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Beryl Cryer and the stories she collected

Dr. Loraine Littlefield



Beryl Cryer in 1980

Courtesy Mike Halhed

In the mid-1930s, a series of stories told by Coast Salish Elders on Vancouver Island was published in the Victoria newspaper, the *Daily Colonist*. These stories known collectively as the “Indian Legends of Vancouver Island” were gathered and edited by Beryl Cryer, a part time journalist, living at that time in Chemainus. The themes of the stories include mythic tales of animals with human traits; creation stories of place, people, and animals; and historical stories of early contact, warfare, and settlement.

Her life

What little information there is about Beryl Cryer is gleaned from her own short autobiography.¹ She was born Beryl

¹ *Memories of the Chemainus Valley: a history of people: Saltair, Chemainus, Westholme, Crofton,*

Mildred Halhed in 1889 to aristocratic British parents who immigrated to Canada in 1892. The family originally settled at Shawnigan Lake because of the “good hunting and fishing”, but a decade later moved to Chemainus, a mill town south of Nanaimo, where her father, Richard Beauchamp Halhed, became the Provincial Constable.² Unlike other settlers who struggled when they first settled on Vancouver Island, Beryl grew up in a large comfortable home equipped with all the amenities of an aristocratic household—tennis courts, maids, nannies, and private tutors. A parade of visitors, including such distinguished English guests as Lord Baden Powell, who was her father’s cousin, were part of her daily life.³ In 1920, she married William Claude Cryer, a local merchant, and remained in Chemainus until 1938 when she moved with her small family to Victoria. She died in Welland, Ontario in 1980.

Her journalistic career began as a Chemainus correspondent in 1927 writing a regular social column for the Victoria

Thetis, Kuper and Reid Islands, compiled by Lillian Gustafson, edited by Gordon Elliot. Chemainus Valley Historical Society, 1978 and in *Green Branches and Fallen Leaves, 1887-1967* by Alice L. Gibson. Shawnigan Lake Confederation Centennial Celebrations Committee of 1966-67 [1966]

² Later he was the immigration inspector until he retired in 1932. *Cowichan Leader*, May 29, 1947.

³ Lord Baden Powell established the Boy Scouts in England.

newspaper, the *Daily Colonist*. This position ended in 1932, but Bruce McKelvie, the managing editor, encouraged her to submit a monthly article from her collection of legends. Prior to this opportunity, she and her sister, Matie Ross, hoped to publish the legends as a children's book and had searched unsuccessfully for a publisher as early as 1928. She did in fact self-publish a small book in 1949.⁴

It is not known when Cryer began to collect oral history, or what inspired her to do so, as she had no formal academic education and did not actively pursue other research outside of gathering this collection of stories. However, she was an educated woman with opportunities to meet and interact with people who had knowledge about Coast Salish culture. Three close friends of the family in her early life were C.F. Newcombe and his son Billy (W.C. Newcombe, later to become a well-known anthropologist), and Reverend Roberts, a missionary on Kuper Island working with the Penelakut people. Nonetheless, it was her friendship with Tzea-Mntenaht, a Penelakut woman from Kuper Island, who worked as a domestic in the Halhed household, that facilitated her pursuit of the "legends". Through her relationship with Mary, Cryer gained access not only to Mary's extensive oral history, but also to the stories of a large number of other Elders in Coast Salish communities on Vancouver Island.

The story tellers

Nineteen Elders, mostly women, who lived in the Hul'qumi'num communities known today as Snunéymux^w, Chemainus, Halalt,

Lyackson, Penelakut, and Cowichan were the storytellers of seventy stories set out in the archival collection.⁵ According to Cryer, these Elders were eager to tell their stories. They voiced a fear to her that no one cared about them, and were pleased that some one was writing them down. Two women who told the majority of these stories were Tzea-Mntenaht and Tstass-Aya.⁶

Both Tzea-Mntenaht and Tstass-Aya and were part of a generation of Elders with strong links to the oral traditions. They grew up at a time when families still lived in longhouses surrounded by the traditional extended family. In their early lives, their grandparents and other family members continued to have important roles as their caregivers and educators. The stories that they tell were told to them by their families, and are in many cases part of a repertoire of stories that have been passed down from generation to generation. In other cases, the historic events they recall—first contact experiences with Europeans, warfare, the signing of the Douglas Treaty—were events that their parents or grandparents had personally witnessed.

Tzea-Mntenaht

Tzea-Mntenaht, or Mary Rice, was the grand daughter of Chief Hulkanastun of Penelakut and Chief Capilano of Squamish. Born in 1855, she married in 1875 an American Indian who was a circus rider. After he died, she remarried in 1888, but this husband later drowned in 1895, leaving her with five small children. Her marriage to her second husband, who was not a registered Indian in Canada, caused her to lose her Indian status. Unable to live on an Indian reserve she moved to Chemainus and

⁴ *The Flying Canoe; Legends of the Cowichans*, illustrated by Betty Cambell Newton. Victoria, BC, 1949

⁵ Indian Legends, BCA F82/C88.1

⁶ The spelling of these names was anglicized by Cryer.

lived in a small cottage on the beach situated at the end of the Halhed family's orchard. Here she worked taking in washing for the men who worked in the large Chemainus mill. She remained here until 1938 when she moved to Nanaimo to be close to a daughter and son, who had both married into the Snunéymux^w community. She died in Nanaimo in 1949 at the age of 94.

