"We Indians were sure hard workers"
A History of Coast Salish Wool Working

by

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B.A., University of Victoria, 1994

A Thesis Submitted in Partial Fulfillment of the
Requirement for the Degree of

MASTER OF ARTS

in the Department of History

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University of Victoria

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ABSTRACT

In the study of the economic and labour history of the West Coast Native people of British Columbia most research has centered on activities such as fishing, farming and forestry. This thesis turns the attention from what was primarily men's work in the dominant society to the Coast Salish wool working industry where women worked with the help of their children and husbands. I examine the significant economic and cultural contribution Coast Salish woolworkers had on West Coast society, the meeting place woolworkers' sweaters provided between the Coast Salish and the newcomers and the changes which took place in the industry during the last century. This story includes many voices most of which are recorded in newspapers, correspondence and journals, and in the memories of those that lived and worked in the industry.

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DEDICATION

This story is dedicated to Laura Olsen whose hands have knit hundreds of Indian sweaters over the past seventy years. Her hard work and indomitable spirit lives on in her 12 children, 56 grandchildren, 80 great grandchildren and 5 great great grandchildren and in all those, like myself, who have had the honour to know and love her.

NOTES ON NAMING

This is a story of the Coast Salish people currently and more correctly known as the people of the Straits and the Hul'qumi'num. The Straits people include the Lekwammen, Beecher Bay, T'Sou-ke and Wsanec people whose territory spans the southern tip of Vancouver Island northwest to the Sooke hills where it meets Paacheenaht land. Straits territory rises north-east across the Saanich Peninsula/Inlet and the Gulf Islands. To the west of the Straits people are the Hul'qumi'num comprised of the Malahat, Chemainus, Halalt, Penelakut, Lyackson, Sne-ney mux and Snaw-naw-as. Hul'qumi'num territory meets the Straits' most northerly border and continues north up the east coast of Vancouver Island including the Gulf Islands to Nanoose.

These different peoples share certain common cultural features. Though they speak different languages they belong to the same 'linguistic family,' recognizing the common features, that linguists have called the Coast Salish. In this story, for a number of reasons, I use the name Coast Salish and the common place names of the Straits and Hul'quumi'num villages such as Cowichan, Nanaimo, Saanich and Sooke. First, the general readership will not be familiar with many of the specific group's names. Second, many of the villages are currently still deciding what name they want to use and how they want to spell it. Although there is a movement towards returning to an orthography and pronunciations that render community and group names closer to those of the local languages, many Native people do not yet use these terms so I have chosen to use the names that are most commonly used in the villages at the present time.

"First Nations" is replacing "Indian" as the title commonly used when referring to Canada's indigenous people and some Native people are beginning to use "First Nations" in reference to themselves. Many Straits and Hul'qumi'num people have been resistant to the term other than in formal communications and still commonly refer to themselves as Indians. However, the formal use of Indian is often offensive. In order to find an acceptable word to use in this story I conducted an informal poll of some wool workers and their families and most agreed that "Native people" was the best term to use when referring to their people in general. Times will change and the term "Native people" may fall into disrepute, but for now it will satisfy.

INTRODUCTION

Two days before Christmas I answered my doorbell. A tall gaunt man stood at the door holding a shiny, faded and ragged Cowichan Indian Sweater.

"Sylvia," he said, "I was told down town at the Sasquatch Trading Center that you could fix my old sweater."

He held it up to expose the cuffs, unraveled three or four inches up each sleeve, a hole on the right front and the sleeves worn through at the elbows.

"You see," he continued, "I bought this sweater in 1972, the year I graduated with my anthropology degree. I promised myself a sweater when I got a real job. So as soon as my first research contract was signed I bought this sweater and I have worn it ever since. It is looking a little worse for wear but if you could just fix up the sleeves and do something with the hole in the front then I am sure I could get another few good years out of it. I love this sweater. I've worn it everywhere and I don't want to part with it yet."

