

An Account of a Squamish Smallpox Epidemic

Excerpt of interview with Sadie Baker. In The Story Our Mountains Tell, Compiled by Dixie Newman, September 1977. Transcribed and published by Lesley Keith, 2005.

...What was their name? It was Tony Charlie's grandparents, wasn't it? They went down to Vancouver. Maybe it was for Easter – you know, for their Easter duties. When they were coming back there was this nice mattress floating out in the harbour, and they picked it up. And it's a brand new mattress, and they couldn't see why anyone would throw that overboard, you know.

Anyway, they picked it up and they put it on their canoe. They had a big canoe, you know. Those canoes – they built a big wide one for the families to get on. And they came up and when they got to the mouth of the river, they started to get sick. They got as far as the shops [Yekwaupsum], and some of them died. And they just kept going along the river, you know. And they'd stop at peoples' places – how they used to be, you know, really sociable.

Anyway, they were dying all the way up the river. Yes, they must have landed her. Anyway, they landed at Brackendale, and that's where Blind George Tom's parents lived. He caught it. The Lewis' mother – she was staying there. She caught it too. But she was lucky. She didn't get disfigured or anything – you know, didn't get blind. Sam [Baker]'s father was about ten years old, and he was staying at Charlie Douglas' place, and they beat it away up to the head of the river – up as far as they could go. They took flour and sugar and that; but they stayed there for three years. They ran out of sugar. They ran out of flour. And they lived off the land. They didn't want to come back because of this smallpox that was going around. In three years it had died out, and they came back down then.

...I can remember when I was a little kid, that my father was talking about that they should burn all those things after – not throw them out. From that, I think, that's why they started that.

There was a boy and a girl went up to the woods [who] wasn't there – supposed to be brother and sister, and they were the only ones who didn't get it. There were three longhouses down there, and they were all just dying off. And so these two ran away and went up in the woods and lived up there. After so many years, they came back. They lived together as man and wife, and they had children. When they came back, there was these bodies lying around – all around the longhouse. And I guess other people came too, you know.

They gathered all the bones and they just dug big holes, and they put them all in there. They were supposed to be over on the other end, where George Moody was living. This is where May [Harry] is living now – down below. [Stawamus.] They were digging for putting pipes in, and digging skeletons there – when George was down there, George Moody.