A LEGACY FOR THE FUTURE:
Margaret Siwallace, 1968-1985

Margaret Siwallace was a grand individual—a sensitive and intelligent woman who intimately knew and readily discussed the issues facing Indian people today. A member of the Nuxalk Nation of Bella Coola, British Columbia, she was an important force for decades in the preservation of the culture of and for her people, and through the Nuxalk, of all Indian people. She worked with her people and with many scholars from distant universities to document and preserve the cultural traditions. Margaret was recognized for her leadership and work in many ways, and she was very proud and pleased to receive an honorary Doctor of Letters degree in May, 1985, from the University of British Columbia.

The ceremonial citation was written by Dr. R. Bugwood who was guided by the numerous letters of support from noted academics, and it was read by President Smith at the convocation. In the citation, Margaret Siwallace was described as:

"...a translator of excellence from the age of ten, moving familiarly and easily between English, Chinook and her native Bella Coola language. An unsensational woman of great poise and scholarly integrity, communicating the message of one culture to those belonging to another.

Margaret Siwallace has, through her work, been a principal source for many a paper and thesis in fields as diverse as ethnohistory, anthropology, history, archaeology, linguistics, medicine, paleoethnobotany, pharmacology and mythology. In this mixing with and informing a wide variety of scholars and scientists, of both local and extramural repute, she became and has for long been a true scholar and scientist in her own right, with a breadth of knowledge and insight given only to a few. She has been a fighter for Indian rights, working for her own community as well as for poor relations with others. She has earned the respect, admiration and love of all who have encountered her, whatever their purpose or interests.

With a rare sympathy and understanding combined with imagination and wide experience, Margaret Siwallace has mediated and unswayed many a thorny problem, be it in the field of politics, law, custom, science or more general scholarship. She is a great historian of her people. The parents of five grandchildren of eighteenth and great grandchildren of more than thirty, through a long life which has known dire tragedy as well as the exuberance of material poverty, Margaret Siwallace has always been generous of herself, freely sharing with others the qualities and wealth of her mind and heart, her knowledge, her sympathy, her insight, reaching all who have come to her."

Margaret visited our home many times with her family and friends. Her last visit was to receive and celebrate her degree. During the week following her degree celebration Margaret was hospitalized for testing which revealed colon cancer. Surgery was recommended and scheduled for the end of July. She went home to Bella Coola for several weeks of celebration with her family and friends, then returned to Vancouver, for the surgery. Margaret died in the hospital on August 8th following complications of surgery.

Her close friend and co-editor, Felicity Walker, visited us in October with their common granddaughter, Louise Hilliard and great-granddaughter, Chasity. They were visiting with two other Nuxalk women, Sandy Mooly and Rose Hinds, to prepare and stage the Vancouver Arts, Sciences and Technology Centre exhibit and demonstration on Nuxalk foods. At dinner on their final evening with us the stereo system started out and made a loud, booming sound which startled all of us.

Felicity said, "It's Margaret, coming to be with us."

We were to be very quiet while Felicity gathered several morsels of food from the table into a ziptop and placed them bit-by-bit into the flames of the fireplace. While
doing this she was speaking and singing in the Nuxalk language. We were all happy to
know that Margaret was so mysteriously well up during the evening.
Sadly, Felicity, too, is now gone, having passed away on January 8, 1986. Margaret
and Felicity were famous friends,coexisting colleagues and supporters to one another.
The Nuxalk have lost two great educators, but because of their efforts with the Nuxalk’s
community of elders, the legacy of preserving the Nuxalk cultural traditions will prevail
with their people and their future generations.

Harriet Kehl

Editor’s note: Please refer to Sketches in the Sand, Journal of Ethnobiology 5(1) for an
acknowledgment by the Journal and the Society of Margaret Swallow’s honorary degree.