**B.C. First Nations mark small pox anniversary**

**By:** Dene Moore The Canadian Press Published on Mon Aug 06 2012

There are only red marks on a rock, pictographs drawn by long-ago hands that would have fished and built houses and held babies on the banks of the Fraser River.

There are only dips in the level ground where those houses, rotten and forgotten, lie covered by a century's worth of sand and dust.

There are only bodies, buried or not, somewhere beneath the Earth that reclaimed them.

A group of First Nations will travel the Fraser River this week to find those rocks and dips and mark the sombre anniversary of one of the most devastating events in their history: the 1862 small pox epidemic that killed as much as 60 per cent of the native inhabitants of the westernmost colony in what would become Canada.

While the deadly outbreak remains one of the worst disasters ever to occur in Canada, it's one most Canadians — aboriginal or not — know nothing about.

"It's our own history and we never learned it," said Phyllis Webstad, a member of the Secwepemc Nation and one of the organizers of the five-day journey that will include traditional pipe ceremonies to honour the victims and the erection of a memorial plaque.

When she did learn of it as an adult, she realized that it hit close to home.

"In school I hated social studies and I remember hearing about small pox, but I didn't clue in that it was in our back yard. So when I started to hear about that and to start putting the numbers together and doing the calculations and realizing that my great-grandmother was a small pox survivor, and because of that I was here.

"To realize that we're all here because someone survived the small pox, that was a huge moment for me. Growing up on the reserve with Granny in Dog Creek, I don't ever remember it being discussed. Not once."

It was Tuesday, March 18, 1862, that the British Colonist newspaper in Victoria confirmed rumours circulating for days that small pox had made its way north from San Francisco to the colony.

"The case is not considered a dangerous one by the attending physicians, although a consultation was held yesterday to determine its character," said the report on page 3.

In the coming weeks and months, the reports would become more and more frequent, and more and more horrific.

A few were reported dead. Then a dozen. Then hundreds and thousands — all but a few of them First Nations. There are estimates that more than 30,000 of the approximately 50,000 people living in B.C. at the time died. First Nations believe there were many more, and the death toll much higher.

The racist overtones of the debate make it difficult to believe the authorities of the day were terribly concerned.

"Were it likely that the disease would only spread among the Indians, there might be those among us like our authorities who would rest undisturbed, content that the small pox is a fit successor to the moral ulcer that has festered at our doors throughout the last four years," noted the British Colonist newspaper in April.

But fearful that the epidemic would spread to the white population — where it originated — and fuelled by the frenzy of the non-aboriginal public, the authorities evicted the First Nations. Able to stand or not, they were forced into canoes within the sights of a gunboat, and sent back to every corner of the province.

At the same time, the lust for gold was not the only cause of fever among the waves of miners now making their way to the Cariboo Gold Rush, in the province's nearly untouched Interior. Along with their gold pans and big plans, they carried with them the seeds of a man-made disaster.

"The California gold rush is winding down and something like 99 per cent of the people who didn't make any money on it are hearing about a gold rush taking place in B.C. and up in Alaska, and so they're leaving out of San Francisco in any shape or form of boat they can get on," said Bill McLennan, a historian at the UBC Museum of Anthropology.

"In that time in San Francisco, small pox is rampant so it doesn't take very long before one of the boats arrives in Victoria (with pox)."

There was a vaccine, but only the Songhees would agree to be vaccinated, McLennan said, and the disease spread rapidfire through the native encampments.

"People are dying left and right. It's just devastating so what they do, they've got apparently one gun boat so they bring that out in the harbour and tell all the First Nations encamped there that they've got one day or two days to pack up everything in their canoes and get out and then they're going to burn everything that's left," said McLennan, who studied accounts published in the British Colonist in Victoria at the time.

"People left and they burned everything, but of course they're already infected.

"There are references from other people at that point of seeing canoes full of dead people. There's nobody alive in the canoes any more, and these people are starting to head north."

The dying First Nations are not the only carriers bringing death and devastation to the rest of the colony.

