

Chilliwack Progress

The spirit of Chief Sepass felt at book launch

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Bill Sepass believes the spirit of his great-grandfather had a hand in this weekend's revival of a book of poems passed down over the generations to guide Coast Salish children.

Because now the 16 poems that make up the epic tales of the Coast Salish people may be recorded on CD so that a new generation of children, native and non-native alike, can hear them at school in their original oral form, he said.

The poems, translated into English from Halq'emeylem, come from a time when children were "taught how to be" by their elders, Sepass said at the book launch held Saturday at the Skowkale community hall.

"Back then, they had a lot of time to sit down and talk with the children," he said.

UFV president Mark Evered said the book, Sepass Poems: The Ancient Songs of Y-Ail-Mihth, will be included in the university's library, and will also make a fine gift for international visitors.

"Aside from the translations, these are works of art," he added.

Each poem is illustrated by Fraser Valley artist Lynne Grillmair, who signed books sold at the launch, along with Gerald Sepass, the chief's grandson and "caretaker" of the poems.

The poems contain remarkable similarities to the myths and legends that have guided Western thought, as noted by B.C. Lt-Gov. Steven Point in the book's foreword.

There is even a flood story with a Noah-like character, and others that are clearly aimed at giving children lessons in morals and behaviour.

Selected and trained as a young boy to carry the traditional teachings of his culture, Chief Sepass was the last of the Coast Salish orators and wanted to make sure the stories and legends of his people would not be forgotten.

With the help of Eloise Street, a crippled white girl Chief Sepass met at Cultus Lake in 1911, and with her mother Sophia, who was raised by Sto:lo nannies and fluent in Halq'emeylem, the poems were translated into English - but with their rhythms and native imagery intact.

In 2002, Longhouse Publisher Ann Mohs approached Gerald Sepass about publishing the book, and began looking for members of the Street family who still held the copyright.

In 2004, she found a member of the family, who just happened to be wondering what to do with the poems, and who gladly returned the copyright to the Sepass family.

Mohs said a scholarship fund will be set up from sales of the book, which can be ordered online at www.longhousepublishing.com

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