Stone T’xwelátse Returns Home
A Briefing on a Recent Repatriation by the Stó:lo-Ts’elxwéyqw-Nooksack

Dave Schaepe and T’xwelátse (Herb Joe)

On Saturday, October 14 of this year, an audience of approximately 600 people representing many Stó:lo and Nooksack communities and their friends gathered at the Semáth Longhouse in Kilgard, B.C. to witness and celebrate the return of a long separated Ancestor: Stone T’xwelátse. This event, hosted by Sumas First Nation elder Ray Silver (Xeyteleq), concluded a series of gatherings following ceremonies at the Burke Museum in Seattle (October 6) and the Nooksack Tribe Community Hall (October 9) near Everson, Washington — prompted by this significant repatriation. Burgundy ribbons with silver print handed out that night read “T’xwelátse me t’6kw’ telo qtiys” (“Stone T’xwelátse is finally coming home”). The longhouse resonated with the sounds of drumming, singing, and dancing, traditional elements of ceremonies carried out throughout the ages in the Central Fraser Valley / Stó:lo Territory, and Stone T’xwelátse — all four feet and 600 pounds of his granite form — was welcomed back after 114 years of absence from his community and homeland. While of granite form, Stone T’xwelátse maintains his position among the Stó:lo-Chilliwack-Nooksack communities as a living ancestor, transformed into stone form during the distant past.

In brief, … in the distant past, in the early years following the creation of the world, T’xwelátse was born at the village of Th’ewá:li along the lower Chilliwack River and became the ancestor of the Ts’elxwéyqw (“Ch-ihl-kway-uhk”) Tribe. Later on during the period of Sxwúxwíy̓im when the world was ‘not quite right,’ T’xwelátse was turned to stone by Xá:ls (the Transformer) for arguing with his wife — so becoming a living testament to the need to live together in a good way; and so falling into the care of his wife and subsequent women of his family. After generations of inheritance of the name “T’xwelátse” among his male descendants, and the passing on of caretaking responsibilities among the women...
in the T’xwelatse family, Stone T’xwelatse wound up at a village on the south-western shores of Sumas Lake where in 1892-114 years ago — he was taken by members of a non-Aboriginal “pioneer” settler family. He was moved into Sumas, Washington, sold for display in a “dime museum,” and eventually collected by the founding members of the Washington State Museum — now named the Burke Museum of Natural and Cultural History. Stone T’xwelatse lived among the Museum’s collections for over 100 years — cared for by the Museum staff — until October of this year. In 1992, T’xwelatse (Herb Joe) began efforts to repatriate his ancestor — after Stone T’xwelatse’s where-abouts were brought to his attention by way of anthropological research being done at the Stó:lō Tribal Council (see the associated sketch by Smith). Overcoming obstacles encountered in the newly established American Native American Graves Protection and Repatriation Act (NAGPRA) required considerable efforts involving the T’xwelatse Family and the Nooksack Tribe Council and Culture Committee (hosts of the NAGPRA process), with support from the Ch-ihl-kway-uhk Tribe, Stó:lol Tribal Council, Stó:lō Nation, and Stó:lō House of Elders. During the ceremony at Semá:th over 70 individuals were recognized for helped in one way or another to navigate this long, winding, and ultimately successful process. In October 2005, the official NAGPRA repatriation request and supporting documentation were finalized and submitted by the Nooksack Tribe on behalf of the T’xwelatse Family and broader Nooksack-Ts’elxwéyqw-Stó:lō community The Burke Museum’s “Notice of Intent to Repatriate” Stone T’xwelatse as a recognized “Object of Cultural Patrimony” under NAGPRA was published in the U.S. Government’s Federal Register on August 18. Stone T’xwelatse returned home, by way of the Nooksack Tribe, on October 14, 2006, and many people — community members and sīyage (friends) alike — came out in great numbers to witness and support this happy occasion. Where did Stone T’xwelatse go from the Semá:th Longhouse? He will be provided a new home at the Stéhiyiq̓ Healing Centre in the Chilliwack River Valley — very near where T’xwelatse was transformed by Xá:ls — currently being designed and built in collaboration between the Ch-ihl-kway-uhk Tribe and Stó:lō Community Futures (SCF). The Tribe/SCF is temporarily hosting Stone T’xwelatse in their recently remodeled Headquarters in Chilliwack/Vedder until he can be transferred to the Healing Centre.

As exemplified by the Haida Repatriation Committee at their Repatriation Conference of 2003, information and knowledge gained from the experience of repatriating T’xwelatse — particularly as it pertains to cross-border issues — can be shared and potentially prove useful to other First Nations and Aboriginal communities engaged in this process. It is our intent to pursue this outlet. Please look for an upcoming edition of the Midden for our follow-up article covering T’xwelatse’s return in greater detail. Thanks to all those involved and to all those who came out in support!

Dave Schaepe is the Senior Archaeologist and Manager of the Stó:lō Research and Resource Management Centre. He can be reached via email (dave.schaepe@stolonation.bc.ca).

Herb Joe carries the name T’xwelatse and is a member of the Tzeachten First Nation.