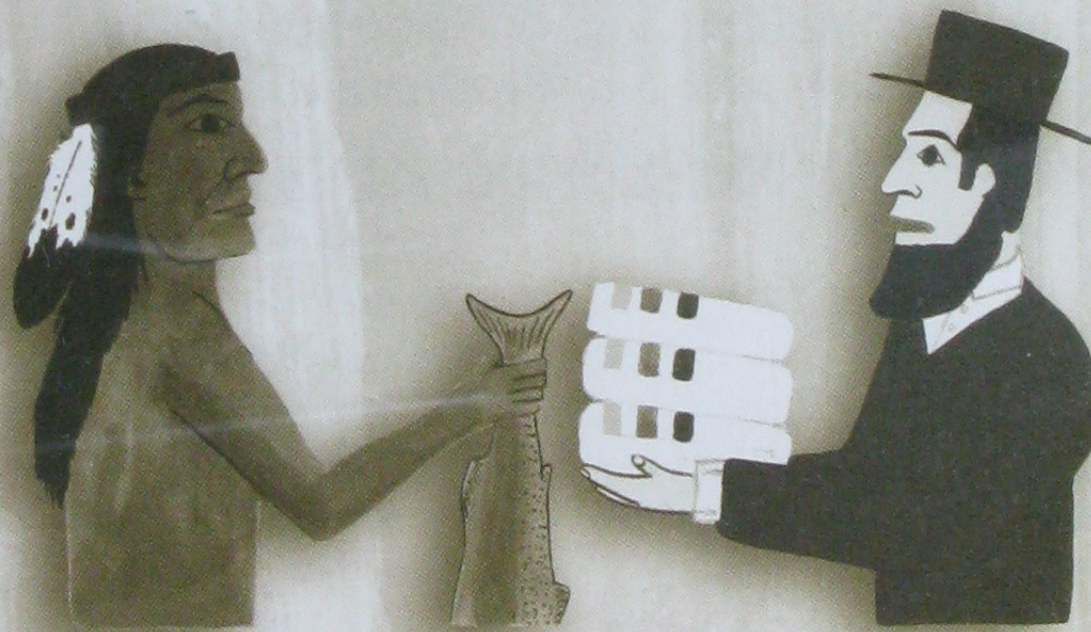


Stó:lō-Xwelítem
Relations
during the Fur
and Salmon
Trade Era



Keith Thor Carlson

I N T R O D U C T I O N

For *Xwelítem* people the fur trade is probably the aspect of Aboriginal history they feel most familiar with. Indeed, too often the fur trade is seen as synonymous with all Aboriginal history. This chapter revisits the history of the fur trade along the lower Fraser River and in doing so challenges many commonly held assumptions. Until recently historians viewed the fur trade as a relationship between technologically superior people (the Europeans) and “primitive” Aboriginal people. The latter allegedly being “duped” by the former. More thorough studies have now shown that the *Xwelítem* traders adapted more to Aboriginal ways of life than vice versa, and that Aboriginal people were not dependent upon the newcomers or the newly introduced goods and technologies. This chapter seeks to set the groundwork for those which follow. Aboriginal history is not simply fur trade history, and Aboriginal contributions to British Columbian culture, economy, and society did not end with the fur trade era. Moreover, for the *Stó:lō*, it was “salmon trading” and not “fur trading” which characterized their relationship with the *Xwelítem* during this period.



European ships visiting the Pacific Northwest Coast.



1 MARITIME FUR TRADE ■

When did the fur trade era begin and end in *Stó:lō* territory? Those who are aware of the relationship between the *Stó:lō* and the *Xwelítem* at Fort Langley will know this is a trick question. In western Canada, the “fur trade era” began when maritime fur traders from Boston, Massachusetts, and London, England arrived off the shores of what is now British Columbia in the 1780's. However, it was not until the establishment of Fort Langley in 1827 that a land based “direct” fur trade really got underway. An “indirect” fur trade had begun previous to the establishment of Fort Langley, as European goods were traded among Aboriginal people within established Aboriginal trade networks. What we refer to as the “the fur trade era” came to a close when the Fraser River gold rush began in 1858, ushering in a new era of *Xwelítem* settlement and land and resource use. But the term “fur trade” is somewhat misleading, because the *Stó:lō* traded

few furs during this period. Along the lower Fraser River, the fur trade era in many ways can be better understood as the “salmon trade era.”

After returning from the Northwest Coast the British explorer Captain James Cook published accounts of his voyage describing the thousands of golden haired sea otters he had seen along the shores of British Columbia and how people in China were willing to pay great prices for their pelts. American and English businessmen responded to this news by sending ships to the Northwest Coast loaded with European manufactured items to exchange or trade with Aboriginal people for sea otter pelts. The “Boston men” (as the Americans were known to the Aboriginal people) and the “King George men” (as the Englishmen were called), then took the pelts to China and exchanged them for silk, spices and other items unavailable in America or Europe. They then travelled back to London or Boston and exchanged the silk and spices for items which they hoped Northwest Coast Aboriginal people would be interested in trading for.

