

A Tribute to the Late Dr. Chief Simon Baker

We will mourn the loss of Chief Simon Baker for many years to come. Among the tears we have shed and the sadness that we feel, there is a profound sense of celebration, of deep gratitude for the privilege of having shared in the life of one so significant and so indescribably wonderful. On behalf of all who had the pleasure of knowing your dear husband, Emily, I thank you and your family, for sharing him with us.

Khot-la-Cha, the man with a kind heart, would want us to celebrate his life, to remember him now and in the years to come for his teachings, for the role he played in making our lives richer. Simon Baker was, as the Sechlet Nation described him, "an ambassador of his own culture and of the human spirit". There can be no higher calling than to follow the "natural law of the Creator". This Simon did, with the pride he had in being Squamish, in being Coast Salish, in being Aboriginal. As an ambassador of his culture and the human spirit, he pioneered the revival of cultural traditions and practices of our people in British Columbia and other provinces.

I first met Simon in 1970 in Ottawa at the inaugural National Indian Cultural Conference. He described this conference as a breakthrough in recognition of Indian culture. I remember the impact he had on all the delegates. He encouraged us to do whatever we could to deal with the loss of our languages, our customs and our people's traditional ways of making a living. He urged us to talk to our elders to learn our ways and to pass these teachings on to the younger generation.

Long before this, in the late 40s, Simon was involved in cultural activities. He was the chairman of the Coqualeetza Fellowship Club, the first Indian Club organized in Vancouver. They put on pow-wows in the summer and invited dancers and drummers from BC and other provinces. He often spoke of Elders, Mathias Joe, Isaac Jacob, August Jack, Louis Miranda, and Dominic Charlie, who helped them at that time. And of course, his grandmother, Mary Capilano, was his lifetime teacher. Simon practised what he preached. We have often heard him say to young people, "Go to your elders, speak to your elders, learn everything you can". That is what he did.

When the Coqualeetza Fellowship Club became the Northwest Indian Cultural Association, he continued to be the chairman. Besides the pow-wows, they put on arts and crafts shows and banquets. During this same time he formed the Capilano Indian Community Club for local events. He was the chairman and Emily was the treasurer. This Club put on sports days and pow-wows. He talked about this twenty year period, from the 40's to the 60's, as a time when people from different Nations learned to work together, as a time when they could showcase the various dances and exquisite regalia of their respective Nations. He felt it was also an opportunity for non-Indians to learn about our ways and to gain their respect. In his book, he said, "My idea was to promote our culture, our traditions, our songs. I wanted to teach our people so they could teach their children to know their identity, their grassroots. I want our people to have respect, pride and confidence".

Chief Simon Baker's ambassadorship extended to many parts of the world. Between 1965 and 1987, he did six tours sponsored by Canadian Airlines, Air Canada, the Canadian Government Travel Bureau, the Royal Canadian Air Force and others. On his first trip in 1965, he did a twelve-city promotional tour to West Germany. While he was sponsored to show people of other countries that Canada was a great country to visit, he saw it as an opportunity to educate the people about Canadian Indians. He said, "I always wore my full regalia when I made my presentations, my buckskin outfit, feathered headdress, deer hooves. Sometimes I dressed prairie style and other times I wore my Coast Salish outfit decorated with paddles. I would speak my language first, then talk in English. I often did the snake dance and ended by getting everyone to do the deer dance, that Dominic Charlie taught me".

Like many of you, I had occasion to do the deer dance many times. We will chuckle when we remember "Kla Hee!" and we would jump as high as we could. At least that's what he wanted us to do.

Following one of his visits to Germany, he wrote a letter to an eleven year old boy he had met there. The boy, Jens, replied. One of his bits of news was "In my free time I like to play Indians. I go to the wood and make a teepee for me. But most of the white children cannot play really good Indians. I would be glad if your grandchildren were here or I could go to them".

