'

"Well, very quietly Suquen-Es-Then took his canoes round to the back where the water ran in, and, leaving one man to guard each canoe, as the Chief had told him, crept with his men through the woods until they could see the houses. There they lay waiting for t[h]e shout to come, when a lodge door opened and an old man came out. He had his head thrown far back and was spitting into the air and sniffing.

"'Ah, ah!' he shouted. 'What do I smell? It is a strange smell! This will be a bad day for the Ukul-Tahs!' He began to jump and shout, making a great noise.

"'Something's going to happen!' he called; and as he turned round and round Suquen-Es-Then jumped at him and cut his head off.

"The old man made no sound but fell backwards into the water—dead. Suquen-Es-Then jumped in after him; got his head and threw it into one of the canoes. Just as he did this a loud shout came from the other side of the houses. Ah, such a noise there was—every man shouting and running to the houses! The doors were broken in and nearly every man at that place was killed, and the women taken for slaves and many of the children. They were driven down to the canoes and made to sit with their backs to that piece that goes across the canoes

[3] In another story, *Hyatz-A-Hn of Sna-Na-Mo*, the Cly-Altw of Gabriola are identified as being distinct from groups living in Departure Bay [*sti'ilup*] and Nanaimo. Gregory Monks, in a review of David Burley's *Senewélet*, also draws attention to "…the presence of ritual paraphernalia at False Narrows usually associated with winter spirit dances" and to the richness of the artifacts there compared to other sites in the Nanaimo area. These and other observations suggest that, at one time, False Narrows may have been rather more than just a seasonal resource-extraction site.

[4] No village with this name is listed in Robert Galois, *Kwakwaka'wakw Settlements, 1775–1920—A Geographical Analysis and Gazetteer*, UBC Press, 1994, but Snunéymux^{w} elders think it was the Weewiakay village [*tsa'k^{w}a'luten*] at Cape Mudge.

(thwart), we call it Sch-Wyltn [*łxulwułtun*], and to that piece of wood, their long hair was tied, so that they could not jump into the water.

"Indians always tied the women like that," explained Tstass-Aya [*sic*], with a laugh. "The[n] they had them safe."

Prisoners Are Released

"Now they got the women belonging to the Cly-Altw, Cowichans and S'na-Nay-Mos [*Snunéymux*^{w}], who had been taken prisoners in others [other?] fights, and they put them into one canoe by themselves. Next the great houses of the village were burned and all the Ukul-Tah's canoes smashed. All the heads were gathered and thrown into the canoes, the canoes all got close together ready to come away. Suddenly there was a great shouting, and out from the trees came running a Quoi-Quoi-Thit."

"What is that?" I interrupted her.

"Well," replied Tsass-Aya, "that is a rich man's son who has been living back in the woods hearing the Spirits talking, and voices in the air. He was jumping up and down, up and down, high in the air, and his mouth was all white foam. He had nothing on his body but his head was covered with oil, and down from the breasts of birds.

"One of the Cowichans called out, 'Who will shoot him?' You see," said Tstass-Aya, "some of the Cowichans had old muskets—Squalash [*sk*^{w}*ulesh*] is our name. 'That man must be shot,' the Chief shouted.

"Now there was one man who was called Squal-Chtun, and he said, 'I can shoot him!' Still the Quoi-Quoi-Thit was jumping up and down, never stopping.

"Now all sat very still waiting for Squal-Chtun to shoot.[5] The Ukul-Tah women tried to lift up their heads to watch, too, but their hair was tied too tightly, and they could only lie back waiting for the noise of the musket.

" 'Now!' shouted the Chief, and Squal-Chtun shot. Down fell the Quoi-Quoi-Thit, with a hole in the middle of his forehead. Now tha[t] Ukul-Tahs were punished for what they did to the Cly-Altw, and feeling that they had had a good fight, the Cowichans left the burning village behind them and paddled away to their homes."[6]

Acknowledgements

I thank the Victoria Times-Colonist and the British Columbia Archives for their permissions to re-publish this story, and also anthropologist Dr. Loraine Littlefield for her generous help with some of the footnotes.

EDITOR

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[5] A note, possibly by Beryl Cryer, on the BCA copy says: "Quoi-Quoi-Thit must be shot when his feet are off the ground". "Quoi-Quoi-Thit" may be *sk*^{w}*a'k*^{w}*ti*—"a little crazy", but this is not certain.

[6] Snunéymux^{w} elder, Bill Seward, says his grandmother helped stop the war with the Lekwiltok. Originally from a Kwakiutl tribe, she married into the Snunéymux^{w} bringing the name *Seaweed* with her.