



I am Stó:lō!

Katherine explores her heritage



*By Keith Thor Carlson
with Albert 'Sonny' McHalsie*

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S T Ó : L Ō H E R I T A G E T R U S T

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By Keith Thor Carlson, with Sonny McHalsie

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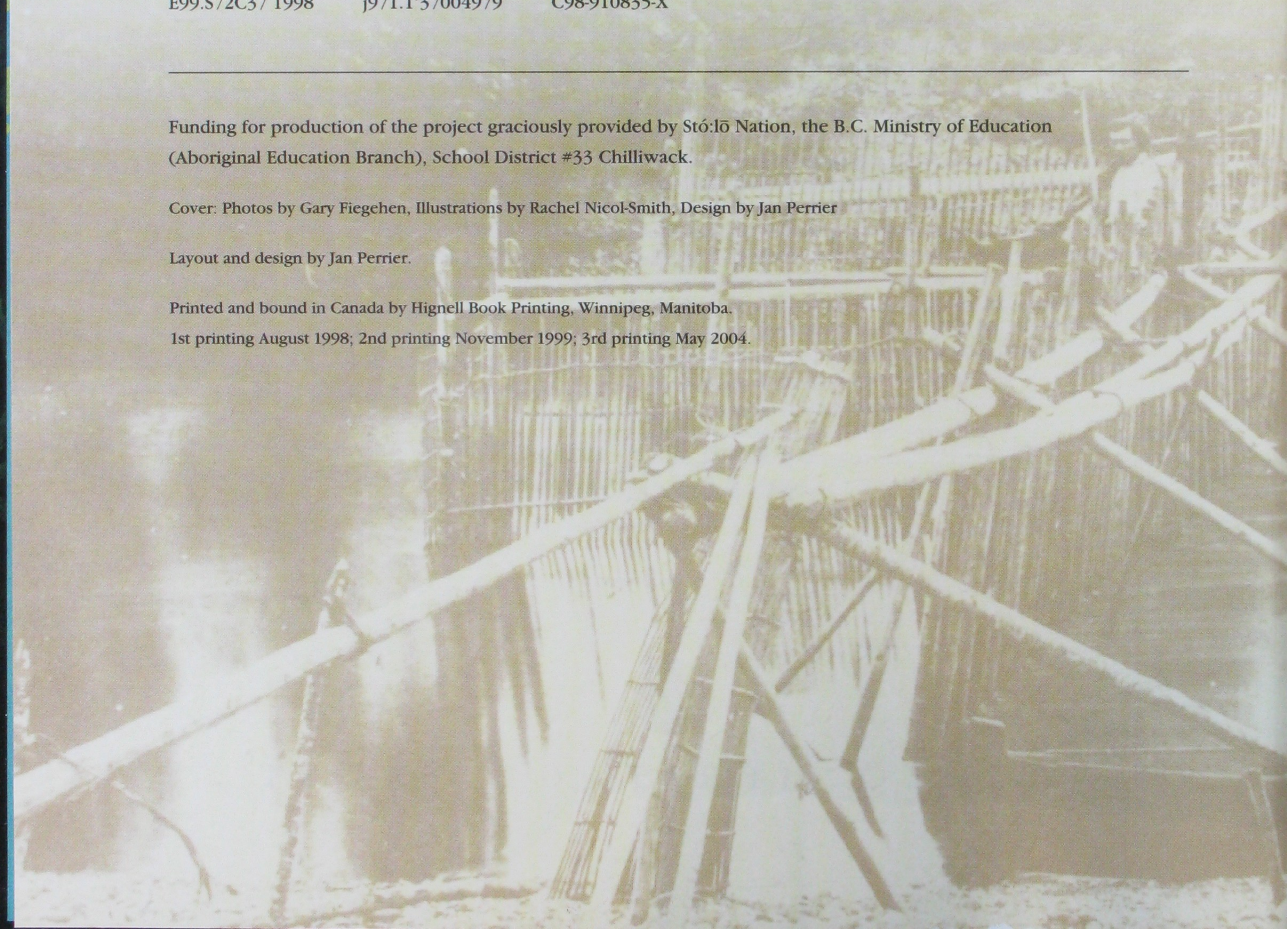




