

THE LEGACY OF LESCHI
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As we celebrate the anniversary of the birth of Chief Leschi 184 years ago today, let us remind ourselves, our children and our grandchildren of the greatness of this man who once walked on this very land on which we still walk, the Indian Leschi.

Chief Leschi has stood as the guardian at the gate of our past since his death 134 years ago. He has become a symbol of the traditional tribal history of our Nisqually people. When we think of the old ways, we think of Leschi, of how he lived and how he died. When we become sick, when we become tired and grow weary from the hardships that life has dealt to us, we turn to Leschi and to the old ways. There in his presence we begin the healing process to make our life whole again, to turn so that our face may feel the warmth of the sun again.

The Birth of Leschi

Leschi was born in January of 1808 in a secluded winter village on the Mashel River in the upper Nisqually watershed. His father was of the Nisqually tribe. His mother was a daughter of a Yakima chief. According to the custom of the Nisqually, his mother moved to her husband's village to make her home.

The energy from the placement of the Aquarius planets in the universal sky at the time of Leschi's birth endowed him with the gifts of oratory and forthrightness of thought which, as his life unfolded, would place him as the spokesman and leader among our people.

Each summer Leschi came with his parents to the lower prairielands on the shores of Muck Creek to dig camas, harvest cattails and fish from the summer run of salmon. Later he would bring his own family to the lowlands to continue the ritual. In those days the prairies covered large land areas on both sides of the lower segment of the Nisqually River - the Yelm Prairie on one side, the Nisqually Prairie on the other side.

Leschi, The Diplomat

When the British came in 1833 to establish Fort Nisqually, a fur-gathering fort, just east of the mouth of the Nisqually River, it was Leschi who observed their movements. He noted that they came without their families and took Nisqually women as their wives. He watched their farming efforts which later turned to sheep and cattle raising. In time Leschi and his brother Quaymuth accepted a position as horsetenders with the Hudson's Bay Company at a farm station on Yelm Prairie.

It was there that Leschi saw the advancement of the Americans as they inundated Nisqually tribal traditional lands. They arrived with their families in tow and proceeded to build homes and fences. After the United States had arbitrarily assumed jurisdiction over the Indian people living below the 49th parallel, it was Leschi and Quaymuth who monitored the government's actions. On December 26, 1854 when the Treaty of Medicine Creek was negotiated between the United States and the Nisqually and neighboring tribes, both Leschi and Quaymuth were asked to sign the document.

Leschi refused to sign the treaty, deploring the location of the proposed reservations assigned to both the Nisquallies and the Puyallups. He had requested a portion of the Nisqually River for fishing and a segment of prairieland for pasturing tribal horses. Neither need was addressed in the treaty negotiations which purported that the population of the 13 Nisqually villages should move onto a small piece of rocky highland near Johnson Point.

Refusing to accept the assigned reservation placed the Nisquallies in a peculiar situation. They stood firm with the stand taken by Leschi. A period of general unrest followed. The Americans were uneasy. The government officials were uneasy. The Nisquallies were, for all to see, dissatisfied and restless. The war that began in the fall of 1855 was inevitable. When a territorial official dispatched a party of Eaton's Rangers, a detachment of volunteers, to Nisqually to bring Leschi and Quaymuth into Olympia for custodial protection, all hell broke loose. Hearing of the proposed action, the two brothers gathered their families together and fled from their camp. By the time the Rangers arrived on the Nisqually bottom, Leschi's group was far into the mountain foothills.

Leschi, The War Chief

Confronted by the advancing members of the Eaton Rangers, Leschi's party crossed the Puyallup River and made camp near the White River where they were forced to stop and defend themselves and their position. It is believed that they had intended to cross the mountains via the Naches Pass to seek refuge with Yakima relatives. Other Nisqually and Puyallup warriors and their families soon joined the Indian group. Leschi was chosen to assume the leadership role, a position that would earn him the title of the war chief of the allied Indian forces. When two of the pursuing Americans were killed, there was no turning back. The Indian War of 1855-1856 had begun.

The disadvantages that faced Leschi and his warriors far outnumbered the advantages. For while the Indian fighters knew the lay of the land and could maneuver well in the thick wet underbrush, they faced a long cold winter without a sufficient stockpile of food and ammunition. They were also outnumbered. The Rangers had been reinforced by more volunteer units and by the professional soldiers stationed at nearby Fort Steilacoom. Both sides experienced casualties. Most of the fighting took place within a radius of about five miles and lasted well into the spring of 1856. Defeated and hungry, Leschi and a portion of his remaining fighters crossed the mountain pass to seek asylum in Yakima country. The war officially ended when, on August 5, 1856, the territorial governor, Isaac I. Stevens, met with members of the Medicine Creek Treaty tribes interned on Fox Island and changed the locations of both the Nisqually and Puyallup reservations. The Nisquallies would receive 4,700 acres of prairieland intersected by about four-and-a-half miles of the Nisqually River, but not before a price was placed on the heads of the remaining Indian war leaders, Leschi and Quaymuth.

