



Uts'am / Witness

**Witnessing Ten Years
of Transformation**

BY E. KATHERINE DODDS



DEDICATION

This text is dedicated to the memory of the irrepressible Xwexwsélkn, John Clarke, to the hybrid visions of Slánay̓ Sp'ákw'us, Nancy Bleck, and most of all to telàsem̄in/siyam, Hereditary Chief Bill Williams, as he was and is the 'Watchkeeper' over the territory that is the living text of Uts'am/ Witness. Grateful thanks are also due, of course, to all the many, many people who contributed to and participated in this project, some of them for years. We are all witnesses.



Witnessing Ten Years of Transformation

BY E. KATHERINE DODDS

Commissioned by the Roundhouse Community Centre on the occasion of the Uts'am Witness Art show June 12-27 2007 and the Witness 10th Anniversary Ceremony, Saturday June 23, 2007

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1. *history*

"There used to be deer and elk hanging out around 12th and Cambie. Of course that was long before there was any such a thing as 12th and Cambie. According to telàsemkin/siyam Hereditary Chief Bill Williams of the Squamish Nation, all of Vancouver was once rich in animal life. The banks of False Creek provided seafood for the picking. The traditional First Nations saying is "when the tide is out, the table is set."¹

During the summer of 1997, in a political climate where the provincial government declared that environmentalists in general (and Greenpeace in particular) were enemies of the province, I was witness to a motley crew as they took off to the woods of British Columbia to enact an unusual collaboration.

The first Witness Weekend.

It's eight a.m. on a Saturday in July 1997. A herd of humans gather on the Davie street side of the Roundhouse Community Centre, coffee cups in hand. It's a diverse collection of young and old, travelers, young families, and in one case an entire clan from grandmother to granddaughter.

From the banks of False Creek, now the epitome of an urban cityscape, this group's destination is three hours upstream by car. They're headed for Sims Creek, a history lesson in what the land was like before the city was built.²

The precedent-and protocol-setting Uts'am/Witness project was co-founded by artist and photographer Nancy Bleck, the late world-renowned mountaineer turned wilderness educator John Clarke, and telàsemkin/siyam – Hereditary Chief Bill Williams of the Squamish Nation. Their vision was one

1. Dodds, Katherine, "Bearing True Witness," Vancouver Courier, Vol 88, N0 64, Sunday August 10 1997

2. Ibid

of connection to the land, wilderness conservation, collaboration, artistic inquiry and social justice. Uts'am/Witness became the flagship project of the newly formed Roundhouse Community Centre, with Bleck their first Artist-in-Residence.

After its first year, it produced BC's largest-ever exhibition on themes of environmental practice, First Nations culture, and political engagement. 175 artists, both professional and emerging, exhibited work. From the outset this community-based project was hugely attended. It was nominated for the 'Ethics in Action' Award in 1998, and national winner for 'Best Cultural Event' from Tourism Canada in 2002. It remained a stable residency project for The Roundhouse ever since its inception in 1997. Both the Roundhouse and Uts'am/Witness are celebrating their 10th Anniversary.

During the first Witness weekend Williams spoke of his people's desire to reclaim their territory, and expressed hope that the Witness project would light a spark and start the flow of information. "What we would like is to have a spot in our territory to reflect what it was 200 years ago, where not only can we go and sing and hear our ancestral songs but gather strength."
— Chief Bill Williams³

For the past ten summers, Chief Bill (as most participants referred to him) invited the public to experience Squamish Nation culture during the Uts'am/Witness camping weekends and to witness, in the Coast Salish tradition, the work they were doing in the woods and waterways of the Sims Creek watershed. This place is now known by the Squamish Nation, and their friends, as Nexw-ayantsut, meaning 'place of transformation'.

What Uts'am/Witness has transformed is complex and historically significant. Over the years the project brought to-

3. Dodds, Katherine, "Bearing True Witness," Vancouver Courier, Vol 88, N0 64, Sunday August 10 1997

gether ten thousand people — members of the Squamish Nation, the core group of volunteers, environmentalists, artists and the general public. It specifically invited artists to experience and reflect in their own work what the project was about. The transformation “witnessed” by the participants over the past decade included a unique style of true public consultation around land, environmental arts, forestry, models of non-violent resistance, and a re-claiming of traditional culture.

By offering an alternative to the blockades of ten years ago, Uts’am/Witness opened up a space for these issues to be discussed in a non-threatening environment, whether you were Native or non-Native, a logger, a scientist, a corporate CEO, an art student, a young mother, a lawyer, or anyone else.

