



T'xwelatse Comes Home

The homecoming ceremony lasts from mid-afternoon until after 10 p.m., and even as people begin to head for home, the drums continue to pound, the song grows louder, and family and friends join in joyful dance.

*by Sandra Shields |
photographed by David Campion*

THE BURKE MUSEUM

at the University of Washington threw a going-away party last fall for an ancient granite statue that had been in its collection for more than 100 years. To the timeless rhythm of drums and traditional song, aboriginal communities joined politicians from both Canada and the United States to celebrate the return of the stone sculpture to its original owners, the Sto:lo Nation of British Columbia.

The repatriation is part of a dramatic shift that has seen museums across the continent begin collaborating with indigenous communities to reunite them with culturally significant objects.

According to Sto:lo history, the stone holds the life force of their ancestor T'xwelatse, a man who lived in the distant past when the transformer Xa:ls was traveling through the land. T'xwelatse got into trouble for fighting with his wife, and Xa:ls turned him to stone. For generations, the stone stood outside the

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*In stone,
a legend lives again*

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 longhouses of his descendants, reminding them that they must learn to live together in a good way.

Then in four months in 1858, 30,000 miners flooded into British Columbia's Fraser Valley, and life for the Sto:lo was never the same. White settlers followed, and the Sto:lo were confined to reserves. The stone T'xwelatse went missing after

nearly 100 settlers from Washington Territory rode into Canada in the middle of the night and lynched a 14-year-old Sto:lo boy, Louie Sam, for a crime he did not commit. The boy was from a village near the U.S. border, the same village where the stone T'xwelatse stood. Amid rumors of more violence, the village was soon deserted. Two white farmers found the stone near the

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In a basement storage room at the Burke, measurements are taken so a new, culturally-appropriate stand can be created for the stone. Archeologist Dave Schaepe (left) works with Nooksack Indian Tribe member George Swaniset Jr. (rear), Megan Noble from the Burke and Sonny McHalsie (right) of the Sto:lo Nation.



After the politicians and leaders finish their speeches at the Burke, Herb Joe's son and grandsons linger around the stone. Joe's son J.R. (right) embraces his nephew Clarence Joe and jokes with Brandon Williams (left).



Herb Joe and his wife, Helen, join with the Nooksack community to raise their hands in gratitude and their voices in song as the stone is drummed out of the hall at the end of the ceremony.

At the Nooksack Indian Reservation, the community gathers around when T'xwelatse arrives. Kids reach out to touch the textured stone as their parents explain the story to them. Cameras and cell phones click pictures that are soon sent off to friends and family.

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During the homecoming ceremony at a longhouse in Sto:lo territory, about 10 miles north of the Sumas border crossing with Canada, Herb Joe is joined by Simon Roberts, who also holds the traditional name of T'xwelatse, and by Eleanor Joe, who holds the female version of the name.

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village in 1892, and it was displayed in a dime store before the sons of some of Seattle's prominent pioneer families acquired it for the museum they'd founded, which eventually became the Burke.

The stone T'xwelatse was lost to the Sto:lo and might have remained so except for a Canadian social worker named Herb Joe.


As a young man, Joe had been given the traditional name of T'xwelatse. For years he sought out elders and listened to their stories about his name. Then an archeologist told Joe his ancestral namesake was in the Burke. In 1992, Joe drove to Seattle and was overcome with emotion when he saw the stone. He reported back to his "grandmothers," elders of the tribe who charged him with bringing their ancestor home.

Joe met with museum staff and told them the Sto:lo wanted T'xwelatse back. It was the opening salvo in negotiations that would ultimately last 14 long years. The biggest problem was that by U.S. law, public institutions such as the Burke can return objects only to U.S. tribes. Joe turned for help to the Nooksack, a U.S. tribe that had been divided from the Sto:lo when the border between Canada and the U.S. was drawn in 1858.

Over the years, Joe drew on the support of his extended Canadian and American families, and worked closely with archeologist Dave Schaepe, who prepared a report laden with data conclusively establishing that the stone at the Burke is the stone T'xwelatse. Staff at the Burke worked through the legal fine points of the Native American Graves Protection and Repatriation Act, and when the day of repatriation finally arrived, they were as excited and nervous as Joe and his family.

The event at the museum was only the first ceremony to celebrate the repatriation. Three days later, the stone traveled north to the Nooksack Community Centre, where some 400 people gathered to share a meal and welcome a long-lost ancestor with an honor song. Joe thanked the Nooksack Tribe, and for several hours, people stood to speak about the return. When he saw T'xwelatse, one man said, he realized he had a hole in his heart he didn't even know was there.

The stone spent a week in front of the tribe's Nooksack River Casino. Then, on Oct. 14, T'xwelatse traveled across the border to a Sto:lo longhouse where 500 people rose to their feet in welcome. A meal was shared, the sacred sxwo:yxwey masks were danced, and the evening ended hours later with pounding drums and joyful song.

For now, the stone is staying at the Ch-ihl-kway-uhk Tribe's headquarters in Chilliwack, B.C. T'xwelatse's final home will be an aboriginal healing and wellness center that is being built in the wilderness of the nearby Chilliwack River Valley among the same rugged mountains where the story of T'xwelatse and his transformation began so many years ago. 



Herb Joe steadies the stone T'xwelatse while the heavy figure is fitted into a specially-carved red cedar canoe with the help of a 5-ton hoist and a team of Sto:lo Nation and Burke Museum staff.