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Return to Balhats

Lheit-Lit’en Nation
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By the Lheit-Lit'en Nation

We are the Lheit-Lit'en—the "people from where the rivers meet."

To understand us is to understand a people who once knew great abundance and much happiness.

A people who lived as one with Mother-Nature.

A people whose families were whole and whose children knew love and carefree days of laughter and running in the forest.

To understand us is to understand a people who have lived in the place where we now live since before recorded history. Whose earliest known settlements date back to 8,000 years before the birth of a man named Christ in a far off land.

A people for whom there were no such things as minutes and hours, only the seasons—spring, summer, fall and winter. Each season being part of the cycle of life and our guide for living.

Yet to understand us is to also understand a people whose joy was turned to overwhelming sadness.

A people whose way of living was torn apart and thrown away like so much useless chaff.

A people whose children were ripped from the arms of their mothers and fathers by strange men with white collars and with uniforms.

To understand us is to understand men and women who, as it would be with anyone who had their lives and beliefs and families torn apart, walked for many years as if in a fog of disbelief and confusion, of fear and despair.

A people who were cast aside for no reason and left to languish and perish in a dark world utterly without hope.

To understand us as we are today is to understand a people who have just begun to awaken from a long and terrible dream and who are now rising once more.

We are the Lheit Lit'en.
Our original community and social structures evolved completely free of outside influences over a period of thousands of years in central British Columbia.

According to our elders, we initially came from the Blackwater area, about 60 kilometres southwest of Prince George, over 15,000 years ago.

At the time we were experiencing a population explosion and because we were hunters and gatherers we had to spread out in keeping with the rules of nature.

It was decided our people would divide into many smaller nations, each of which migrated to different areas throughout a vast region.

Some of these new nations settled throughout north and central B.C. while others went as far afield as the southern part of what is now called the United States where they are now called the Navaho. Even today, our Athapascan language links us with our Navaho brothers and sisters as well as many other nations.

A large contingent of Traditional Chiefs and Medicine People led our people to the convergence of the mighty Nechako and Fraser Rivers where Prince George is now located. Anthropologists have found evidence of our settlements dating back 10,000 years in the area.

Here we settled and prospered throughout an area of thousands of square kilometres from what is now the Alberta border to a wide area of central B.C.

Our life at the time was both simple and extremely complex and it was completely integrated with nature.

We learned very early on that if nature suffered we suffered and this formed the basis for our philosophy and beliefs. All life was given by Yu’Augusta, The Creator.

From Yu’Augusta’s rivers and forests and plants and animals we had all that we required; our foods, our clothing, our shelter and our medicines. Nothing was ever wasted.

Nature gave us everything required to sustain us provided that we never took more than was needed and that we always allowed nature time to replenish herself.

Our community structures also reflected this philosophy of sharing, coexistence and working together.

Everyone filled a specific role. Some hunted, some gathered food or medicine from the forest, some served as our spiritual advisers, some looked after the children, some cooked, some made clothing—each person filling a role in the overall fabric of the community.

And in all things, everything was shared. There was no individual ownership. If someone had something, it belonged to everyone.

At the centre of our social structure, our “legislature” so to speak, was the Potlatch, or balhats as we say in our language.

This was our governing mechanism and all community matters were dealt with through it.

The balhats was a gathering of our peoples and in many cases of people from surrounding nations.

As part of the balhats system of governance our people were divided into four clans; the Caribou, the Bear, the Frog and the Eagle.

Each was headed by either a Dune za (head man) or Tse-kay za (head woman) and each clan was responsible for the protection and careful management of part of our territory.

At the head of the whole structure was our traditional Chief, Keyoh Whudu-chun, “the tree that people lean on for support.”

The main balhats gathering was usually a culmination of a series of many smaller earlier meetings where individual issues were dealt with.

When the final gathering came together all people were included so that everyone could participate in final discussions and be aware of decisions and agreements. In this way our history was passed on accurately to succeeding generations.

It was a forum for allotting land use, places to settle, for giving gifts and for
managing our territory in general.

Justice issues were also dealt with. If someone had committed an offense against the community, it was here that person’s punishment was decided on.

In the case of something like murder, the normal punishment was banishment. When a person was banished, even though they were physically still in the community, they were treated as if they were dead. No one spoke to them or interacted with them in any way for the rest of their lives. It was extremely effective.

If a person mistakenly killed another, that person had to pay back to the injured family the worth of that person’s life often by working for the family until the debt was repaid.

For more minor transgressions, the offender was brought before the Elders, the Clan members, the Azahs and Keyoh Whu-du-chun who collectively decided on the appropriate punishment.