How Uts’am/Witness came about is a microcosm of the community-building it produced. In 1995 then-art student Nancy Bleck and the legendary mountaineer John Clarke were trying to educate the public about the impending clear-cutting in the Elaho Valley. They bypassed the violent protests that were going on in the area, and started to hold peaceful camping weekends. It was always Bleck’s intent to get away from the war in the woods, and to “move beyond protest, and find a new model of communication.” Chief Bill Williams, ‘Watchkeeper’ over this part the Nations’ territory noticed their activities at Sims Creek and decided to see for himself: “what they were up to in this northern part of my territory”.

After borrowing his cell phone at Barney’s PetroCan in Squamish, Nancy noticed Bill on the banks of Sims Creek. When

Chief Bill Williams noticed their activities at Sims Creek and decided to see for himself “what they were up to in this northern part of my territory.”

she went to greet him, he gave her his business card. As Nancy realized she was speaking to a Squamish Nation Chief, she immediately acknowledged that she should be asking permission for their group to be there, and asked if he could welcome them. He responded that the logging road, which no one had asked permission to build, prevented him from giving a formal welcome – protocol had already been breached. Then he joined their campfire circle. It was the last weekend of the summer, and Nancy had gifts for all those gathered. She also had the feather that had been given to her on a recent vision quest. She gave *telàsemkin/siyam* her feather.

Soon after, their combined work began.

John Clarke and Chief Bill shared a love of the land. And so the Dublin-born mountaineer came to guide a Squamish Nation Chief on a trek across his own territory, to mountains and places where he'd never been before. At the end of their first Witness season together, Chief Bill designated and blanketed John as speaker and gave Nancy an eagle feather.

Territory became the text⁴ of Uts'am/Witness.

2. ceremony

*To be called witness is the actual cornerstone of our Longhouse tradition of what we call 'Chicayx'. Chicayx is our foundation of our law of how things get done. And in order to verify our law, we need people not just within our family, our community, but people from outside our community to come in and to verify that the event that is taking place.*⁵

— *telàsemkin/siyam*, Chief Bill Williams

4. I am using "text" in the sense of literary criticism, as the subject for analysis, and I admit to a tendency to revel in the pleasure of the text.

5. From an interview with Chief Bill Williams by Nancy Bleck, as part of the research for her M.A. thesis "Becoming Witness: ecology, embodied ethics and artistic practice".

Through the enormous foresight, wisdom and generosity of telàlsemkin/siyam, a Squamish Nation tradition was opened up in an unprecedented fashion to the public who participated in Witness ceremonies during Uts'am/Witness. The witness ceremony itself, while rooted in tradition, has contemporized.

And what was witnessed, in that very first year of the project's formation, was historical. At the first weekend the Squamish Nation Assertion of Aboriginal Title was handed out in photocopied form. At the end of the summer of 1997 the forest above Sims Creek was logged. As the art exhibition drew near, media attention on the project was phenomenal.

Unrelated to the project, but highly relevant to its aims, on December 11, 1997 Chief Justice Antonio Lamer of the Supreme Court of Canada ruled that British Columbia, in all its entirety, is "Indian Land." Terry Glavin, in an article in the *Globe and Mail*, pointed out the astounding ruling by Judge Lamer that "oral evidence, songs and stories not only be admissible, but placed on an equal footing with common law tests of occupation and ownership."⁶ Suddenly, in the texts or "our" law, non-European discourse is being validated. We will only be "post-colonial" when we take seriously this text of the Supreme Court of Canada telling us that it is indeed a stolen land. Meanwhile Witness was setting an innovative precedent, inviting people to go out and listen to the land, and to each other.

On January 18, 1998, the Roundhouse exhibition closed with a ceremony to witness the naming of John Clarke in the Squamish tradition as *Xwexwsélkn*, "mountain goat", in honour of his knowledge and respect for Mother Earth. Three years later, Nancy was honoured with the name *Slánay̓ Sp'ák'w'us*, meaning "eagle woman".

3. *pre-history*⁷

The historical interlude between Rousseau's romantic ruminations on his "irrepressible ravishings" to melt into nature⁸, and Lévi-Strauss' own 20th century anthropological travels encompasses the historical time-span in this country-known-as-Canada from a time of "pre-contact" to so-called "post-colonial." During this time, trees 25 stories high were cleared to create Vancouver, and the era of illegal cultural genocide we are still in began.

The Witness ceremony itself is a traditional form of government within a formerly oral culture, and has been used as a legally binding ceremony from "time immemorial" to the present day.

