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PITT RIVER CHIEF SAW FIRST WHITE MAN ON FRASER SWAMKA, LAST OF ONCE NUMEROUS CLAN FEARED THE NEWCOMERS.

BEGINNING LIFE AS SLAVE HE ROSE TO HEADSHIP OF TRIBE.

BY S.A. FLETCHER

Since I came to this part of the province, some forty years ago, I have spent many days, nearly every year, at Pitt Lake. This lake is distant about twenty miles by water from New Westminster, and it was then, as it is now, noted as favourite resort for hunters and fishermen; and, the fishing and shooting to be had there were to me the great attraction.

I had as a companion a friend of my own age and similar tastes and likings; and we thought nothing of leaving town in the early evening with a flood tide and pulling a heavy boat most of the night, so as to reach the hunting grounds in the early morning. This was of course, long before the gas engine was thought of, and when pulling a boat and handling a sail had not yet, with walking and horse-shoeing, become half-forgotten arts.

*Tribe was prosperous*

There were then many Indians living on both sides of the Pitt River, which joins the Fraser about five miles above New Westminster. At the mouth of the Lillooet (now called Alouette) River, and of the Sturgeon Slough—both tributaries of the Pitt—there were Indian camps comprising many families, all of them apparently prosperous, with many children, dogs and canoes. On the west bank of the Pitt River, near where it discharges from the lake, there was a large Indian reserve with several houses, well built and comfortable, and occupied all year around.

On our first visit to the lake, we overtook in the river close to the lake, an Indian in a small canoe, and we asked him about the best places to fish. To our surprise, he answered in good English, and said he was going in that direction and would show us the way. We asked him to come aboard our boat, which he did after some hesitation and with the usual display an Indian makes when meeting with white strangers. We were running before a light breeze taking it easy, and we asked him a great many questions about the river, the tides, and the fishing and shooting. We told him who we were and what we wanted and made him feel at ease as well as we could. He said his name was Billy, and that he had been to school at Mission City for some time, and that his home was

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at the reserve near the lake. Before he left he was quite well-disposed towards us, and he directed us to where the fishing was best, and gave us much information as to the proper time to fish and the bait to use.

We saw him on subsequent visits; he liked to come with us when he could. Intelligent and interesting, he was always good company, and we welcomed him around our campfire in the summer evenings, and we were often able to do some small service in the city for him or his people.

## *Didn't like white men*

He was the grandson of the chief, or head man, of all the people on the Pitt River and in the neighbourhood. Billy, one very wet afternoon, as we were on our way back to town, introduced us to his grandfather at his house on the reserve. The chief's name was Swampkwa, and he was at that time 80 years old. He seemed a man of great intelligence and strong personality, who in his prime must have been of great physical strength, and no doubt have had a powerful influence over his people.

He was sitting in a large chair near the stove: the room was quite clean and comfortable, with other rooms off it. The old chief, rising slowly, shook hands with us in the white man's way, repeating our names after Billy. He addressed us in his own language, and Billy interpreted it to us what he said. The gist of this was that he welcomed us as friends of his grandson; he did not like the white men; he had been cheated and abused by them on several occasions and had always avoided them as much as possible; but as Billy had told him we were neither land surveyors nor sawmill men, he made an exception in our favour. He told us to warm ourselves well; and he hoped that when we came again we would have better luck.

We were both very much impressed. Although deeply marked with the furrows of age, his face seemed full of animation; his eyes strong and clear, brightening with the warmth of his welcome and flashing with scorn when he told us of his ill-treatment; and his gesticulations were most suggestive and expressive. We thanked him for his welcome and told him we were very glad to make his acquaintance. My chum presented him with a pouchful of tobacco, and we left shortly afterwards.

We saw him frequently after this, and always had a small present for him. But we learned, from Billy, in our talks with him, a great deal of the old gentleman's history, which Billy had heard from his father and mother and his uncles.