Every decision made at the balhats was done by consensus and we all stayed at the gathering for as long as it took to reach that consensus. There was never any voting or arbitrary rulings by any individuals.

We all discussed the matter until it was resolved and everyone was in agreement: Because of this, there were no time limits. A balhats could last for a month or more.

The balhats was our instrument for community control, community watch, defense of the territory and any and all other issues that related to the community.

It served us effectively for centuries and was one of the main foundations for our successful society.

Dak’et/Fall
1850 to 1920

While there is no record in our oral history of the first sighting, it must have been a truly amazing incident.

It is likely our people probably laughed in wonderment at the first white man.

By all accounts they were clumsy in the forest and ignorant of the ways of survival. A white man could die of starvation in a forest surrounded by all the food he could possibly eat.

They would kill an animal for its skin and leave the rest of it to rot.

Apparently, they also smelled very badly.

But it’s likely that our laughter very quickly diminished as that first white man was followed by a trickle of others and that was followed by a flood of them. All of them pouring into our land without ever asking our permission.

And with them they brought a scourge of disease, greed and alcohol.

They also took it upon themselves to assume ownership of whatever they saw fit to take. We had no understanding of this because our society believed we belonged to the land and not the other way around.

Although we didn’t know it at the time, the white people had a government too in a land far, far away from where we lived, in a place called Ottawa.

We also didn’t know that this white people’s government had decided that they somehow had the right to take control of our lands and our lives.

They wrote this down on paper in a language we couldn’t understand and because of this they believed it to be valid and acceptable.

We had little or no awareness of any of this while it was taking shape. We continued to go about our business of living by the cycle that nature had laid out for us.

The Indian Act², meanwhile, made us “wards” of the white government.

It took away all our rights, laid out a series of regulations as to how and where we could live, took control of all our finances, limited our ability to choose work, make investments and even told many of our women they were no longer part of our community because they married white men.

Disclosure: Fin de Siècle Democracy
The Indian Act was a very skillful and pernicious document. Even though we were brought under the "umbrella" of the white government we were allowed no input because we were not allowed to vote, could not own land, could not use the reserve lands they put us on as collateral to borrow money and we couldn't meet in large groups to discuss this.

We were forbidden to hold our potlatches. The Act eliminated the power of the Clans and even of Kayoh Whu-du-chun, our traditional chief.

The Act was so thorough that when the white government of South Africa was developing their system of apartheid they sent representatives to Canada to study how Ottawa had done it.

The Indian Act stipulated that we were to be confined within our territory to small reserves. We were to be "re-socialized" by being taught farming and domestic skills.

Probably the single most horrific aspect of this Act was that they took away our children as soon as they came of school age.

The children were taken, by force when necessary, to what were called residential schools. These schools were run by the Catholic Church and were usually located far from the reserve. Here our children were forbidden to speak their own language or learn the ways of their people.

Nor did it stop there.

All the while that we were being brought under the yoke of the Indian Act, white people continued to pour into our land and as they did, business interests and the Grand Trunk Pacific Railroad saw that the land we had remaining (which was by now a tiny triangle at the fork of the Fraser and Nechako Rivers where our original village was located) had immense commercial value.

The railroad set about negotiating a deal with the federal government for this land.

Again, unbeknownst to us, agreements were made behind our backs.

In 1911, in November of the harshest winter in 50 years, after our repeated refusals to sell our remaining land or move, our people were called back from the bush when they should have been gathering our winter food and a document was placed before us which we could not read and did not understand.

It's still unclear whether our men signed the document or whether their signatures were forged.

Whatever happened, by that Spring the railwaymen showed up. We were forced off the land and our village was burned down. Later the graves of our ancestors were dug up and the bones were thrown in the river.

We were paid $100,000 by the Indian Agent for that land. Its market value at the time was more than $5 million. Its value today has been estimated at as much as $500 million.

Khi/Winter
1920 to 1985

As the federal government and white society took hold of our lives we became a people lost.

The impacts on our people were immense. It very nearly killed us, our culture, our language, our traditional way of life, our identity and our family and community structures. It robbed our people of their souls.

The Indian Act spread its tentacles through our lives to the point where our people were completely prevented from doing anything without the prior approval of Indian Affairs, approval which was always given grudgingly if it was given at all.

The Indian Agent ruled our lives. If we needed food or clothing for our children or housing or community assistance we had to go to him with cap in hand and on bended knee and meekly ask for whatever it was we needed.

He scared most of us because he was the ultimate power. He literally held the power of life or death.

Our once-proud people became ravaged and destitute. The poverty on our reserves was like nothing anywhere in white society.