TABLE 1

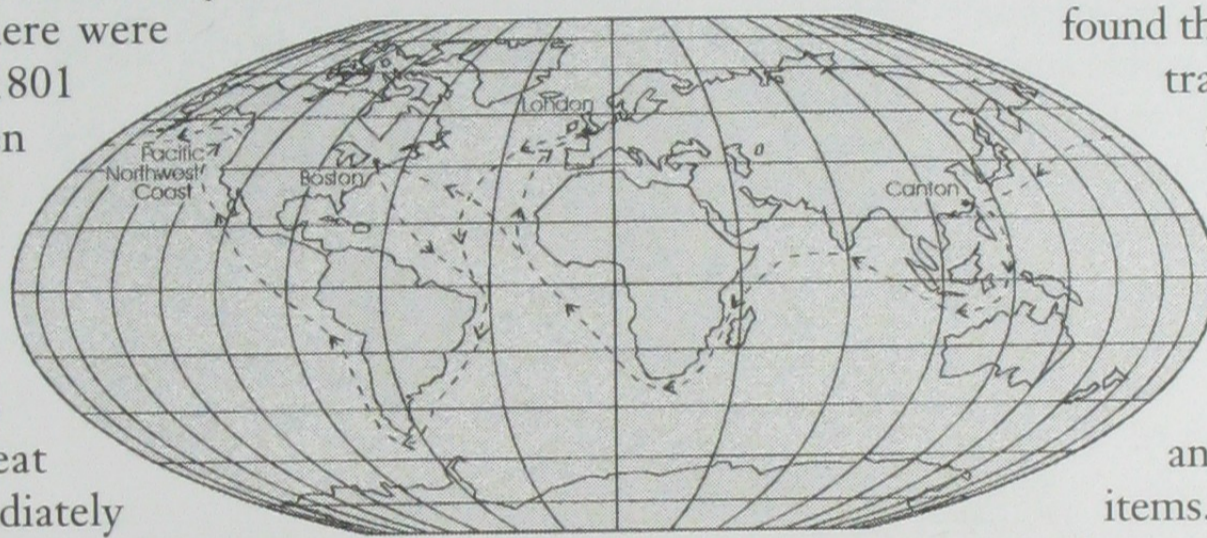
Fur Imports by American Vessels at Canton, 1804 - 34 and 1836 - 37

(Gibson)

Season	Beaver	Fox	Fur Seal	Land Otter	Sea Otter	Others	Total
1804-05	8,756	000	183,000	000	11,003	67,000	269,759
1809-10	20,000	3,500	000	15,000	11,003	000	49,503
1815-16	168	12,533	109,000	14,364	4,300	000	140,365
1820-21	2,870	8,967	13,887	5,927	3,575	9,254	44,480
1825-26	4,886	10,188	32,521	14,833	2,250	930	65,608
1830-31	000	5,263	6,022	6,454	329	000	18,068
1836-37	1,465	1,198	000	6,773	560	000	9,996

Following this exchange, the traders headed back to the B.C. coast to start the process over again. Thus, they formed a "triangle of trade" which covered the globe.

Between 1785 and 1830 an average of ten to fifteen ships visited the Northwest Coast annually. On high years, such as 1792, there were twenty-one ships, and in 1801 there were twenty five. When the maritime traders embarked for the Northwest Coast they initially anticipated being able to trade any kind of European item to Aboriginal people for great profits. However, they immediately found otherwise. The maritime trader's journals show that the Aboriginal people not only set the prices, they also determined which items were marketable. For example, if an American ship arrived with steel files and attempted to trade them at excessively high rates the Aboriginal people simply kept their furs and waited. They knew that other ships would soon arrive and that it was to their advantage to play off the various traders to obtain the best prices. Likewise, when it was found that steel files were popular among Aboriginal people one year it resulted in many ships arriving the following season with their holds full of steel files.¹ To the trader's chagrin, by that time the



The triangle of trade (R. Ross, 1995).

or facing the prospect of sailing back to their home ports loaded with unsold files. As one English maritime trader explained, "we had the sorrow to see valuable furs escape us... for want of suitable objects to exchange."²

Some American and British traders found the Aboriginal control of the trade more than inconvenient. Some voyages were financial failures. In the words of the American trader John Mears, Aboriginal people showed great "judgment and sagacity" when selecting items.³ Moreover, the Aboriginal people were very concerned with quality. If a ship arrived with cheap wool, brittle files, or muskets with poor quality firing mechanisms, they were not accepted.

When describing Aboriginal people's astute trading skills, American Captain Richard Cleveland remarked that,

The Indians are sufficiently cunning to derive all possible advantage from the competition, and will go from one vessel to another, and back again, with assertions of offers made to them, which have no foundation in truth, and showing themselves to be as well versed in the tricks of the trade as the greatest adept.⁴

British traders at Clayoquot Sound became frustrated in their efforts to trade bolts of cloth. Cloth was measured "by the fathom" (an arm span), and the Clayoquot people insisted that Chief Wickaninish's tall brother be the

TABLE 2

Prices in Spanish dollars of Prime Sea-Otter Skins at Canton for Various Years from 1779-1832

(Gibson)

Season	Price ²	Season	Price ²
1799 - 80	\$50 - 70.00	1810 - 11	21.50
1785 - 86	37 - 43.00	1815 - 13	35.00
1790 - 91	15 - 25.00	1819 - 20	35 - 50.00
1795 - 96	9 - 17.00	1824 - 25	30.00
1800 - 01	18 - 22.00	1829 - 30	64.00
1805 - 06	17 - 19.00		

TABLE 3

Value of American Exports to the Northwest Coast, 1789 - 1817

(Gibson)

