



PHOTO: JOHNNY JONES

THE VANISHED VILLAGE

By Blair Shakell

What caught my attention in the video introducing visitors to the Squamish Lil'wat Cultural Centre was the brief, almost incidental mention of an ancient village that had once been located on or near the site of present-day Whistler. What intrigued me was the suggestion that this village, long lost in the mists of Time, had been destroyed and buried by an earthshaking cataclysm. My imagination immediately conjured up visions of wrathful fire and brimstone raining down upon a prehistoric Sodom and Gomorrah, and of archaeologists delicately uncovering ash-entombed figures, like those found in the ruins of Pompeii. Wishing to learn more, I began asking questions of the Centre's staff. When the first answers came easily, I began to believe, mistakenly as I now realize, that my quest for the lost village might be a simple one.

Guide Bernadine Billy showed me "Spó7ez" in Squamish-"Sp'ú7ets" in Lil'wat (pronounced "Spoy-èz", as if the 7 were a y) on a map hanging in the Centre's Great Hall. She pointed to where the Sea to Sky Highway crosses the Cheakamus River near BC Hydro's Daisy Lake Dam, 20 kilometres (13 miles) south of Whistler. The vanished village had apparently been located south of the present day bridge, on the wedge of land where Rubble Creek now flows into the larger stream. My first thought that the old site would be easily accessible was crushed a few days later when I met with Johnny Jones (Yeq'lakwa7 in Lil'wat meaning *Weather Changer*), archaeological field technician for the Lil'wat Nation, at his office in Mt. Currie, north of Pemberton. Johnny presented me with the photo of the Spó7ez site.

Dominating Johnny's photo is the towering basalt

wall above Rubble Creek known as "The Barrier," formed some 9,000 years ago by lava flowing from a vent on the western shoulder of nearby Mount Price. At the time, the Cheakamus Valley was still filled with glacial ice, which served to halt and cool the lava flow, creating the precipitous cliff-dam behind which the melting ice eventually formed Garibaldi Lake. In the foreground of the photo the headwater of the drainage of present day Rubble Creek can be seen emerging from the boulder-field that gives the waterway its name. In the middle ground stands a gigantic, forest-covered mound of debris shed through the ages by titanic avalanches peeling from The Barrier above. This 50-metre (165 feet) high mound is now, alas, effectively a huge and impenetrable grave marker, beneath which rests the most likely location for the vanished village of Spó7ez.

When I sat down with Rudy Reimer (Yumks), a lecturer in First Nations Studies and the Department of Archaeology at Simon Fraser University, my first question to him was: Considering that no scientific excavation would ever likely be undertaken to determine for certainty if Spó7ez had been located beneath the Rubble Creek mound, was it even conceivable that a prehistoric village might once have been located there? He explained that not only were there many recognized village sites scattered throughout the area, but that the physical profile of the Spó7ez location, with its easy access to plentiful hunting as well as cultural resources like medicinal plants, made a village site very likely there, especially with a Transformer Rock of great spiritual significance to both the Squamish and Lil'wat peoples being located just down stream. Over

Rudy Reimer



Johnny Jones



the many thousand years this territory has been occupied, it is likely that the ancestors of both the Squamish and Lil'wat peoples lived here at different times. Moreover, since the whole Garibaldi area continues to be tectonically active, it is conceivable that over the millennia more than one Spó7ez might have grown up and been buried here.

The memory of the cataclysm that destroyed Spó7ez in ancient days lives on in the oral traditions of both the Squamish and Lil'wat peoples. From the Squamish perspective, the story remembered and told by Reimer recalls a day when both Squamish and Lil'wat families lived in the village. It was a time when the introduction of new things had caused the people of Spó7ez "to forget their cultural teachings, that they should live together in peace, work for the benefit of each other, treat each other with respect and be humble for the things the Creator provided." When Thunderbird, from its resting place on Black Tusk high above Spó7ez, heard the inhabitants of the village fighting with one another, harvesting too many resources and not sharing, mistreating each other and each other's children, "it spread its wings and barely flapped them, creating tremendous booms of thunder,

causing a great rock and water slide to crash down the Rubble Creek Valley." It is said only two children—one Squamish and one Lil'wat—survived the disaster, living to remind their peoples "that we need to work together in areas where our territories overlap, and that we must treat each other with respect so that future generations can live in peace and thrive."

Now, there are those who might contend that the story of the destruction of Spó7ez is only a cautionary tale, offering no "real" proof that the village ever existed. To those I would recall the legendary city of Troy, made famous in Homer's *Iliad*. For a thousand years, fair Helen, brave Achilles and the Trojan Horse lived as fact within the Western imagination, while most historians believed that there never had been a real Troy. That was until 1873, when German archaeologist Heinrich Schliemann spied a copper jug embedded in the wall of an excavation on a hill above the Greek village of Hisarlik, discovering there not just one Troy, but the remains of 11 ancient cities, each built upon the ruins of the previous settlement.

In 1858, three Lil'wat hunters reported to colonial surveyor Major W. Downie that a catastrophic landslide had buried a number of Lil'wat families in a contemporary rendition of the village of Spó7ez on Rubble Creek three years earlier. (Annual tree ring studies conducted in 1973 confirmed that an avalanche had occurred there in 1855-56.) Moving forward into living memory, a skull attributed to an inhabitant of the lost village was disinterred from the hillside slope when the road was being built up to The Barrier. In 1980, Jimmy Jones (Johnny's father) brought his son to the site to insure that his boy would never forget that Lil'wat people lay entombed beneath the rubble slide where the rocks go over the road.

Today the story of Spó7ez resonates within an era of unprecedented cooperation between the Squamish and Lil'wat peoples. They are partners in the Cultural Centre in Whistler, and with their Musqueam and Tsleil-Waututh brothers and sisters, make up the Four Host First Nations for the 2010 Olympic and Paralympic Winter Games, a first for indigenous peoples.

The next time you cross the Cheakamus River Bridge below the Daisy Lake Dam, remember the vanished village of Spó7ez. Turn your thoughts to the families of the Squamish and Lil'wat peoples who have been buried by avalanches in the days when the mountains shook in fury. And reflect on just how much history lies right beneath our feet.



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