The Death of Leschi

Quaymuth returned to Nisqually and gave himself up, only to be murdered the first night as he slept on the floor of the governor's office. His murderer was never punished. Leschi also returned but remained in hiding until he was betrayed by his nephew Sluggia for the payment of fifty blankets. Leschi was tried in the territorial court system for his part in the war and specifically for the murder of one soldier, A.B. Moses. After two trials, the first of which produced a hung jury, Leschi was condemned to hang. After several postponements while some of his friends attempted to exonerate him, Leschi was hanged on February 19, 1858. On his memorial stone are these words: "This is a memorial to Chief Leschi, 1808 - 1858. An Arbitrator of His People." On the back of the stone are these words: "Judicially murdered. February 19, 1858, owing to the misunderstanding of Treaty of 1854-55, serving his people by his death. Sacrificed to a principle. A martyr to liberty, honor and the rights of people of his native land. Erected by those he died to serve."

Leschi died, not as a warrior in battle, but at the hands of the men who came onto his land and claimed it as their own. When he asked for a decent reservation where his people could fish and their horses could graze, he was refused. The war that followed seemed the only way to settle the affair. The Nisquallies didn't start it nor did they win it. In the end the reservation location was changed as Leschi had requested. The new government deemed that someone had to be blamed. Leschi was selected because he was an Indian of great importance. The government had taken his land, defeated him in war and hanged him. Three wrongs didn't make it right.

The Leschi Legacy

One hundred and thirtyfour years have passed since Leschi's death. Yet today many of us here at Nisqually remember and revere his memory and continue to use his life and death as a beacon to follow when we falter and miss the way. The same perseverance and survival techniques employed by Leschi were used by our ancestors through the years that have transpired from 1858 to 1992. As we look back and document our reservation history we realize that our people have lived through periods of deprivation that were of such proportions that would have decimated or destroyed most tribes, yet our people survived from generation to generation as a connecting link to our people who live today.

Our ancestors moved onto the new reservation but could not live up to the agency farmer's efforts to make farmers out of them. No one has yet found a way to farm our prairie land! As a salmon people, they were still able to fish on the reserved portion of their beloved Nisqually River and survived those first years of adjustment because they could eat salmon for breakfast, lunch and dinner.

The war had killed our Nisqually leaders. Without leadership the tribal people could have abandoned their cultural ways and easily lost the cohesiveness of the extended Indian family, especially when their reserved lands were allotted into individual family units. With male leadership missing, our Nisqually women became stronger and discouraged many of the drastic changes expected of them. They held their families together, finding that the hand that rocked the cradleboard could preserve the Indian way of life and rule the direction the tribe might take. When it was ordered that the children be sent off to government boarding schools, they were encouraged to do, their best. Never forgetting that the white teachers forbid them from speaking their native language and from practicing their traditional cultural ways, there emerged two tribal members who would, each in his own time, lead the Nisqually tribe well into the twentieth century...the first, Henry Martin who died in 1918, the second, Peter Kalama, who died in 1947. Both men excelled as interpreters and leaders for the Nisqually Tribe. The legacy that Leschi left behind remained intact.

When the missionaries attempted to turn the minds of the Nisqually people from their old religious ways, the people found themselves in a no-man's land of beliefs, not acceptable in either culture. With the effects of alcohol and disease taking their toll among Indian people, our neighbors at nearby Mud Bay retaliated by establishing the Indian Shaker religion, a mixture of the old and the new. This new Indian religion spread up and down the coast and continues to this day to provide a spiritual uplift that rules out the need for alcohol, in fact, discourages its use in any form.

In 1918 the Pierce County side of the Nisqually Indian Reservation was condemned to be used as a part of a larger land parcel for use as a military base. With the loss of two-thirds of our reservation, we lost 13 homes, six cemeteries and two churches. Slowly our people moved off of the condemned land, some moving to the remaining portion of the reservation on the Thurston County side, some moving to other Indian reservations or went to live near established relatives. It took almost 12 years to move our dead. The population of the Nisqually Tribe seemed to disburse overnight. Only a few families remained intact on the sliver of land that remained. Most of the land that Leschi had died for was gone, even his burial spot had to be vacated. His remains were moved to the Puyallup Indian Cemetery near where his daughter lived.

In 1930 when all the world seemed as poor as our remaining Nisqually families, instead of giving up, they counted their blessings. One-third of the reservation remained and although the land had been considered worthless before, it now became home, the only home for our Nisqually people. Secondly there was still four and a half miles of the Nisqually River that flowed through the reservation and the salmon runs continued to come. The Creator, knowing that the land, the river, the salmon and the Nisqually people were one, must surely have placed his arms around them and held them close for they all survived. The spirit of Leschi continued to live.

The years following the depression were filled with United States congressional acts that helped all Indian people. In 1946 our Nisqually Tribe reorganized under a tribal constitution and elected a tribal chairman and a Business Council as set forth in our new document. That was 46 years ago and this writer remembers it as if it were yesterday because she is one of the few who, now living, were in attendance. Renting space for our tribal headquarters in Yelm enabled the Nisqually people to establish long range plans. The Boldt Decision of 1974 redefined enrollment procedures and guaranteed off-reservation fishing rights. In 1976 when the United States government advocated tribal economic self-sufficiency, we applied for and received funds to build our present on-reservation tribal headquarters. In 1977 the new building was dedicated and today houses a large variety of tribal programs for our Nisqually people. Slowly our people have come back home. Could a stranger viewing our busy tribal facility today even suspect the history lessons that we hold very close to our hearts that tie us to our past, back to the old ways, back to Chief Leschi? Perhaps not! But we, the people of the Nisqually Tribe, will never forget. Today we celebrate the 184th anniversary of his birth. Happy birthday, Chief Leschi!

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