But fortunately for the government, we were also an "invisible" people.

With no understanding of the white society, of power structures or politics, we had no idea how we could ever regain our value as a people.
Throughout this period, these controlling influences comprised a systematic program to completely extinguish our original cultural, social and community structures.

It was as if we were a people who had been cut off at the legs.

Our parents for generations were denied the opportunity to raise their own children and many lost their parenting skills.

Our children were deprived of the connection with their parents and as a result lost the single most important guiding influence of their lives.

Our connection to the land was ripped away.

As cities grew and industries appeared, the animals became more and more scarce, our rivers and air became polluted and the fish became toxic.

White man's diseases ravaged us. The flu, tuberculosis, smallpox and other sicknesses crippled and killed us. Over time, 90% of our population was wiped out.

Those remaining collapsed in on each other. Because we were a people completely without any power or control over our own lives, we began to take it out on ourselves and each other.

Those who could left the reserve for the cities only to find more hardship, poverty and exclusion.

Most of those who achieved some semblance of comfort in the white world were only able to do so by completely forsaking their heritage. Many were ashamed to admit they were native and hid the fact if they could.

Yet even as we did this, the vortex of our near-destruction kept spinning ever faster.

As generation by generation passed, we went through a cycle where we had no skills in the community to help us do better and no economic power. We lived in unrelenting poverty without sufficient housing, health care, education and practical training.

We turned to alcohol and drugs. Levels of violence and abuse within our families and community skyrocketed. Our people filled the jails of the white

people. We became jealous and started killing ourselves and each other.

This is what happened to our people. It made us very sad because we could see it happening to us but we were powerless to stop it.

And bit by bit, our people left the reserve. By 1980, on our main reserve at Shelley, B.C., only one man, August Quaw, still lived there.

This was the winter for our people.

'Oolulh/Spring
1985-1992

The winds of change for us began as a slight breeze in the blackest part of the night.

In the first half of the 1980's a few families had begun to trickle back to the reserve only to find that nothing had changed except perhaps for the worse. We looked at ourselves and saw a people who had hit absolute rock bottom.

But something very important happened from that realization. We asked ourselves, "Is this the way we want to stay?"

It was then as a people we decided that, both for ourselves and for our children, we had to rise from our knees and become a people once more.

In 1986 we took our first few tentative steps down that road. We elected a new Government Chief and Council with the mandate to create a new base upon which to build our community.

We began work on a 25 year plan for our Nation which would lead us back to the harmony we once knew.

Very slowly, we began to regain some of the dignity we had lost so many years ago and we began to feel even more confident that we could heal our community.

A year earlier the federal government had restored the right of the women from our community — who had lost their status due to marrying non-natives — to reclaim their heritage, along with their offspring. This too helped revalidate us as a people.
As well, a 5 year plan was developed to put our nation on its feet again and establish the reputation that we are workers, with nature, that we back up what we say and that no longer will we be subservient to anyone or any government.

This was a difficult task, the rebuilding of a nation. We had to overcome decades of community destruction which generated resentment, jealousy and suspicion.

But with every step we took we became stronger and the next step became easier.

Through adhering to our workplans and confronting ourselves we continued to regain our sense of spirit and hope.

We did an in-depth community study. We held this mirror up to ourselves and we saw we still suffered from many social problems. But looking at ourselves honestly was another step forward.

We developed a community blueprint mapping out the systems and processes by which we would regain control of our reborn Nation.

We involved everyone in the community by holding monthly meetings to share volumes of new information detailing every aspect of our evolving plan and development. In this manner all of us came to know and understand the issues.

And possibly most importantly, for the first time in decades we called on the Elders of our Nation to come back and help guide us.

We continued healing ourselves and, more and more, our people started coming home.

In 1990, we created a Management Team comprised of 58 people, both from inside and outside the community, to create the policies and processes for a self-governing nation. On January 20, 1992, we adopted our Declaration of Self-Determination to bring us out from under the Indian Act.

On July 1, 1992, we eliminated the position of Government Chief ruling over Lheit-Lit'en and our Elders named the first Traditional Chief since 1918. That person once again holds the rightful position of Keyoh Whu-Du Chun, the "tree that people lean on for support."

We are now negotiating on an ongoing basis with the Government of Canada as we move towards the total elimination of the Indian Act.

The Lheit-Lit'en Act will take us into the future. Once again it is Spring for our people.

Hanu-Qwatchu/ Joe David, 1977
from Edwin Hall Jr., Margaret Blackman and Vincent Rickard 1981.
Northwest Coast Indian Graphics. Vancouver: Douglas and MacIntyre.