

A LEGACY FOR THE FUTURE: Margaret Siwallace, 1908-1985

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. K. Burrige 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 intercultural woman of great personal and scholarly integrity, communicating the modes of one culture to those belonging to another.

Margaret Siwallace has, through her life, been the principal source for many a paper and thesis in fields as diverse as ethnobotany, archaeology, history, anthropology, linguistics, nutrition, ethnomedicine, pharmacology and mythology. In this mixing with and informing a wide variety of scholars and scientists, of both local and international 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 good relations with others. She has earned the respect, admiration and love of all who have encountered her, whatever their purposes or interests.

With a rare sympathy and understanding combined with imagination and wide experience, Margaret Siwallace has mediated and unravelled many a knotty problem, be it in the field of politics, law, custom, science or more general scholarship. She is a great historian of her people. The parent of five, grandmother of eighteen and great grandmother of (more than) thirty, through a long life which has known dire tragedy as well as the extremes of material poverty, Margaret Siwallace has always been generous of herself, freely sharing with others the qualities and wealths of her mind and heart, her knowledge, her sympathy, her insight, enriching 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 celebrations 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-elder, Felicity Walkus, visited us in October with their common granddaughter, Louise Hilland and great-granddaughter, Chelsey. They were visiting with two other Nuxalk women, Sandy Moody and Rose Hands, 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 shorted out and made a loud, booming shout, 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 napkin 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 with us during the evening.

Sadly, Felicity, too, is now gone, having passed away on January 8, 1986. Margaret and Felicity were famous friends, contrasting colleagues and helpmates to one-another. The Nuxalk have lost two great educators, but because of their efforts with the Nuxalk community of elders, the legacy of preserving the Nuxalk cultural traditions will prevail with their people and their future generations.

Harriet Kuhnlein

Editor's note: Please refer to *Sketches in the Sand*, *Journal of Ethnobiology* 5:[1]i for an acknowledgment by the *Journal* and the Society of Margaret Siwallace's honorary degree.