Table of Contents



PREFACE	PAGE	I
INTRODUCTION		
Canada's First Nations	PAGE	1
The Stó:lō "People of the River"	PAGE	7
CHAPTER 1		
The Assignment	PAGE	13
CHAPTER 2		
Stó:lō Stories	PAGE	19
CHAPTER 3		
Learning by Living	PAGE	49
CHAPTER 4		
Stó:lō Names	PAGE	65
CHAPTER 5		
The Picnic	PAGE	73
CHAPTER 6		
The Report	PAGE	95
Glossary	PAGE	97
Index	PAGE	101
Key to Stó:lō Writing	PAGE	104



for Katherine



Preface



This book is above all else a cooperative project. Sharing has always been an important aspect of Stó:lō society. Food and wealth, for example, continue to be shared between communities at large ceremonial potlatch gatherings each time a family decides to mark an important occasion like a naming ceremony. Of all the Stó:lō expressions of sharing, the one that holds the greatest meaning remains that which occurs between generations: Traditions, beliefs, special skills - knowledge and wisdom of every kind - were, and are, shared in formal and informal ways between Elder and youth. As one Stó:lō Elder recently explained to me, "Elders have an obligation to share what they know with the next generation, just like people with special 'gifts' have to share what they have." Unwillingness to share is regarded by the Stó:lō as an indication of a person's poor training and upbringing. Generosity is considered a distinguishing trait of high status people from good families.

Throughout the past two centuries the Stó:lō have shared with the non-aboriginal explorers and immigrants who have come to their land. Simon Fraser in 1808, the gold miners of 1858, and a series of successive generations of Xwélitem, or hungry people, have all partaken of Stó:lō hospitality and generosity. The information gathered for this book was provided by Stó:lō Elders and community members in this spirit of generosity and with the conviction that through sharing comes understanding; the foundation upon which relationships of respect and trust are built.

The Chiefs and Elders of the Stó:lō Nation have identified educational initiatives designed to promote increased awareness of Stó:lō cultural traditions as an essential aspect of rebuilding healthy communities. They also see it as a crucial step in establishing the groundwork for negotiating and implementing a mutually

satisfying treaty with the Canadian government and broader British Columbia society. While this can best be accomplished internally through direct dialogue among and between Stó:lō community members, and externally through dialogue between the Stó:lō and their non-Native neighbors, it is hoped that this book will contribute to these worthy goals, if only by encouraging people to talk about what they have read.

Though conceived to complement the objectives set by the leaders of the Stó:lō Nation, this book was designed to meet the needs of students and teachers. After a quick review of the literature and resource material available to grade four classes as they study their prescribed unit on First Nations People, it became apparent that most of the available information was somewhat outdated and tended to portray an overly homogenous view of Aboriginal culture. While the benefits of these earlier works are many, they also serve, inadvertently, to undermine the unique and defining features of individual Aboriginal societies. I also noted that most elementary school reference materials did not effectively communicate the link between contemporary Aboriginal society and traditional culture, or the continuing significance of spirituality in Aboriginal peoples' lives. In trying to decide how to best avoid these problems in a new curriculum I was also confronted with one other consideration. Public school teachers had stressed to me that narratives about children were the most effective means of engaging a juvenile audience and conveying information. Moreover, to be accepted as a school textbook required that accurate information be conveyed in an engaging manner through a story that children could relate to on a personal level. To address these issues I consulted with Gwendolyn Point, Stó:lō Nation Education Manager, and Albert "Sonny" McHalsie, Stó:lō Nation Cultural

Advisor. Together, we agreed that a first person narrative depicting a contemporary Stó:lō girl would be the most appropriate means of approaching this project.

Once the project had been defined I was immediately confronted with the first of two major ethical dilemmas. The first issue was that of 'voice'. As a non-Native man, could I write a book that presented a first person narrative about a young Aboriginal girl? Many Stó:lō and non-Native people offered advice and suggestions on this matter. They reminded me, that I had, after all, been hired by the Stó:lō Nation to research and write about aspects of Stó:lō history and culture. They suggested that I simply be as inclusive as possible in the way I approached the writing so that Stó:lō people ultimately could feel a sense of legitimate ownership over the text. I embraced this recommendation and sought to ensure that the process was both collaborative and interactive.

Another important aspect of Stó:lō oral tradition is oral footnoting. Unfortunately, because of the intended audience for this book, it was decided that including too many names in the text would be confusing.