"The disease is also spreading into the miners, and the miners are looking for every route they can possibly take to get to the Interior... to get up into the Cariboo Gold Rush," McLennan said.

They went north to Bella Coola and then inland along the Oolichan Trail; they went up the Fraser River and then over land. And everywhere they went, they left death in their wake.

McLennan is skeptical about rumours that have persisted for generations: that the Hudson's Bay Company or the colonial government handed out blankets infected with small pox. The non-aboriginals in B.C. at that time were completely reliant on the First Nations, he said, and unlikely to have wanted them killed off.

There were likely three small pox outbreaks along the western coast of what would become Canada prior to 1862, but none as devastating. At the same time, measles, influenza and scarlet fever were also taking a toll.

By some estimates, 60 per cent of the population living on the West Coast in 1861 was dead by the end of 1863.

"Whole families were gone; whole villages wiped out, so the oral tradition of numbers and population can only be speculated at," McLennan said.

Irvine Johnson, a native cultural historian from Esket, near Williams Lake, is among the group rafting down the river Aug. 5 to 10.

His grandfather, who lived to 97, told stories of the white men who used to "wash" the rocks in the river, and how first a few and then many came up the river when he was a boy.

Through the generations, the names of 13 villages wiped out in the epidemic were handed down: Under a Leaning Rock, the Home Place, Out of the Water, the Place of Horseflies.

Johnson tried to imagine what it was like for the people who watched their families and communities die in front of their eyes. The few survivors left these once thriving communities, and sought shelter in neighbouring villages, he said, and some of the stories have survived, passed down from one generation to the next.

"Right at Esket when we were fixing our road in the late '70s, we accidentally dug up a small pox grave," he said. "A lot of those pit houses were just demolished, crumbled in on themselves, and that became their burial site."

At first, they buried their loved ones in a traditional way but as the epidemic grew, they were thrown into mass graves and their pit houses burned. At the end, there was no one left to bury the dead, he said.

The rafters want to give those victims a traditional goodbye, said Webstad, who counts among her many volunteer titles president of the education society of the five northern Secwepemc bands.

"This small pox needs to be mourned. Has anyone really given them a burial? Has anyone had a service? There are thousands of people who never got a funeral so I believe as part of this reconciliation, or decolonization, or whatever you want to call it that this is necessary," she said.

She is in discussions with the local school district to include the 1862 epidemic in the curriculum.

"I just want that they be remembered."

**FURTHER READING: The Hudson’s Blanket & Smallpox Controversy**

A controversy supported by documented scientific evidence and so widely believed by Canadian Aboriginal inhabitants, that some British administrators actually supported the handing out of blankets contaminated with small pox to the native people of Fort Pitt. This was in an attempt to wipe out their populations thus using them as a biological weapon, The Hudson Bay Company was the main health agency across Canada between the late eighteenth and the nineteenth century… Sellers, military leaders and some states especially those of Georgia and California(presently) had plans to exterminate all Indians and among their strategies was use of blankets infected with small pox. However apart from activists’ word-of-mouth, there is little evidence to substantiate the claims. When forty years later there was another smallpox outbreak, Mathew Cocking turned due to the fact that earlier, they had not acted in the correct way as a company. Albert (119-214) identifies the evidence of a letter from the commander of forces at Fort Pitt to Commander Chief Pontiac of the Indian forces before the siege on May 1763. This letter read: Out of our regard for them (two Indian chiefs), we gave them two blankets and a handkerchief out of the smallpox hospital which will have the desired effect. This letter had a lot of questions unanswered. In the middle of all the controversy, Hudson’s Bay Company dismissed the reports as propaganda saying that soldiers took used blankets from their bodies and sold them to the natives not with the intension to kill but eyeing quick money[42]From all these conflicting reports, it would be safe to conclude that HBC point blankets had a role to play in the spread of the small pox epidemic in the western plains during the late eighteenth century to the native communities. However, stones remain unturned as to whether the spread of small pox was to serve as a biological weapon to wipe out the natives especially Indians or it was accidental!

From: http://wiki.ubc.ca/Course:HIST104/Hudsons\_Bay\_Blanket