

I grew up in Bella Coola a small town on the west coast of British Columbia north of Vancouver. Although I was born in Western Samoa I was adopted by an Irish family who lived in Bella Coola and so I was raised there since the age of two weeks. Bella Coola consists of about 2,000 people. About fifty percent of the population is white and the other half Nuxalk. I have a son whose father is Nuxalk and so this is why I choose to put together a Nuxalk dictionary for my project.

The Nuxalk like so many other Native Nations are struggling to keep their language and culture alive and a dictionary is one way of preserving this long forgotten knowledge. I think many of us take our heritage, language and identity for granted. I know for myself I could not image how I would feel if I was one of the last few people able to speak English. In this paper I will refer specifically to my experiences growing up with the Nuxalk people but I know these experiences are common to many other Nations as well.

From the age of sixteen to about twenty-two my boyfriend and I lived with his grandma. I remember her friends would come over and they would sit around and talk and laugh as they told stories but what really stands out in my mind is that they would be speaking Nuxalk. When my son was a baby and still to this day his great grandma would also speak Nuxalk to him, but only him (and her elder friends) and she would never speak Nuxalk to my son when anyone was around. The only reason my boyfriend and I knew she spoke Nuxalk to our son was because she would do it when she didn't know we were home or thought we couldn't hear her. This made me think. It made me feel almost ashamed that I had forgotten that her first language is not English but Nuxalk. Second of

all the shame that she still felt herself for speaking Nuxalk around the “young people” such as my boyfriend and me. It was interesting to note just how long the degrading affects of assimilation have remained. Besides the shame I know many elders have expressed apprehension in teaching the “young people” their Native language as they feel they have not been raised to recognize the value of it. In Bella Coola a language preservation project was started about eight years ago where elders would be recorded and then make the translations themselves. Even through this project I remember the administrator expressing her frustration in getting elders to participate. As mentioned above there is the shame and the hesitation to share such a vital part of history but I think in addition to this shame is the inherent mistrust of the Aboriginal Peoples towards the government in which the elders may be concerned that the language preservation may somehow be used to exploit them and the sad part is, is that I don’t blame them!

In putting together this project I asked my grandma various Nuxalk words and had her translation of them. I asked her different versus and the importance of them and took note of the predominant sound(s) in the language. A lot of the sounds come from using the back of your throat (which was very difficult). Also different was the use of the number “7” as a letter in the Nuxalk alphabet. I was amazed to find out that in the Bella Coola many of the mountain ranges, rivers, and other historical land marks were all Nuxalk words.

It is important to preserve the Nuxalk language and a Nuxalk dictionary is a creative way in doing just that. A dictionary enables all cultures to be able to access and appreciate this

language as well as solidify the importance of the language to the Nuxalk people. I hope with the continuation of documentation of the Nuxalk culture that any shame associations will slowly be dissolved. Also as Native history has become increasingly more dominant in public school texts and literature this also helps to decrease the ignorance of those who have no idea that there are thousands of languages and cultures slowly dying around us. It is my intent with this dictionary to give a glimpse into a language, culture and people that have been and continue to be such a vital part of my life.