And so it is with Cowichan sweaters.

In 1978 everyone in the Tsartlip Village, where I live, complained that knitters couldn't get enough for their sweaters and that buyers insulted their work and constantly tried to cut the price as low as possible. So I started buying Indian sweaters from a few of my neighbours. I advertised with a small sign outside my house and a $5.00 ad in the newspaper. Soon a steady trail of customers found their

way to the reserve. I had enough business by 1981 to build a small shop behind our house. From that shop my husband Carl, a Coast Salish man, and I marketed Cowichan knitting. Sales flourished, but by 1991 we were frustrated by our inability to make any significant change in what seemed to be a dead end business for the knitters. The cost of wool had increased yet the knitters were receiving the same price for their sweaters in 1991 as they did in 1978. At that time we closed the marketing end of our business but I have continued to repair sweaters and sew in zippers for the few remaining knitters on the Saanich Peninsula.

Cowichan sweaters have been part of the Olsen family for generations. Laura, my mother-in-law, taught both her sons and daughters to knit. She also taught me to prepare wool, spin and knit when I first married into her family 25 years ago. Laura still knits daily at 83 years of age. She encouraged me to teach my daughters Joni and Heather to knit and we hope that one day they will teach their daughters.

Early travelers and fur traders made note in the records of their first voyages to Coast Salish territory of the heavy woven wool blankets worn and curiously collected by the West Coast people. Some witnessed the looms set up in the longhouses, the goat hair trade between the Island and mainland women and the curious little white dogs kept in flocks and shorn for their wool. The traders brought their own blankets, hand woven in the industrial mills in England, to trade with the Coast Salish people for skins but mostly for food and labour. The traders also

brought sheep north from the farms in the Puget Sound and taught the local people to shepherd and shear. The new immigrants infiltrated most of Coast Salish territory and as they settled they also brought with them new ways to dress: shirts and ties, and jackets and sweaters replaced the thick wool blankets. Government agents and church missionaries replaced furtraders as the primary foreigners dealing with Native people. They brought with them ideas of civilization and Christianity--capitalism, wage labour, exhibitions, and business.

The Europeans came also heavily laden with the cultural attitudes, beliefs and interpretations that informed their impressions, observations and interactions with the Coast Salish. They came to Native territory where the Coast Salish had a successfully organized society functioning with its own set of cultural practices and assumptions.

This story focuses light on one point of intersection between these two peoples. In this work I examine the history of Coast Salish wool workers and more specifically the products that the woolworkers produce--Coast Salish blankets and later Cowichan sweaters.

Coast Salish blankets and Cowichan sweaters open a window for us onto a table of exchange. At this place we can witness the attitudes, beliefs and values of the Coast Salish and the European immigrants as they interact with one another and as these interactions shift over time. We can also see how these changing cultural attitudes affect the lives of both the Coast Salish and European newcomers.