The second closely related dilemma centered on the problem of distinguishing between fact and fiction. This problem did not become apparent until after the actual writing of the story had begun. Once the project had been defined, Sonny graciously agreed to consult with his family, and in particular, his nine year old daughter Katherine, to see if they would agree to becoming the vehicle through which the story would be told. They consented and work then began in earnest. It quickly became apparent that Katherine and her family were well suited to conveying accurate and culturally appropriate information about the Stó:lō. However, it was felt that a fictitious plotline needed to be developed to carry the story forward so that all the cultural information the Stó:lō Chiefs and Elders had identified as important to share could be worked into the story. This posed a serious obstacle because in the Stó:lō world view there is no cultural equivalent for the European literary genre

of "fiction." The concept of "historical fiction" appears to be equally foreign.

As opposed to fiction, for the Stó:lō there are two types of stories, each equally real and equally true. The first are *sxwōxwiyám* – legendary stories which describe the distant past before the transformer *Xá:ls* arrived to make the world right. *Sxwōxwiyám* are sacred tales, which are understood to have been passed from generation to generation in unaltered form. In this regard they are somewhat analogous to Biblical stories in the Judaic or Christian tradition; they are considered to be true. The second form of Stó:lō history is called *Sqwélqwel*. A *sqwélqwel* is a story about the more recent past from the era after *Xá:ls* transformed the world into its permanent state. It describes people's personal histories and experiences, and though open to enhancement through occasional exaggeration, *sqwélqwel* are "not made up." Moreover, and most important for the purposes of this book, both *Sxwōxwiyám* and *Sqwélqwel* are owned by people. It is through these stories that people assert their hereditary property rights over important fishing spots; that people explain how their family's or community's ancestors were created; who their ancestors are and what they did. Thus, it was impossible to simply use Katherine and her family as photographic models; to assign to them fictitious identities, and then try to include real and true Stó:lō stories around their "characters" to convey authentic Stó:lō content. Katherine's family did not feel comfortable with the idea of their family property being discussed in the context of "make believe characters." For example, if Katherine's photographic image was assigned to a fictitious character named "Karen" then it would be completely inappropriate, from a Stó:lō perspective, to have Karen's character talk about real and true stories that belonged to real Stó:lō people. As a solution, it was suggested that Katherine's true identity be retained, and that the stories and cultural information she and her family relates within the book be their own authentic

cultural property, and true stories. The plot line that creates the opportunities for these stories to be shared, however, would be fictional. To this Katherine and her family agreed, provided the plot line be developed in such a way as to accurately reflect real life situations from their lives.

With this as context, it is important for readers to understand that the Stó:lō people depicted within this book are real. The conversations they have and the actions they take are based upon real conversations and actions by those same people. The teachings they share, and the messages they present belong to their family and are also real. The importance of tradition, and in particular the significance of Halqeméylem names are common topics of conversation around Katherine's family's household. Katherine's father, Sonny, actually was carving a sturgeon paddle when I began writing this text, and he did discuss with Katherine and his other children the significance of the sturgeon (which is the actual ancestor spirit of their community at Shxw'óhámél). Minnie Peters did take Katherine out to teach her how to harvest cedar roots and weave, and Sonny does fish at Aselaw in the Fraser Canyon. The Súx'yel story about the grizzly bear is also true as are the two legends about the sturgeon and Th'ōwxeya the cannibal woman. What is made up is the plot line and some of the supporting non-Native characters. Katherine, for example was never assigned a school project on the Stó:lō, and there is no "Martin" (though "Martins" inevitably exist in every classroom). Likewise, the real Katherine does not have a friend named Susan and there is no Ms. Anderson. It is important that these divisions between fact and fiction be acknowledged, in order for the process by which this book was conceived and written be appreciated.

As a close friend of the McHalsies I was privileged to be able to base the content and character development of this book on my personal observations, social interactions, and extensive consultations with Katherine, her older sister and six brothers, her par-

ents and members of her extended family. Katherine provided me with frank discussions about school life and shared with me her growing awareness and pride in her cultural identity. As Katherine's father, Sonny was intimately involved in constructing the book's key messages and suggesting subject matter. In many ways, this book is really about Sonny. It reflects his personal views and opinions about Stó:lō cultural identity and is designed to complement the broader work he does in his official capacity at Stó:lō Nation. Throughout the writing process Sonny reviewed each chapter, suggested changes, corrected factual information, arranged for meetings with family members and Stó:lō cultural experts and Elders, and in other ways ensured that his family and Stó:lō society were portrayed in a respectful accurate manner, and in a way that youth could appreciate.