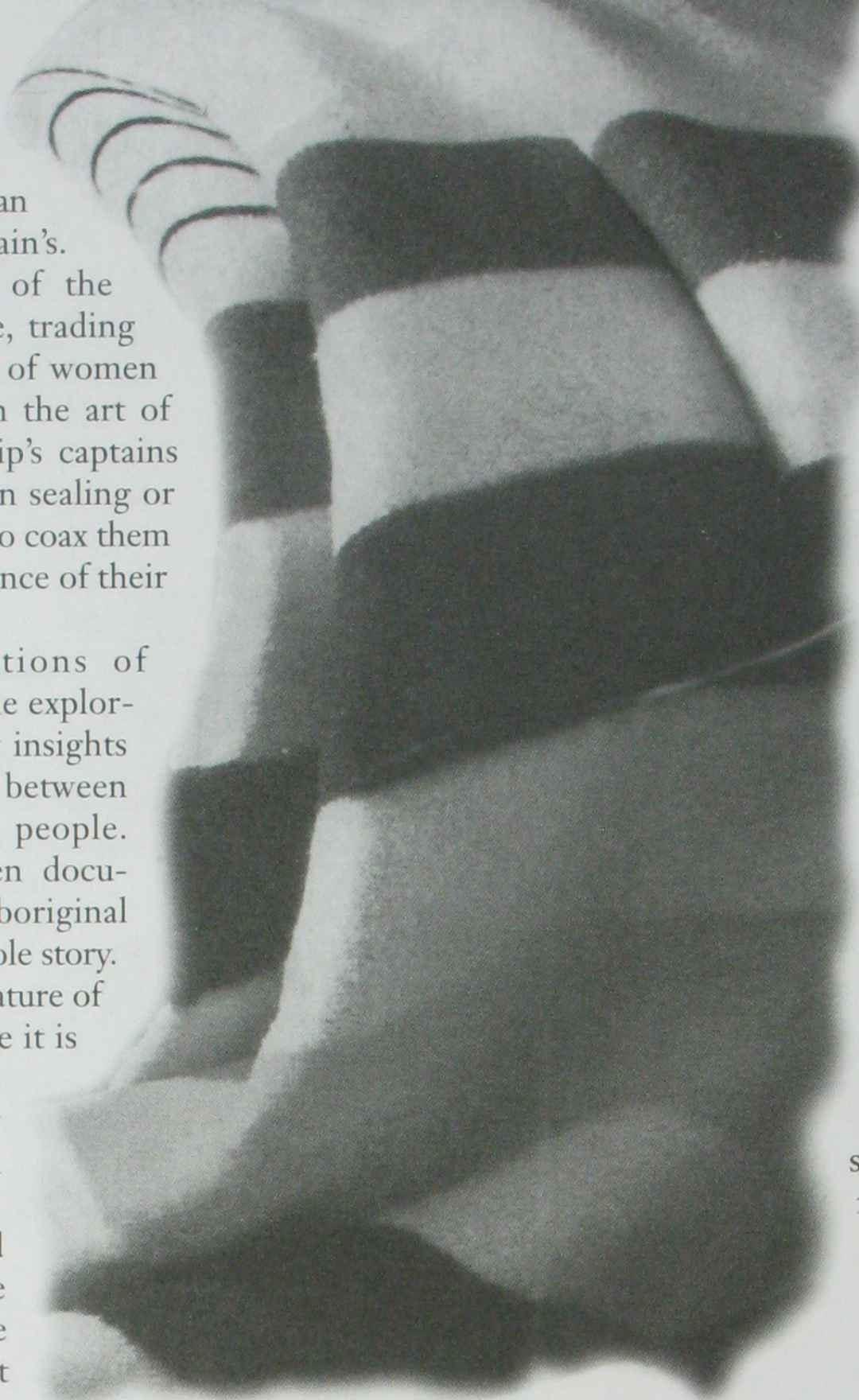
Year	Dollar Value	Year	Dollar Value
1789 - 90	\$ 10,362	1804 - 05	\$302,859
1794 - 95	44,063	1809 - 10	145,918
1799 - 1800	756,153	1814 - 15	170,985

one to measure the fathom. His arm span was well over six feet, at least a foot longer than the average British ship's captain's.

Likewise, among some of the more northern coastal people, trading was the exclusive prerogative of women who were specially trained in the art of barter. Knowing this, the ship's captains searched for canoes of men on sealing or whaling expeditions and tried to coax them into trading without the guidance of their shrewd female partners.

The written observations of American and British maritime explorers and traders provide many insights into the trading relationships between Europeans and Aboriginal people. However, while these written documents provide clues about Aboriginal culture they do not tell the whole story. To more fully appreciate the nature of Aboriginal trade and exchange it is necessary to consult the ethnographic records created by anthropologists working with Aboriginal Elders.

The ethnographic record shows that the *Stó:lō* were experienced traders long before the arrival of Europeans.⁵ It also shows that *Stó:lō* society shared certain characteristics with European cultures. The *Stó:lō* valued things because they were either useful or prestigious. These concepts had their equivalents in European society. For example, nineteenth century European society valued coal because it was useful – it made locomotives operate. Nineteenth centu-



The Hudson's Bay Company blanket became a standard measure of wealth. Its adoption by Aboriginal people undermined the indigenous weaving industry.

ry *Stó:lō* society valued canoes because they were similarly useful. Prestige items in European society included diamond jewellery which had no practical function other than to look good and show the wealth of the owner. In traditional *Stó:lō* society jewellery made from indigenous copper was valued for essentially the same reason.

The traditional *Stó:lō* economy differed from the European market economy in that it focused on resource redistribution (including food, tools, prestige objects, slaves, house boards, canoes, etc.). Leaders of extended families, called *sí:yá:m*, were expected to both share and accumulate family resources. Wealth was exchanged for wealth or, in the case of Fraser canyon fishing sites, wealth was also exchanged for the right to access family owned fishing spots.

