

**With Thanks to**

The Okanagan Indian Band

The Okanagan Heritage Museum

The Greater Vernon Museum and Archives

Chief Byron Louis, Okanagan Indian Band

Ruby Alexis, Researcher, Okanagan Indian Band

Colleen Marchand, Director of Territorial Stewardship,  
Okanagan Indian Band

Westbank First Nation

Hailey Causton, Westbank First Nation

Wilfred Barnes, Westbank First Nation Elder

Tracy Satin, Heritage Officer, Sncəwips Heritage Museum

The Fintry Estate

Golder Associates Ltd.

Paul Creek Language Association

And Private Collections

# The Okanagans and their Neighbours



**Lake Country Museum and Archives**  
11255 Okanagan Centre Road West  
Lake Country, BC V4V 2J7  
[www.lakecountrymuseum.com](http://www.lakecountrymuseum.com)

# way̓ x̓ast s̓xəl̓x̓f̓ált

(whay hast selh-halt) (Greetings, good day)

## The Okanagan Syilx People

The indigenous people of the Okanagan valley are the Syilx people. There are eight member communities within the Okanagan Nation; from North to South, Upper Nicola Band, Okanagan Indian Band, Westbank First Nation, Penticton Indian Band, Upper Similkameen Indian Band, Lower Similkameen Indian Band, Osoyoos Indian Band, and Colville Confederated Tribes. All communities share the traditional language nsyilxcn with various dialects. Language is important in many indigenous cultures; without language meanings and values may be lost.

...” The principal family of the Oakinacken nation bears the name Conconulps, being the name of the place where the members of it generally reside, which is situate about nine miles up the beautiful stream of the same name. The head, or principal chief of this family died last year, leaving the inheritance or chieftainship to Quills-chin-eigh-an, his eldest son, about twenty five years in age. The old man himself was called Who-why-laugh, or Red Fox.

The old chief was a venerable and worthy savage: his influence was great over a wide circle, not only at home, but abroad among the neighbouring tribes. The Red Fox had been many times with his young men at the Great Salt Lake, as they call it, meaning the Pacific, the direct road to which, across the mountains, is almost due west to where they fall on the sea-coast, in about the 49th degree of north latitude. They take generally fifteen days to make the journey, sometimes more, sometimes less according to circumstances. Traffic is their object: they carry along with them the wild hemp of the interior, prepared neatly and put up into small parcels, which they give in exchange for the higua and trinkets. The hemp is used for making fishing-nets, and is always in great demand on the coast. The higua, which has already been noticed, is the most valuable commodity among the Indians to be found west of the Rocky Mountains, being the circulating medium throughout the country.

Adventures of the First Settlers on the Oregon or Columbia River – Alexander Ross. 1849. Smith, Elder & Co. 65. London. Pg 290 -292

## The Okanagan Language: nsyilxcn

The Okanagan language, nsyilxcn, is an endangered language. There is a serious effort being put towards reviving and revitalizing the Okanagan language.

## Knife Point

Obsidian, flint, basalt rock and jade were all used to create arrowheads, knives and other assorted tools. This piece was found at Fintry near the lighthouse.



Fintry Manor collection

## Wind Dried Salmon

Salmon is an important staple to many First Nation people. Salmon was traditionally dried for winter storage. People still dry their salmon, but also smoke, can, or freeze it for the winter. Wild salmon is high in many nutrients and essential for many oils.



Private collection

*Captikwl* contain the natural laws and codes of conduct in which an individual is to carry them. *Captikwl* are not folklore, myths or tales.

## Four Foods Chiefs Captikwl

Before two-legged people came to be, the animals and plants lived on earth in balance. The Creator told the animals that the people would be coming soon. The animals gathered together, and worried about the survival of the people. “How can we help the people?” Bear, the Chief of all the four-legged that walked upon the earth, said, “I will lay myself down for food for the people.” And the other four legged agreed as well. Bear didn’t get back up. Bitter-root, Chief of all that grows under the earth agreed with Bear, and offered to be food for the people. Saskatoon Berry, the Chief of all that grows upon the earth, agreed with both Bear and Bitter-root, that all that grows upon the earth would be food for the people. Salmon, Chief of all that swims under the water, agreed to be food for the people. However, Bear still did not awaken. All the Chiefs called upon their power songs and sang and danced trying to revive Bear. Fly was buzzing by and asked if he could try his song. Everyone brushed fly aside and kept trying to revive Bear. After everyone had sang, danced and prayed, Fly began singing his song, and dancing around Bear. Slowly Bear started moving and getting up. Bear thanked Fly; even the smallest being can offer help to any situation.