Simon's other travels took him to France, Spain, Holland, England, Japan, Australia, New Zealand and Hawaii. He said, "I always say its good medicine to go out and meet people. I enjoy travelling". He made three trips to New Zealand and formed a very special bond with the Maori people. About them, he said, "As for the Maori, they are like my brothers and sisters. I love their golden voices and all their beautiful songs. They have a strong spiritual belief in the Creator".

I had the good fortune to be with him on the last two of his tours to New Zealand. These tours organized through the First Nations House of Learning at UBC were to take a group of First Nations people to study how the Maori were reviving their language by starting with the very young children. The loss of our languages in Canada was a great concern to Simon, so he welcomed the opportunity to be our spiritual and cultural leader for these tours. As he said, "I enjoyed visiting the Maori language nests and hearing little children speak their language". On his last tour with us in 1990, we also took in the second World Indigenous Peoples Conference on Education (WIPCE). Simon was one of the main speakers. As well, he was happy to accept an invitation from his long time Maori friend, Te Rangi, to emcee the performance featuring the dances of indigenous people from around the world.

It was appropriate that he should play a prominent role at this conference because he was instrumental in having the Squamish Nation host the opening day of the first WIPCE in 1987 at the site of the Capilano Longhouse. About these conferences, Simon remarked, "the main thing was we had a chance to meet each other, indigenous people from around the world, to share our stories, our beliefs, to try to improve the education of our

children". These conferences were the beginning of a tradition that would continue to the present.

Simon Baker was, indeed, an ambassador of his own culture and of the human spirit. He gave freely and generously of his time to help our people. He used to say, my name should be ABEL, because, I will do whatever I can while I am ABLE. He was asked to speak at totem-pole raisings, to speak at conferences and meetings or to open gatherings with a prayer and a welcome song, he was asked to sit on boards and committees, and to fundraise. He was not shy about asking for money for good causes be it in the millions from the government or putting out his drum or money tree at gatherings. All these he did while he was ABLE.

Over the years, he was recognized for his contribution to his people and to the community at large. When asked about his awards, he would say, "Come and visit. Come and see my rumpus room". Here, one would see the many gifts, certificates, diplomas, and trophies that had been presented to him. His awards include being made a lifetime member of the Native Brotherhood of BC, an Honorary NITEP graduate, an honorary doctor of laws degree from UBC, the National Aboriginal Achievement Award for culture and spirituality, the Brock House Senior Award and the Order of Canada.

He helped us so much at UBC, the Native Education Centre, Simon Fraser University, the Vancouver Indian Centre, various colleges and schools to name a few. Wherever he went, the students and staff enjoyed his presence because he had a lot of knowledge and because he was so jovial. He believed in laughter and happiness. He will be remembered as a man of great wisdom, a man who would build you up when you are down, one who would console you when you were sad, one who believed in you, one who trusted you and one who loved you unconditionally.

That was Dr. Chief Simon Baker, the husband, the father, the grandfather, the great-grandfather, the great-great grandfather, the leader, the spokesman, the diplomat, the elder. That was Simon, the advisor, the teacher, the counsellor, the storyteller.

It was a privilege for me to help Simon write the story of his life. The book, Khot-La-Cha – the Autobiography of Chief Simon Baker, which was published in 1994 by Douglas and McIntyre, takes on a new significance with his passing. It ensures that his legacy will live on. When we were working on the book, he said, "I would like to tell about my life, what I've seen, what I've done, so my grandchildren and their children will learn of things that happened in this last hundred years. I believe that my story will be interesting for schools. I know when I go to schools today, kindergartens or even high schools, the children like to hear about my life. They enjoy my songs that my elders taught me many years ago. I sing to them in my language and often I tell them the story of my people, using my talking stick".

I know that he would want you to have a copy of his book. The royalties from this book go directly to the Khot-La-Cha Scholarship at the University of British Columbia given annually to an Aboriginal student whose research includes work with elders.

This book can be purchased from the Khot-La Cha Art Gallery and Gift Shop in Capilano for \$22.95. Telephone: (604) 987-3339 Fax: (604) 988-1930. It can also be obtained from General Distribution at 1-800-387-0172.

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