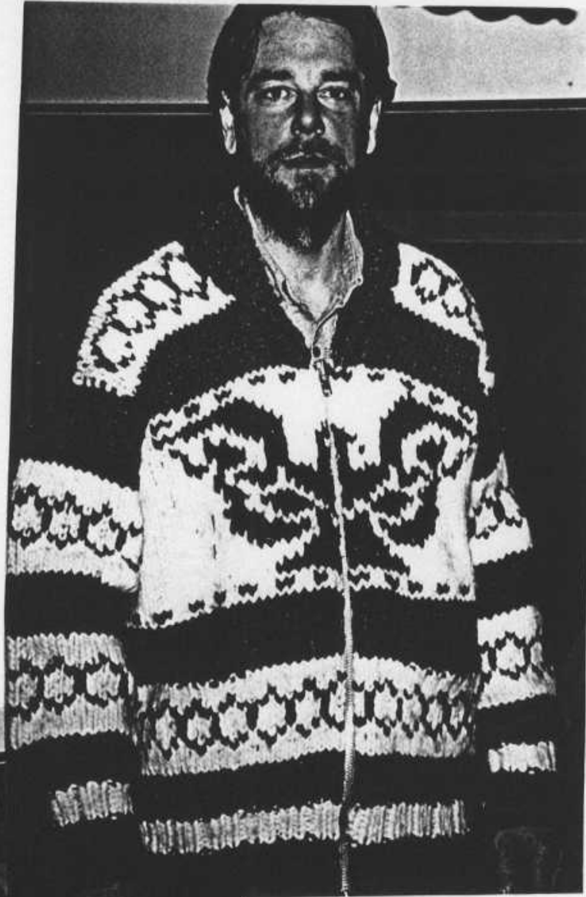
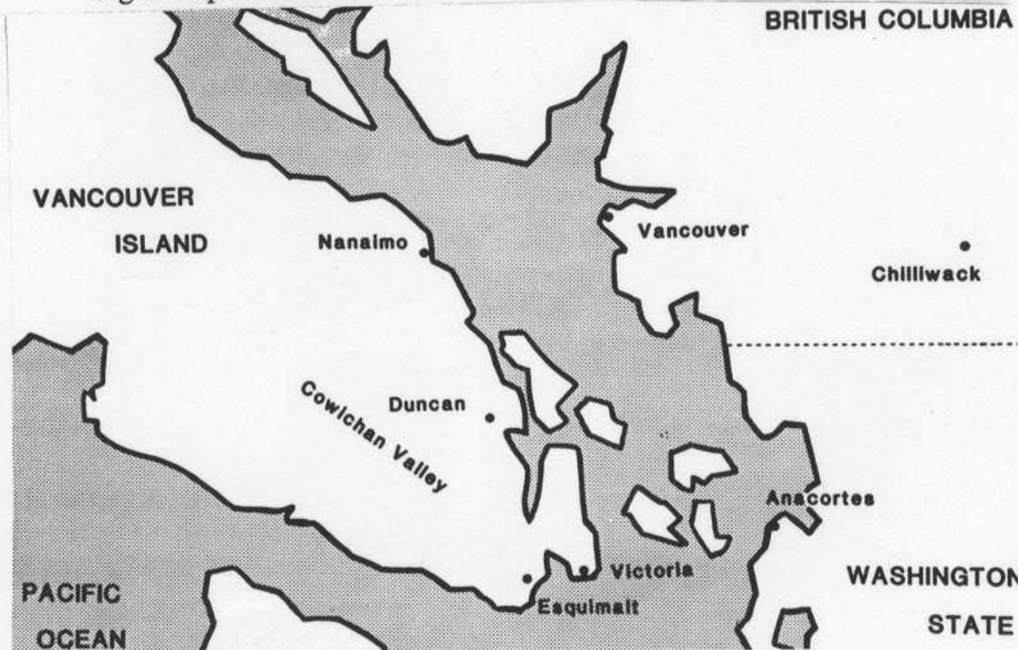


Fig.1 Raw wool drying. Cowichan, 1985

Fig. 2 Map of Southern Vancouver Island territory of Coast Salish woolworkers[1]



1 Photo and map from Margaret Meikle, Cowichan Indian Knitting (Vancouver: UBC Museum of Anthropology), pp. 2 & 8.

The Cowichan sweater story weaves into itself the changing practices of the Coast Salish people as they interact with the newcomers. In many ways the Coast Salish lived in a world apart from the Europeans. Their values and beliefs informed their practices and imbued their blankets and sweaters with meaning quite different from anything the newcomers could understand. In other ways the Coast Salish adapted to and adopted many of the ways of the settlers and what became the mainstream British Columbia population.

My story loosely unravels over one hundred and fifty years of this history of Coast Salish blankets and Cowichan sweaters. I attempt to follow the transformation of the wool workers' industry, the transformation of their products, the transformation of the meaning of their products, and how these transformations affected their lives and society.