Within the context of the origins of Uts'am/Witness, the originary colonizing gesture is reframed. Literally. In that first art exhibition, a panorama photo by Bleck included text from the 'Assertion of Title' document. In another frame, John stands on the sandbar, gazing up at the mountains. In a distinctly ironic move, John Clarke – "British Columbia's premier explorer and mountaineer" – guides Chief Bill Williams on a trip over the glaciers within his own captured territory.

One man's wilderness is another man's territory, and one woman's text. And we are all readers and writers of history.

Those designated as witnesses were accepting a responsibility; to remember, and if called upon in future, to speak their memories. In 2001, witnesses were called upon to do just that. To speak about what the land meant to them.

7. In an ironic sense

8. Lévi-Strauss, *Structural Anthropology*, Volume Two, London, Penguin Books, 1973, p. 43

4. *texwaya7ni7im/ verification*

April 28, 2001, 12 p.m. Location: Northern Squamish Nation Traditional Territory. Sims Creek, mile 56, cut block 72-4.

Hereditary Chief Bill Williams, telàsemkin/siyam invited all those who had ever participated in Witness to attend a sacred ceremony known as texwaya7ni7im (tach way nay tum) dating back 8000 years in Squamish history. In his letter to past Witness participants, he wrote:

You will recall that with each Witness ceremony, participants are reminded they might one day be called on to verify what they did and saw in the course of their Witness experience. I am now calling on you to do exactly that. The time has come when all witnesses, participants and people that the project has touched are being called back to make their voice heard as witnesses for our sacred wilderness.

Ceremonies like this do not happen every day. As the press release stated, "For the first time in BC, Native and non-Native people will gather together in this traditional Coast Salish Ceremony to speak to what is happening in the remaining ancient rainforests in Sims Creek."

There was an urgency to this process. The area, defined by Interfor as "cut-block 72-4" was scheduled for logging that spring. Interfor had said they were planning a public consultation process, but one employee had questioned whether there had been "significant interest in this area". This comment was made despite the demonstrated interest by the 1500 folks who had been part of the camping weekends, and the over 5000 people that had participated in other Witness events over the years. And so a Squamish Nation "protocol" for public consultation took precedence over Interfor's own

public process. Interfor CEO Rick Slaco attended texwaya-7ni7im by invitation of Chief Bill Williams, and was shown on National TV thanking Bill for including him and recognizing the ceremony as a public process. By doing so he became a public witness to the fact that the Squamish Nation had demonstrated that people did, in fact, care about the trees of “cut-block 72-4.” Logging in the area was stayed.

Legal texts and subject formation are what Witness is all about, writ in ceremony, art, politics, economics, and on the land. Precedent, and protocol.

5. *protocol*

The Squamish Nation has existed and prospered within our traditional territory since time immemorial. We are Coast Salish people. Our language is the Squamish language. Our society is, and always has been, organised and sophisticated, with complex laws and rules governing all forms of social relations, economic rights, and relations with other First Nations. We have never ceded or surrendered title to our lands, rights to our resources or the power to make decisions within our territory.⁹
— *Squamish Nation Assertion of Aboriginal Title document*

By collaborating in the Uts’am/Witness project, some individual members of the Squamish Nation have indicated their willingness, not to assimilate, forgive, forget, or any other romantic notion, but to re-establish protocol. Protocol, a term appropriated from European English, by definition, is an appropriate description of the intermingling of ritual, etiquette and government that characterizes the Witness ceremony and other First Nations traditions. By extending an

“invitation to witness” Witness is writing an intermingled text, a hybridization of originary claims.

With the privilege of being invited to witness, and the pleasure of the experience of the Uts’am/Witness community, comes responsibility, and in this case that responsibility is to respect even that which one analytically (or emotionally) picks apart. Protocol is not about meshing identities, or even agreeing, it is about negotiating a path, a relationship, a boundary or the blurring of the boundaries. In effect protocol is intertextuality.

As a collaboration, what is being written through this articulation of Uts’am/Witness is a protocol for a process of inscription — a hybrid, embodied symbol formation for natural/cultural evolution. We are all in this together, connecting as nodes in networks, if not as parts into wholes.

Ten years after Witness first started, the tables have truly turned. In 2005/6, Interfor agreed to sell Tree Farm License 38 to the Squamish Nation. North West Squamish Logging Company, headed up by CEO Chief Bill Williams, now manages the land and Interfor is their customer. They have an unprecedented 100-year land use plan, begun in 2000, with the first draft unveiled in 2001. The final version will be unveiled this month. (June 2007) The plan takes into account sustainable logging, and environmental stewardship of the land. Within this plan, the Wild Spirit Places, Kwa Kwayexwelh-Aynexws, which includes Sims Creek, will remain forever untouched.