Readers will observe that we have not attempted to skirt the issue of Stó:lō spirituality. In the past there seems to have been a concern that talking about Aboriginal spirituality in a school book might somehow violate the School Act. We want to be clear that, in discussing those aspects of Stó:lō spirituality which the McHalsie family felt comfortable sharing, we are not promoting religious indoctrination or conversion. The Stó:lō do not expect other people to believe what they believe, much less practise their spirituality. Rather, they wish to emphasize that every cultural group, and every individual, is entitled to their own belief and epistemology. All that the Stó:lō ask is that people respect their right to live as their traditions dictate. It is only through sharing information about their spirituality that others can come to appreciate their cultural distinctiveness. Through understanding comes respect.

A project of this nature is by definition a joint one. In addition to Sonny and other members of the McHalsie family, this book has also been carefully reviewed and subsequently shaped and amended by other Stó:lō people. Hychblo (Tracey Joe), in particu-

lar, provided direction and contributed to its authentic content by sharing her own personal experiences and memories as a Stó:lō girl attending public school in the recent past. Her insights and experiences contributed to the book's central story line, and contributed structure around which the plot was developed. Gwendolyn Point, as Education Manager, brought her extensive experience working with Stó:lō children and students to this project. Her dedicated efforts at promoting cross-cultural awareness and respect served as both inspiration and a model. Her willingness to share the legend of Th'ōw̄x̄eya, as related to her by her grandmother Dolly Felix, is indicative of her personal generosity and commitment to today's youth. Gwen's thoughtful comments on earlier drafts have contributed significantly to the final product.

For the Súx'yel story, we are grateful to the late Peter Dennis Peters, the late Patrick Charlie, Bill Pat Charlie, Elsie Charlie and Ralph George.

Kirsten Coupe, who was originally contracted to design lesson plans and instructional strategies to complement this work also played a large role in the book's initial writing and editing. She was instrumental in the brainstorming sessions where transitional scenarios were developed to help move the themes of the book forward.

Others who reviewed earlier drafts and made substantial and welcomed suggestions for revisions include David Smith (who also compiled the index), Aubyne Freybe-Smith, Koni Benson, Judy Dallin, Stormy Carlson and Sharon Kinakin.

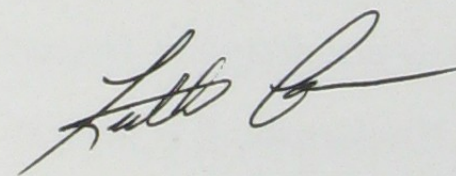
Rachel Nicol-Smith created the wonderful illustrations and artwork which, together with the beautiful and evocative photos by Gary Fiegehen, convey as much or more meaning than the actual text. As an artist, Rachel showed great patience with Sonny's and my frequent requests for revisions as we sought to ensure historical and cultural accuracy. To the degree that our interests did not stifle artistic inspiration is testament to her talent. Deidre Eustace also provided assistance with photographs.

Jan Perrier also deserves special recognition for another important artistic element of this work – the layout. The visually appealing design cannot be explained, I think, simply by her inherent talent and acquired skill. It is also an expression of her dedication to Aboriginal issues and children's education.

We're grateful to Shxwt'a:selhautxw and the artists Herb Joe and George Pennier for the use of their designs in this book.

Others who have contributed to this project in various ways, and to whom I am grateful, include: Grand Chief Clarence Pennier, Joe Hall, Xwiyolemót (Matilda "Tilly" Gutierrez), Dixon Taylor, Brian Domney, Jim Latham, Barry Harman, Stan Watchhorn, Heike Sasaki, Adrienne Regier, Teresa Williams, Tseloyothelwet (Shirley Norris), Siyémches (Chief Frank Malloway) and Rhoda Peters.

Special appreciation is extended to all of Katherine's family and friends who agreed to participate and share in this process, in particular her parents and siblings: Sonny, Linda, Edie, Antoine, John, Charlie, Robert, Kenneth and Peter. The project could not have been completed without the gracious generosity of Katherine's Elders: Minnie Peters, Elsie Charlie and Yómelot (Rosaleen George). To the extent that this book is successful all credit is theirs. If I have forgotten to include anyone's name, I apologize. I assume all responsibility for any errors or mistakes.



Keith Carlson

Sardis, July, 1998