Unlike in contemporary mainstream society the principles of *Stó:lō* economics were seldom isolated from family social obligations and rituals. The most well understood form of traditional exchange

occurred among related extended families and co-parent-in-laws (the parents of married children).⁶ For example, families living on the Harrison River caught and smoked large amounts of "spring" salmon, some of which they

brought to exchange with their children's in-laws at other villages where people did not smoke fish as often (such as the mouth of the Fraser River). After receiving the Harrison River smoked salmon the hosting

TABLE 4

Salmon Cured at Fort Langley, 1870 - 73

(Cullen)

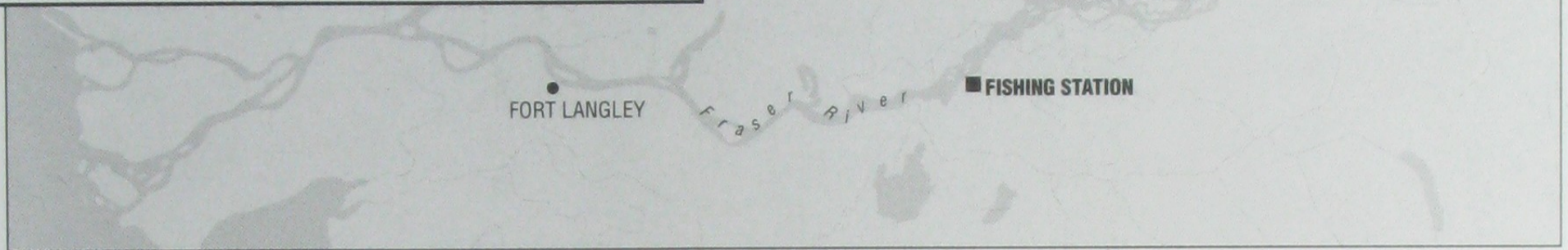
Year	Amount Cured	Year	Amount Cured	Year	Amount Cured
1830	200 barrels		salmon	1847	1835 barrels
1831	300 barrels	1837	450 barrels	1848	1703 barrels
1832	No Record	1838	597 barrels	1849	2610 barrels
1833	220 barrels	1839	400 barrels	1850	1600 barrels
	100 half barrels	1840	300 barrels	1851	950 barrels
1834	30 barrels		1500 pcs dried salmon	1852	1757 barrels
	55 half barrels	1841	540 barrels		150 half barrels
	669 pcs dried salmon	1842	No Record	1853	2000 barrels
1835	605 barrels	1843	No Record	1854	2000 barrels
	112 half barrels	1844	890 barrels	1855	No Record
1836	200 barrels	1845	800 barrels	1856	510 barrels
	350 pcs dried	1846	1600 barrels	1857	No Record

TABLE 5

Cranberry Returns of Fort Langley, 1852-58

(Cullen)

Year	Amount Processed	Year	Amount Processed
1852	No Record	1855	425 barrels - 24 gal
1853	No Record		200 barrels - 12 gal
1854	No Record		100 barrels - 8 gal
		1856	469 barrels - 24 gal
		1857	13 barrels - 12 gal
			180 barrels - 8 gal



Map of HBC posts established on the lower Fraser River.

TABLE 6

Fur Returns, Fort Langley, 1827-65

(Cullen)

Beaver	1827	1828	1829	1830	1831	1832	1833	1834	
Large	683	823	1277	417	1477	944	2062	873	
Small	228	303	421	228	517	449	725	585	
Coating - lbs	19	3	16	9	20	23	36	23-1/2	
Beaver	1835	1836	1837	1838	1839	1840	1841	1842	1843
Large	951	823	659	444	803	568	419	520	529
Small	413	352	324	183	222	245	173	242	302
Coating - lbs.	13	7-1/2	16	6	5-3/4	12	12-1/4	2-3/4	19-1/2
Beaver	1844	1845	1846	1847	1848	1849	1850	1851	
Large	428	202	267	195	150	67	36	42	
Small	161	84	96	118	100	45	24	11	
Coating - lbs	4	6-1/4	8	3-3/4	3-1/4	1-1/4	—	—	
Beaver	1852	1853	1854	1855	1856	1857	1864	1865	
Large	69	189	294	801	842	699	170	217	
Small	54	100	129	99	246	186	50	46	
Coating - lbs.	—	6-1/2	5-3/4	6	6-1/2	6-1/4	5-1/4	1/2	

An early photo of Fort Langley.