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6. *telàlsemkin/siyam, huy chewxa*

Chief Williams took a risk, and the risk paid off. He chose to work together with non-Natives, and his own people, on a project that was based on relationships. The friendship of the co-founders, the communities they each brought with them, and the shared relationship of all who participated with the ‘place of transformation’.

Chief Williams describes the project itself as having “an important, and very positive impact on the Squamish Nation, it showed people they had a right to return to sacred places.” It drew back members of the Nation who “knew the ceremonies and knew the locations to hold them but they were afraid to go because lumber company ownership meant they felt ostracized in their own land.” It drew in urban Native youth, many of whom had not experienced the land and ceremony in this way before.

Out of this experience the Aboriginal Youth Ambassadors Project was formed. Uts’am/Witness made the general public aware of Squamish peoples, their culture and the deep attachment they feel for the land.¹⁰

10. Drew Leatham attended the very first Witness weekend and became a volunteer. Over the years his role deepened, and he worked with the Squamish Nation to develop the Ambassadors project directly as a result of Witness.. In 2006 he was given a Squamish name, Tsewatseltn (sewatsultan) meaning resourceful person.



7. *the art of community*

If we can negotiate the Wild Spirit places out of the annual allowable cut, then that's the best world we would be in, because then we wouldn't have to worry about the cutting of the old-growth forests ever again. What we could do then is focus not on the fight of trying to keep the old-growth forests, but focus on the fight of introducing the old-growth forest to our children.
— Chief Bill Williams

As an Arts Programmer at the Roundhouse since it began, Amir Alibhai, curator of this final Uts'am/Witness exhibition, wrote his Masters thesis about cross-cultural collaboration on the Witness Project. Today he reflects that the project is about more than that. "I have developed scores of different community-based arts projects; I find that Witness stands out for its longevity and profound social effect. It will be studied in the future as a powerful model for art as an agent for environmental and social change."

He describes how as a community based art project, Witness has "blurred the lines between art, recreation, history, science, spirit, education, performance, ritual, ceremony

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and cultures. It has been innovative in many ways: through honouring traditional arts and knowledge; contemporary and cross-cultural forms of art; by creating new forms, especially with respect to eco-arts practice. It has been sustainable in the long term and ultimately it resulted in "real-world" change." He adds, "I've learned that organizations cannot have relationships and substantive partnerships – but people can."

And artist co-founder Nancy Bleck echoes this point. Speaking of her collaborators, Bill and John, she says, "It's hard to be a good man in today's world. I've had the honour and the privilege of working with the very best of men. Both John and Bill, I would say, are rare and exceptional, because they are connected to the land and not just a money culture. For my piece in this show I am remembering the spirit of John Clarke, by depicting the four directions of his burial grounds in Sims Creek."

And as for Bill, Nancy says: "He comes from a line of traditional people that carry a specific wisdom. He took up the role of his father, of being watchman over the Northern part of the territory. He is following a line of very strong men, which he combines with political savvy and love for the land. Bill is always open to possibility." The incredible leadership that has made the continuity of Uts'am/Witness possible has been that of Chief Bill Williams.

"I think that Chief Bill Williams is a true visionary," says Cease Wyss. "I believe that there was some seriously powerful medicine at work, considering it was Bill who went out to the Elaho to investigate who these activists were who

were causing the loggers to ruffle their feathers. It could have been any one of the chiefs and council who sit at the table, and it could have been a situation where there might not be a willingness to talk together. Bill obviously went out there because he really wanted to know more, more than what the environmentalists were doing. He went out there because this place was calling to him. I think that when he came here, it became obvious that this was bigger than anything he had known."

This feeling is echoed by the other artists exhibiting in this show, although in the beginning many people in the Nation really didn't know what Bill was up to.

As Aaron Nelson Moody put it: "Some of us had seen a brochure, but Nancy had put an image of our 56' sea-going canoe on the front, and rumours around the res were that Bill had formed a company with an eco-tour operation and was taking non-Native people on canoe rides and hikes for big money. It sounded halfway plausible because Bill has a background in outdoor recreation. Anyway, I didn't know what I was getting into."

Mark Robinson adds: "We were thinking, who the hell wants to hang out with a bunch of hippy white people in the bush? Bill got the non-native people and he got a lot of Squamish people to go up there and take a look. So he changed the attitudes of his own people and a lot of non-native people and the like, it cut down a lot of stereotypes on both ends. He really brought people together."