## Stickgames

Stickgames have been around since time immemorial. The game consists of two teams who sit across from one another in rows approximately five to six feet apart. Each team has a captain, and between the two captains they begin the game by “shooting” for the kickstick. This is a handgame of guessing and hiding. There are two sets of bones, two striped and two blank. Whichever team is shooting, is pointing for the clear bones. While that team is guessing, the other team is hiding both sets of bones and drumming and singing to try and confuse the other team. People use drums, rattles or clappers to accompany their singing. Each team has five sticks which act as a point system, and one kickstick. Once one team has collected all of the sticks, they have won. Historically people would bet gathered food, tools, horses and even on occasion women to be married. Currently people still play a traditional game where items may be exchanged, however the main draw for stickgames is the money that can be involved. Stickgame tournaments often have grand prizes of up to \$30,000 for first place. People travel far for these tournaments.



*Private collection*

## Projectile Points

Several projectile points were discovered during the construction of the Pelmewash Parkway improvements. The BC Ministry of Transportation worked in partnership with the Okanagan Indian Band and Westbank First Nation’s archeological teams once archeological sites had been found.



*Courtesy of Golder & Associates*

## Fishing Weights

Fishing weights were used to keep the nets submerged so that a desired amount of fish would be caught at a time. Fishing is an important source of sustainability to the Syilx people. Fishing supplied not only food but also a trade item.



*Courtesy of Golder & Associates*

## Buckskin

Okanagan people do not waste any part of the animal. The hide of the animal is skinned and then scraped, removing both the hair and then the membrane side. It is stretched on a rack and then soaked in animal brain mixture. It is stretched again and eventually smoked which takes away any sort of brain smell.

## Buckskin Dress with Painted Designs in Ochre

This buckskin dress was created through the traditional method of tanning by using the brains of the deer to soften the hide. It was created by Barb P. Marchand of the Okanagan Indian Band who was inspired by a description of the dress in James Teit’s Okanagan ethnography report. Most of the dress is laced together with buckskin ties. The ochre paintings on the dress were also created by Ms. Marchand.



*Courtesy of Barb P. Marchand/ Senklip Theatre*



*Lake Country Museum*

## Moccasins

There are many different styles of moccasins across North America, adorned by beads, fur, shells, and even quillwork. The top piece of the moccasin with the quill work is called the vamp.

## Dentalium Shells

Dentalium shells are tusk-shaped shells that were used extensively by numerous tribes in the Pacific Northwest, Plateau and Great Plains areas. They were harvested in the Pacific Ocean by several coastal tribes and exchanged for various goods. For a period of time, dentalium shells were used a currency across a large area of North America. The Okanagans were known to have traded Indian hemp rope fibre for the precious shells.

Dentalium shells have been found in many archaeological and grave sites, including sites within Okanagan territory.



*Private collection*

### Hand Drum

Drums are typically made of rawhide from deer, moose or elk, and rarely beaver or even horse. The drum symbolizes the heartbeat of the Nation. Drums have many protocols and are highly respected. For example, if someone leaves their drums lying around someone else can take it and teach them a lesson about respecting that drum.



Private collection

### Pestle

A pestle is used to grind up seeds, meats, and medicines. Usually pestles are partnered with mortars, which is a large bowl where the grinding takes place.

### Okanagan Hammerstone

A hammerstone is a hard cobble used to strike lithic flakes from a lump of stone to make hand axes and more specialized tools of flint or chert. This hammerstone was well-used and shows telltale battering marks on each end.

This piece was found on the beach at Okanagan Centre.



Courtesy of Herb and Dawn Fallow

### Balsamroot Seeds - *miktu*

The seeds of the arrowleaf balsamroot were used by the Okanagan and other Plateau tribes. They were gathered in the summer time and pounded into a powder, often mixed with other foods and eaten.



Okanagan Indian Band collection

In the Northern Okanagan “calendar” May/June was called *Miktutan*, the seasonal time to harvest the seeds. The young shoots and the roots of the plant are also an important source of food.

**Indian Hemp or Hemp Dogbane (*Apocynum cannabinum*) *Spicən***  
Pronounced *speets-in* in the Okanagan language, this plant was a valuable item for trade due to its many uses in everyday tribal life. The inner fibre of the plant was used to make nets, sew tule mats, weave a variety of storage bags and even used for clothing items. *Spicən* was particularly plentiful in the Okanagan drainage basin including the Okanagan valley. A trade bundle of *spicən* consisted of partially processed fibre.



Courtesy of Ruby Alexis



Courtesy of Ruby Alexis, April Alexis, Gary Bonneau, Wally Louis and Kenny Williams

### Birch Bark Basket

The birch is harvested when the sap on the birch tree is running and the bark is stripped in long pieces. Other baskets are made of cedar root, which is gathered in sandy areas to allow the longest roots to be harvested. The cedar root is soaked in water and split so that it can be woven to the brim of the basket and laced up the sides.



Private collection

### Cedar Root Basket – *yàmxʷa?*

The Syilx name for the coiled cedar root basket is *yàmxʷa?*, pronounced *yam-wha*. This basket is a family heirloom and was originally owned and used by the family of Matilda Wilson of the Okanagan Indian Band. It was created and used as a functional basket for picking berries. If you look closely, you can see the patina from years of saskatoon and huckleberries. The pattern on the basket’s rim is said to be an



Matilda Wilson collection