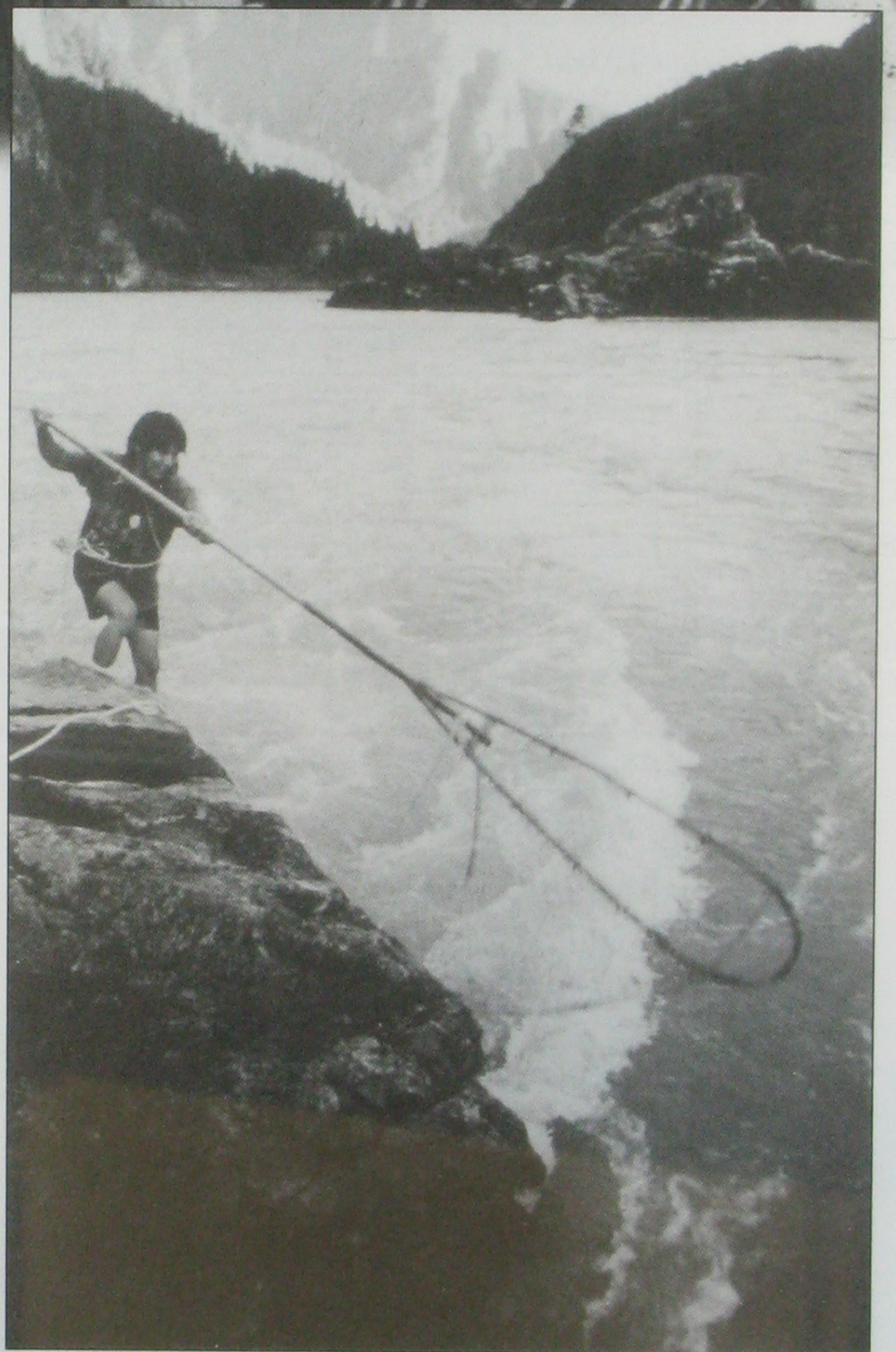


A Coast Salish potlatch feast where the hosts distributed items to their guests.

in-laws organized a feast, inviting their entire community. At this feast, the Harrison River people received gifts such as dried clams and woven bull-rush mats, (things which were readily available at the mouth of the Fraser River, but not on the Harrison River), in appreciation for the salmon.

It was expected that these “appreciation” gifts would be at least of equal value to the original salmon gift. If the family did not have appropriate gifts immediately available they were expected to present them during future gatherings. Those families who did not quickly fulfill their social obligations risked being ostracised and thereby losing their access rights to distant resources. In addition the *Stó:lō* were also familiar with the technique of trading for profit with strangers. Expert canoe makers and jewellers sold their creations to the highest bidder long before the arrival of the *Xwelítem* traders.

Both the journals of the maritime traders and the ethnographic record demonstrate that Aboriginal people were experienced traders. They also paint a picture of the relationship which existed between the two cultures. European items such as steel files and axe blades, calico cloth, muskets, and window panes were new, interesting and nice to have, but they were neither indispensable nor necessary. Such items were quickly adopted for their utilitarian function or their prestige value. If the Aboriginal



The *Stó:lō* have always had firm concepts of resource ownership. “Fishing spots” are controlled by extended families.

Stó:lō women married HBC
employees at Fort Langley.

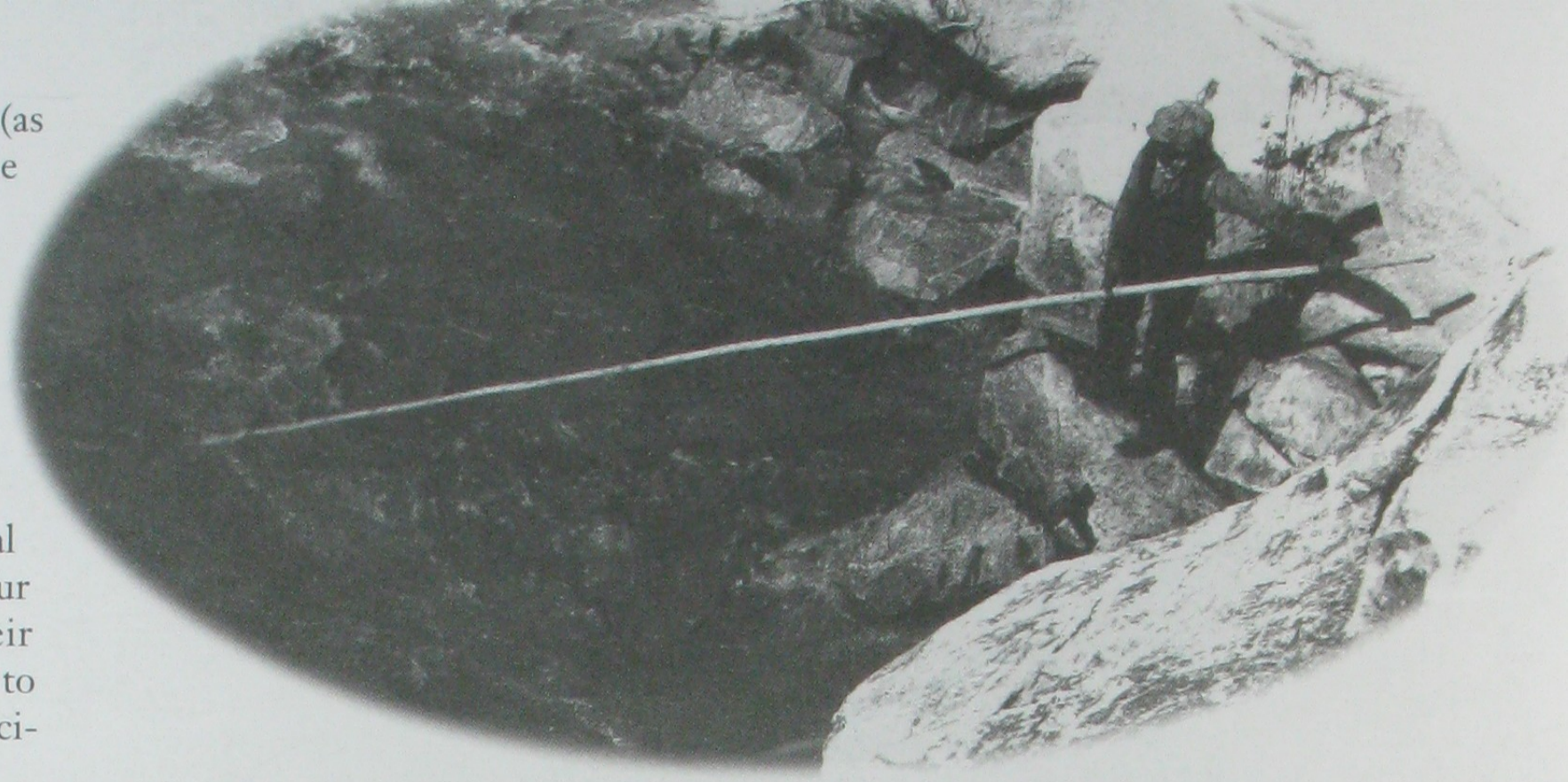
They brought many of their
customs with them into the fort.