Xwa Lac Tun would agree that Bill brought people together in unusual ways. "Back in 1997, one person was unable to make it to do the work for the Witnessing on the river bank of Sims Creek. I was invited to perform this work and was unaware that there was also Vision TV documenting that day. I went

"Bill was directing them with lessons learned in our own Squamish history about how to avoid generational anger and hatred, and damage to both the world and our community."



up unprepared for camping and Bill Williams mentioned that he was not staying up and loaned his camping gear to me. Meanwhile Aaron Nelson-Moody had already planned on staying in this same tent. As a result, we had lots of time to get to know each other and the program better while inside this small one-person tent."

Once Aaron first got up there and realized what he was a part of, he "thought it was an excellent idea, because Bill, Nancy, and John had really complimentary skills. I'd spent time working with Adbusters, and Kahtou Native Newspaper, and had heard lots of people talk plenty about doing something for the environment and Aboriginal culture and rights and all that, but most

people fell into the pattern of doing things in the kind of non-Native protest, court action, media campaign ways. The three of them kind of side-stepped all that, and Bill was directing them with lessons learned in our own Squamish history about how to avoid generational anger and hatred, and damage to both the world and our community. Most cultures on the Northwest Coast have learned that having potlatches always works in the long run, because it brings people together both in their jobs and community roles, and also as human beings with families who we will live with for a long time."

Xwa Lac Tun goes on to describe Uts'am/Witness as significant as "a teaching tool, not only for the Squamish people but for all people. In our culture, our canoe carries us all on a journey whether it be physical, spiritual or emotional. The significance is further deepened as canoes allow people from all backgrounds to pull together to witness what is happening in the Upper Valley of the Squamish old growth forests." His family canoe, Pekultn, which carries the hereditary chief's name of Seymour Creek, is his piece in this show. He says: "This very canoe began to be shaped out at the Roundhouse and was in the first Witness art show, although it was a work in progress at the time."

As Tracy Williams says: "Ut'sam has been a great opportunity to share a little bit of culture and modern history in the making. The revival of Cedar weaving over the past ten years has been amazing, and the interest and respect from people of all Nations has truly been a gift. The commitment of Chief Bill Williams to the Witness Project and to the Squamish Nation people has been outstanding. Our Chief's involvement with Witness has truly impacted so many of our Youth, who previously may not have had the same opportunities to walk our traditional Territory."

Cease agrees: "It made me feel very proud as a young woman raising my daughter in our traditions. My daughter grew up going out to the Witness weekend camping over many years. This has really kept us strong as a family as a result of going there. "She adds, "Being Coast Salish, this has not been a new ceremony to me, nor has it been a new experience, because it was something old for me, that I was being exposed to more and more. I think that considering the fact that there was so much negativity surrounding the protection of the land, there was nothing else to do but engage in ceremony. This was how the land was going to be taken

back. It was a good thing to see our ceremonies being shared through a community outreach project."

Cease was asked to document the last year of Witness 2006. She has assembled, through the assistance of Paul Lang, a short documentary-style loop as part of an installation that will tell the Witness story for all to hear. "It is the part that helps others to actually get a sense of sharing in what it might be like to go out to the woods, and be there in the Elaho, in the Wild Spirits Places."

People from such a wide variety of backgrounds coming together and actually doing things was at the heart of Uts'am/Witness. Aaron says: "Even if what was going on seemed very small, it was, I think, very important. You could see the little kids watching us sometimes. They'd wander around kind of oblivious to our formality, and you could see them looking around at all the adults, and what we were doing. It's called mastery learning, how a child sees something done many times, and when it is done, and the attitude it's done with, and then one day they just do it themselves. I think that the example we left for all the kids who came up there was the most significant thing of all."

Says Tracy Williams: "Uts'am has been a great place to throw rocks in the river, play in the sand, swim in the river, hike through the forest, sing traditional songs, and open our hearts to hear the call of our Ancestors, the land, and the Creator. I humbly raise my hands up to Chief Bill, Nancy, and the late John Clarke for having that good heart, and listening to the whisperings of the land, so that all of our people could benefit from the reconnection to our environment. Witness was always a fabulous adventure, and I am so grateful for having been a part of this."

8. *postscript*¹¹

Because the work that was intended has been done, Uts'am/Witness, as a project, has ended. This exhibition, and this final Witness ceremony represents the final "official" event. However, Uts'am/Witness, as a process, will no doubt witness new work emerging, and new models evolving. The legacy of Uts'am/Witness is hope, for time immemorial.

11. There is certainly more to this story than one can tell here— so much unsaid about John Clarke, and many more parts of the tale of Uts'am/Witness. We have hopes for a book.