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## *Captured in [raid]*

He told us that [Chief Swampkwa] had not been born in [the Pitt Lake area] but that he and his brother [Shloomack] had been captured or stolen when they were very young from some northern tribe by war party from the Fraser River and had been taken to Pitt Lake by a former chief, to be his slaves when they grew up. When this time came, however, they both were so much superior in intelligence, physique, and courage to those around that they came gradually to the front; Swampkwa becoming chief, while his brother was a noted hunter. Swampkwa was besides a Shaman or medicine man and collected herbs and roots for cures for rheumatism and fevers.

He would disappear for weeks at a time going into the hills and living in solitude on berries and roots, and coming back naked and worn out, and telling of a strange and mysterious light he had seen and talked with.

Swampkwa had seen the first white men come up from the Fraser River to Pitt Lake; and told how they came in a large white boat with four oars, one man to each oar and two men paddling. They had landed near his village and had gone up on the rocks and one man looked through a stick placed on top of two other sticks. They left some men with the boat and others came to the village and spoke to him and gave tobacco, and told him by signs to come to their village and bring their skins. He saw then, for the first time, the chain and anchor the white man uses; the chain interested him very much. (This may have been in 1826 and the white men came probably from Langley.) Swampkwa had heard of the white men there, but he had never visited them, and he advised his people to have nothing to do with them. We could not learn whether he had heard of Simon Fraser. Swampkwa said the Indian name for Pitt River and lake was "Kwytliith" (as nearly as we could make out), but he could not learn why they called it so, or what the word meant.

## *Saw tribe dwindle*

Swampkwa lived for the rest of his life at or near Pitt Lake, and he saw all his people gradually disappear after the white man came; and when he died he was practically the last one left there. Today there are none left. The remains of the houses on the reserve near the lake's outlet can yet be seen in a small bay close to a low point of rocks now known as Siwash Rock. He was a splendid specimen of a vanishing race. How bitterly he must have felt the encroachments of our people and the loss of his prestige and authority. He could not, or would

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not, condescend to talk the Chinook; we tried him with it, but he shook his head contemptuously and would not have it. He understood a few words of English, besides of course that of the red-hot expletive sort used in anger or excitement. He lived a hermit-like, unhappy life for many years, hardly speaking to those around him; brooding, no doubt, over the past. In later years he took care of the widow of his brother Shloomack, an old withered woman, who, although quite blind, did his cooking and looked after him as well as she could.

The death of Swamkwa was a sad and tragical [sic] one, and I must finish by telling of it. He and the old woman I have mentioned had gone up the Pitt Lake in a small canoe, probably to look for herbs, as they were wont to do quite often in the summer months. They did not return as soon as soon as they were expected, and the people of the village became anxious. They asked a timber-cruiser named Cromarty, who was passing on the way to the head of the lake, to look out for the old couple.

Near the head of the lake, Cromarty heard someone calling out, and he found the old woman alone on the shore. She pointed out the direction in which Swampkwa had gone, and after giving her something to eat, he made a short search and found the old chief lying dead on the rocks, not far from the water, his canoe close by. Cromarty got the body into his canoe and taking the old woman with him in his own canoe, towing the other with the body, the old woman weeping and wailing bitterly, he made his way to the village, reaching there long after dark.

### *Tomb swept by fire*

The old chief, probably overcome by the heat of a very hot summer's day, likely died of heart failure, soon after he had landed where he was found. The old couple had left the village on the morning of the day before they were found by Cromarty, so that the old woman had passed the night alone, without food or fire.

Swampkwa was laid away in the family tomb on the reserve; this was a low, solidly-built structure of heavy cedar logs, on top of a small knoll, not far from the houses. He was a pagan so that there was no need for a priest. Like others of his people [text not readable] sternly refused to accept it.

But his mortal remains were not to be allowed to rest undisturbed. Some time after he was laid away, a careless prospector landed and passed the night near the village, which had been temporarily abandoned. He forgot to put out his

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campfire properly; a breeze sprung up; the fire spread and got among the dried leaves and ferns and reached the tomb; and the next day all that was left of it were some scorched cedar logs, some ashes, and the calcined bones of the poor old Chief Swampkwa, the last of the people of Pitt Lake.