Tstass-Aya

Tstass-Aya, or Jennie Wyse, was born on the Nanaimo River in 1858 and died in 1942. She married Joe Wyse, son of Chief Sugnuston in 1876,⁷ and lived all her life on the Snunéymux^w town reserve. Many of her stories belonged to her husband who came from the leading family of the Xsolowel [*x^wsol'x^wəl*] village on the Nanaimo Harbour. Tstass-Aya was the second wife of Joe Wyse, and together they had one son and seven daughters. The majority of their children married into other Snunéymux^w families so that today many Snunéymux^w people can trace their roots back to Tstass-Aya.

The stories

As noted above the themes of the stories include mythic tales of how the world came to be, creation stories of peoples and places, and stories of historic events that occurred prior to contact. The mythic stories include stories of animals such as the first butterball duck, the origin of thunderbird, and numerous stories of mink and raven, important tricksters in Coast Salish tales.⁸ Many of these tales have moral themes concerning outcomes from greed and

disobedience. A number of origin stories include the origins of the Comox, Snunéymux^w, Halalt, Penelakut, Tsawwassen, and Cowichan peoples. However, the majority of stories in this collection concern historic events.

Particularly insightful are the stories about the first experiences of contact with Europeans and the misunderstandings that arise between two different cultures. According to Cryer these stories are told with a great deal of laughter associated with their telling. Two stories recall the first sightings of ships off the coast and the initial perceptions of a strange people. One story details the first sighting by the Snunéymux^w at Departure Bay and the other by the Penelakut when fishing at the mouth of the Fraser River. The imagery in these stories is similar. They perceived the large ships as canoes or islands with wings, and the new visitors as men wearing wooden shoes, and smoke coming out of their mouths. The storytellers then describe the strange trade goods they were given and the misunderstandings of their use. An element of the Penelakut story concerns the Chief accepting a gift of an axe head, which he wears as a charm around his neck. This incident has historic correspondence in the Spanish accounts.

Other historic stories included in this collection are of intertribal warfare. Warfare was endemic at the time of contact and historical accounts from early fur traders note that northern Kwakwaka'wakw, Bella Bella, and Haida regularly attacked Coast Salish people on the southern coast of Vancouver Island and the Fraser River. These attacks were either all-out village warfare as revealed in the story about *tle:ltx^w* (False Narrows) or small individual affairs of vengeance by small raiding parties. Often the descriptions are quite

⁷ Chief Sugnuston is the first name on the Douglas Treaty.

⁸ In this group of stories is the story of mink stealing fire and taking it to his village at False Narrows on Gabriola Island.



Tzea-Mntenaht (Mary Rice). A photograph taken by Beryl Cryer in the 1920s.

BCARS H 5269

graphic and reveal the extent of violence and cruelty that was part of indigenous warfare. Wayne Suttles, noted anthropologist, in his comments to the Fort Langley journals, attempts to dispel the myth that there was a predator-prey relationship with the Coast Salish and the northern groups.⁹ The Cryer

⁹ *Fort Langley Journals, 1827-30* edited by Morag MacLachlan, with contributions by Wayne Suttles, UBC Press, Vancouver, 1998.

stories substantiate this opinion, for many of the incidents reveal an equal role of the Coast Salish in initiating and perpetuating the violence.

One of the great strengths of these stories is that women's experiences are strongly expressed in many of them.

Frequently the central activities in these stories describe gathering and steaming clams, preparing camas, picking berries, weaving blankets, mats and baskets, accompanying husbands on fishing and hunting trips, as well as plant uses for medicines. These activities are well documented and support the known women's role in the ethnographic literature. However, there are other stories here that offer personal insights into family history and

private beliefs. Of particular interest too are the stories about Coast Salish women's first experiences with new foods and their preparation, and with a new language. These experiences reveal an open and friendly relationship between European and indigenous women.



Tstass-Aya (Jennie Wyse) and her husband Joe Wyse. A photograph taken in the 1880s.

Snuneymuxw archives

Conclusions

Cryer's stories offer an important insight into the oral traditions of Coast Salish peoples; however, it would be amiss if the limitations of these stories were not mentioned. Today, we have a better understanding of the importance of retaining the original text and texture of the narratives so as not to lose important cultural and historical information. Stories do more than entertain; they make meaningful connections and provide the order and continuity needed to link the past with the present. Because of Cryer's lack of knowledge of the language

and culture, it is likely that some underlying messages were lost. In her correspondence to W.C. Newcombe, Cryer explained that although the narratives do not record the actual words spoken, she was careful not to change the meaning of the stories.¹⁰

Regrettably, however, the notes she made while transcribing them are not available, so it is difficult to judge how successful she was in this endeavour. Also problematic is that Cryer's own voice is added to the narratives to describe the storytellers and explain her relationship to them. This embellishment is at times very sentimental, and takes away from the story and the authority of the Elders themselves.

To end on a positive note, however, Cryer does place the storytellers in a setting that is often very vivid, and adds to another level of understanding about these storytellers' lives. All together, we must be grateful to Beryl Cryer. She has left a collection of oral history that is a rich testament

to the wealth of the oral traditions of the Coast Salish on Vancouver Island. We must also acknowledge the wisdom of the storytellers, particularly Tzea-Mntenah and Tstass-Aya, in agreeing to have their stories written down. ◇

¹⁰ Newcombe Papers, Sept 13, 1928, Add. Mss. 1077, vol. 11, file 41.