Here, high status women
“shape” the head of a high
status infant.



people decided not to trade (as they sometimes did), the Europeans suffered financial losses. If the Europeans had decided not to trade, (which they never did), Aboriginal life could have been relatively unaffected.

However, the fur trade had other affects on Aboriginal communities. Unwittingly, fur traders often exposed their Aboriginal trading partners to European diseases which deci-



Salmon were so plentiful it was said you could almost walk across the river on their backs.

2 LAND-BASED FUR TRADE ■

Lasting only until the 1830's, the maritime fur trade involving the *Stó:lō*, the "King George men" and "Boston men" was relatively short lived. Each spring the *Xwelítem* ships arrived off the mouth of the Fraser River to trade throughout the summer and then they left. Aside from their desire to exchange manufactured products for animal pelts the maritime traders were not interested in establishing long-term relationships with the Aboriginal people. And while Aboriginal people were not exploited victims in this relationship, the maritime traders did impact Aboriginal people. The establishment of permanent land-based fur trading posts changed aspects of this relationship, but not its fundamental nature.

Fort Langley, 1858 *Harpers Weekly*



Women were primarily responsible for food gathering.

mated their populations. Increased emphasis on capitalist style commercial exchange also had the effect of undermining certain traditional Aboriginal social structures. Some astute Aboriginal traders from what were previously lower class families were able to increase their status through trade. Conversely, some high ranking families's status diminished depending on their adaptation to the new economic conditions.⁷





Stó:lō men standing beneath their elevated fish caches. These containers were used to store wind dried salmon throughout the winter months.

In the 1820's the Hudson's Bay Company (HBC), a giant fur trading corporation based in London, England, decided to expand its operations and open a permanent trading post on the lower Fraser River. The HBC had slowly been extending its network of forts westward from Hudson Bay in central Canada for over one hundred years. They now wanted to secure British claims to the territory on the Northwest coast and at the same time drive away American maritime traders who were regarded as cutting into potential HBC profits.

In July 1827 the Hudson's Bay Company established Fort Langley. This was the first time *Xwelítem* had settled permanently in *Stó:lō* territory. Judging from records left by the HBC officers who built Fort Langley, the initial *Stó:lō* response appears to have been cautious acceptance. Apparently, the *Stó:lō* decided not to destroy the fort because it posed no immediate threat. Over time they appear to have come to value Fort Langley much the same way they valued and protected family owned resources like Fraser canyon fishing sites.

Even though the *Stó:lō* showed no explicit outward hostility towards the fort and its inhabitants, the dozen or so men behind the fort's walls were extremely vulnerable. They recognized that the *Stó:lō* had the power to destroy the fort at any time. (This became very apparent when an accidental fire destroyed the entire fort in one

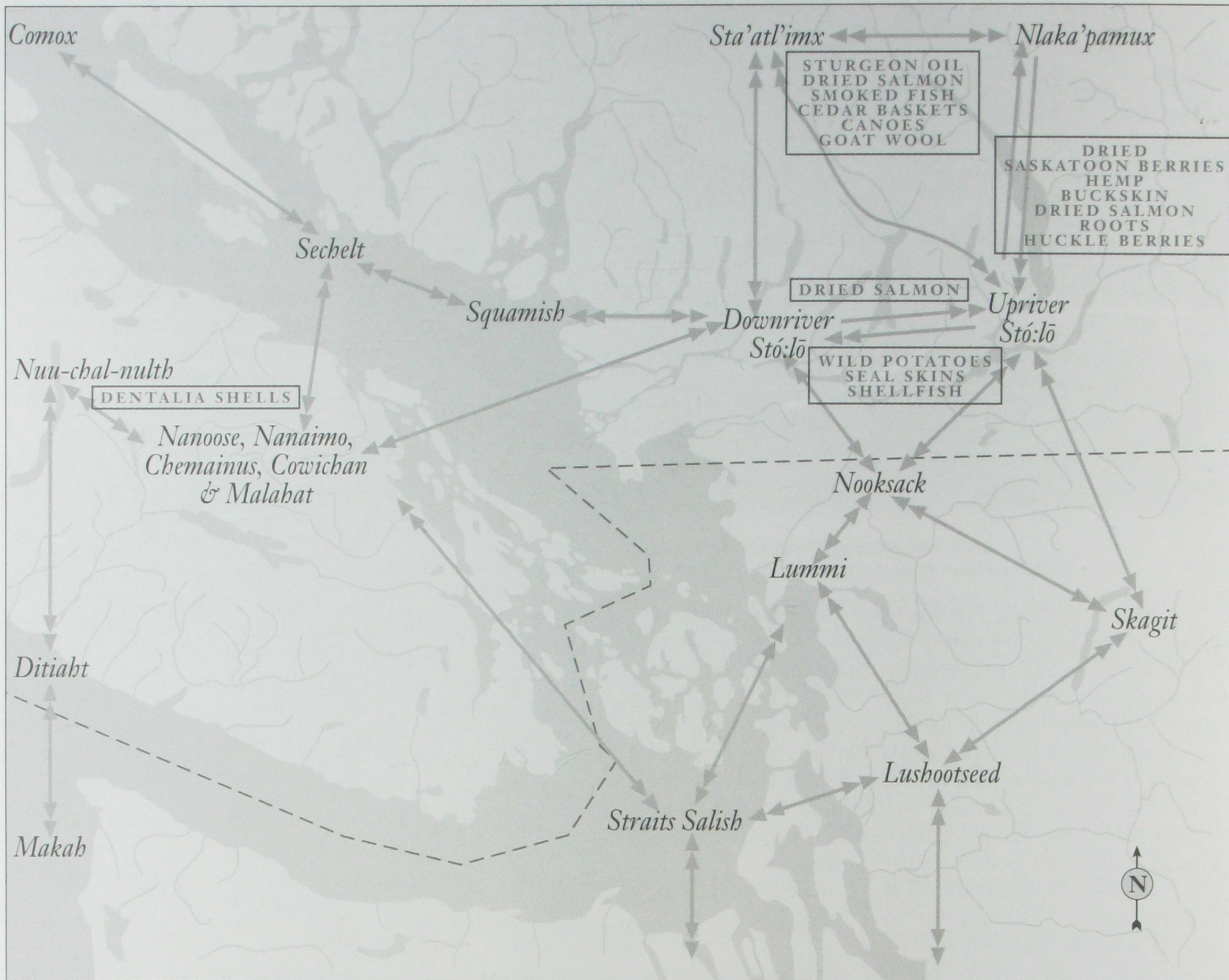
night). As a means of protection, the HBC employees quickly constructed a palisade and mounted small cannons in the fort's bastions. However, the men within the fort also developed a more favourable means of ensuring *Stó:lō* acceptance of their presence. Their solution was to establish lasting and meaningful relations with the *Stó:lō* community by marrying into *Stó:lō* families. As a result, the *Xwelítem* fur traders became family members, not enemies.

Governor Simpson of the HBC advocated cementing social ties with the leaders of the Aboriginal communities as "the best security we can have of the goodwill of the Natives." Responding to this, the fort's Chief Trader, Archibald McDonald, noted in the post's journal that the matter of marrying his men into the high ranking *Stó:lō* families was "a subject on which much stress is laid." Within the first year nearly all the fort's men married into *Stó:lō* families.

For the Hudson's Bay Company these marriages helped encourage the *Stó:lō* to trade their furs at Fort Langley, rather than with the "Boston men" who were

The *Stó:lō* moved to temporary summer camping sites to be closer to the resources they were gathering. Note the preparation of food and shelter resources.





Schematic illustrating a few of the trade relationships between the *Stó:lō* and their neighbours.

still visiting the mouth of the Fraser in their ships each summer. These alliances also provided the HBC with interpreters.

For the *Stó:lō*, these marriages meant something different. They did not view ownership in the same way as did the *Xwelítəm*. Most *Stó:lō* resources were communally held, and access to them was controlled by *sí:yám* (leaders of extended families). For example, the *Stó:lō* believed that everyone (except slaves) had a right to access salmon. However, they also believed particularly good fishing sites were owned by individual families. The more prosperous a family's fishing site, the faster and more easily they could catch fish. To access new sites, upper class families arranged marriages among their children.



Leg hold traps were introduced as trade items by the HBC.

The *Stó:lō* likely saw Fort Langley as a resource similar to a family-owned fishing rock. HBC employees at the fort were likely viewed as representatives of the families who controlled the fort's resources. The fort was full of useful and prestigious European items such as wool blankets, rope, and steel axe blades and fish hooks. To obtain preferred access to these things, the *Stó:lō* forged marriage alliances with the men at the fort. People from the nearby Kwantlen community were so eager to control access to the fort's resources that they actually relocated themselves so their new village was situated adjacent to the fort.

One Kwantlen woman who married an officer of the fort was the daughter of the influential leader *Ni-ca-meus*. After the marriage, *Ni-ca-meus* felt so strongly about his family's ownership of the

fort, that when Aboriginal people from Vancouver Island or other places wanted to trade with Fort Langley, *Ni-ca-meus* demanded they go through him, and not deal directly with the *Xwelítem*. When Aboriginal people arrived who did not have family ties with the fort, *Ni-ca-meus* insisted that they give their furs to him so he could trade on their behalf. Much to the chagrin of the Chief Trader at Fort Langley, once *Ni-ca-meus* finished trading he always kept a small share of the profit for himself – in recognition of his family's special relationship with the HBC and the fort.⁸

Chief Trader Archibald McDonald became concerned with the way local *Stó:lō* like *Ni-ca-meus* were controlling the fur trade. In 1829 he wrote in the fort's journal that the local "leaders of the villages now attempt to secure all trade with the fort for themselves." When McDonald attempted to stop an Aboriginal leader known as "Joe" from forcing all other Aboriginal people from his community to trade through him, Joe became upset and told McDonald not to interfere. He explained that the fort would not lose anything by him acting as a middleman, saying "if I have a great advantage from the trade I will naturally see that the furs are not... [traded to the American maritime traders] by them that give them to me now." Joe's comments reminded McDonald that unless he accepted *Stó:lō* customs he might lose valuable trade profits.

With the land-based fur trade, as with the maritime trade, Aboriginal people were in control. Not only did they continue to drive hard bargains and set high standards for the type and quality of European goods they would accept, they also transformed Fort Langley from a fur trading post into a salmon trading post.

3 SALMON NOT FURS ■

The most important aspect of the *Stó:lō* economy was the harvesting, processing, and trading of salmon. They also hunted, gathered berries and roots, and collected shell fish. When the HBC established Fort Langley, they expected the *Stó:lō* to begin trapping large numbers of beavers for the Fort. Yet, while the Fort's European trade goods were interesting, these items were not crucial to the *Stó:lō* economy, and therefore limited time was spent trapping beaver. The sea, river, and forests were so plentiful that the *Stó:lō* needed little from the fort, and therefore saw no reason to alter their lifestyle to accommodate the HBC.

This frustrated the officers at Fort Langley. In an attempt to encourage the *Stó:lō* to catch more beaver, the company offered a variety of new and different trade items. For example, they gave one *Stó:lō* man a valuable steel "leg hold" trap. Unfortunately for the HBC officers the majority of the *Stó:lō* were indifferent to these sorts of new trade goods and incentives. Some even laughed at Chief Trader McDonald when he asked them to spend more time trapping beaver.¹⁰ All of this frustrated the Hudson's Bay

Company. Directors back in London threatened to close Fort Langley. The fort's survival was only secured after McDonald proposed that rather than try to force the *Stó:lō* to change their ways, it would be easier for the Europeans to change the way they traded. McDonald had seen the phenomenal catches of salmon the *Stó:lō* brought back from the Fraser Canyon during the summer spawning runs. He suggested to his superiors that Fort Langley re-focus its activities on exporting salmon rather than furs. The company liked his idea, and apparently, so did many of the *Stó:lō*. In the month of August in 1829, the *Stó:lō* supplied Fort Langley with 7000 salmon.

Over the next few decades, the trade relationship between the *Stó:lō* and the men at Fort Langley grew. Along with the millions of salmon that were being traded to the fort for exportation to the HBC supply post in Hawaii, some *Stó:lō* also began trading hazelnuts and cranberries to the fort for export. In this way, the *Stó:lō* integrated Fort Langley into their traditional economy. They had a long tradition of trading salmon and other items with Aboriginal people from neighbouring communities. The men at Fort Langley simply became another trading partner.

Ultimately, the Hudson's Bay Company became a major broker of *Stó:lō* salmon and other food items. This consumption reflected the earlier relationship that was established between the *Stó:lō* and explorers like Simon Fraser. When Fraser became the first *Xwelítem* to visit *Stó:lō* territory in 1808 he was forced to leave most of his supplies upriver of Hell's Gate in the Fraser Canyon. As such, he relied upon the generosity of his *Stó:lō* hosts for food. Later, during the 1858 gold rush, thousands of hungry miners were dependent upon the *Stó:lō* to fulfill their nutritional needs. This historic dependency may explain the origins of the *Halq'eméylem* expression "*Xwelítem*" which *Stó:lō* people use to this day when referring to people of European ancestry. *Xwelítem* translates as "hungry people" or "starving people."

4 CONCLUSION ■

The arrival of *Xwelítem* explorers and traders on the Northwest Coast modified local Aboriginal societies, but cultural adaptations worked both ways. In the Fraser Valley region the establishment of Fort Langley certainly did not result in the *Stó:lō* radically altering their lifestyles to suit the Hudson Bay Company. On the contrary, the officers and men at the fort were quick to adopt *Stó:lō* cultural traditions, including those associated with inter-family marriage ties. These indigenous customs so heavily imprinted themselves on the HBC, that the *Xwelítem* were forced to accept *Stó:lō* in-laws as middlemen in their trade with the broader Aboriginal communities. Indeed, the fort's primary economic activities soon shifted from fur trading to salmon trading in order to accommodate the traditional *Stó:lō* salmon economy.



Recommended Further Readings:

Cullen, Mary K., *The History of Fort Langley, 1827-96*, Ottawa: Canadian Historic Sites, Occasional Papers in Archaeology and History, No. 20, 1979.

Gibson, James, *Boston Ships, Otter Skins & China Goods*.

Newell, Diane, *Tangled Webs of History*, (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1994).

Footnotes

- 1 Aboriginal people transformed steel files into knives that could be sharpened more easily and retain their sharp edge longer than Indigenous stone knives and adzes.
- 2 Robin Fisher, *Contact and Conflict* (Vancouver: UBC Press, 1977), p.8.
- 3 Ibid, 7.
- 4 Ibid, 9.
- 5 See Keith T. Carlson, "Stó:lō Trade Dynamics," forthcoming in the *Native Studies Review*.
- 6 Wayne Suttles, "Affinal Ties, Subsistence, and Prestige among the Coast Salish", in *Coast Salish Essays* (Vancouver: Talonbooks, 1987).
- 7 For more information on the economic and cultural changes that ensued from the fur trade see Steven R. Acheson, "In the Wake of the Iron People: A Case for Changing Settlement Strategies Among the Kunghit Haida," *Journal of the Royal Anthropological Institute* (N.S.), Vol.1, No.2 (June 1995), pp.273-299, or Richard Inglis and James C. Haggarty, "Cook to Jewitt: Three Decades of Change in Nootka Sound," in Bruce G. Trigger, Toby Morantz and Louise Dechéne, editors, *Le Castor Fait Tout: Selected Papers of the Fifth North American Fur Trade Conference*, 1985, (Montreal: Lake St. Louis Historical Society, 1987), pp.193-222.
- 8 Fort Langley Journal.
- 9 Fort Langley Journal.
- 10 Mary K. Cullen, *The History of Fort Langley, 1827-96*, (Ottawa: Canadian Historic Sites, Occasional Papers in Archaeology and History No. 20, 1979).