This is an ambitious project and I hope that by widening the scope so far I have not weakened the story. I have intended rather to establish a framework, an outline that future writers will rework and fill out with many of the details necessarily omitted from my work.

I believe Cowichan sweaters have not been given the historical significance they deserve. The Cowichan sweater industry played a much more important role in the economies of the Coast Salish than has been previously acknowledged. Historians have looked at wage labour, government relief and subsistence activities as the major components in the Coast Salish economy while relegating Cowichan knitting to a

mere footnote. However, ask any Coast Salish adult of any age how their family made ends meet up until the 1980s and they will likely respond "My mother knit."

This story raises as many questions as it answers and it leaves as many blanks as it fills. But I believe it will open up this very complex and interesting part of British Columbia's collective history in Coast Salish territory.

Cowichan sweaters were often one of the only places where the general BC population came to know the Coast Salish. Cowichan sweaters were a significant point of contact, they became an important BC icon and they were an important figure in B.C. business on southern Vancouver Island.

I have attempted to place this work in the context of John Lutz and Rolf Knight's work on Coast Salish labour and economy and into the larger picture of B.C. history such as those presented by Jean Barman and Robin Fisher. While dealing with blankets I relied on the records of early travelers, fur traders and ethnographers. Newspapers, government documents and early settlers' correspondence fill in the story of the beginning of Cowichan sweaters. As the story progresses I rely heavily on the stories from Coast Salish people and on observations of Cowichan sweater dealers.

I did not attempt a quantitative analysis of the economy of Cowichan sweaters. While this may be a project for someone at a later date it will be fraught with problems. The Cowichan sweater story has not been well committed to paper or formal documents. Rather it lives on in its fullest in the lives and memories of those who have lived it. For this reason I chose to lean more heavily on oral testimony and

in that way to capture what I believe to be the essence of the Cowichan sweater history.

The Cowichan sweater industry began on Southern Vancouver Island and it reached its pinnacle in the same region. While Cowichan knitting was popular on the lower British Columbia mainland and knitters can be found in the interior and up the West Coast, I have chosen to confine my story to southern Vancouver Island where Cowichan knitting was concentrated.

Chapter One

Where blankets aren't bedding and traders aren't capitalists

> These coast Indians are very avaricious in the acquisition of property, blankets being the standard of riches amongst them, as horses are among the interior tribes. Though muskets, canoes &c. are all carefully collected, yet most of these articles owe their acquisition to blankets, and an Indian, in describing the wealth of another, will indicate this by telling how many *pessise* (or blankets) he has. This hoarding up of blankets is the engrossing passion of these people in times of peace, and the exciting cause of their wars ... I have often commiserated a poor-looking man lounging about, his only covering a threadbare, tattered blanket, and on inquiry would be surprised to learn that he was one of the wealthiest men in the tribe, and had several hundred new blankets stored up in air-tight boxes, of native manufacture, in his lodge... To obtain these blankets there is no act of self-denial at which the coast fisherman will hesitate; I might also say no crime which will deter him, if he sees blankets likely to be the result of it. The end of all this scraping and hoarding is to give away the property again at some potlatch at which in a few hours the labour of years will be dissipated.[2]

To the British, a blanket warmed your bed, decorated your chair, or covered your shoulders. A British weaver might also value the quality of fibre and weaving technique. Blankets, however, were obviously something quite different to the Coast Salish. Yet early travellers and traders such as Robert Brown, though clearly thoroughly confused by the Native people's attachment to blankets, judged Native behaviour using European values and cultural assumptions.

It is not only with academic interest that I approach the history of blankets and the Coast Salish people, but also with an enormous respect for the worlds of the

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2 Robert Brown, Robert Brown and the Vancouver Island Exploring Expedition, John Hayman, ed. (Vancouver: University of British Columbia Press, 1989), p. 158.

West Coast indigenous peoples which have been obscured, almost beyond recognition, by the attempts of historians like myself who have tried to portray the relations between Native people and European newcomers. It is the purpose of this chapter to unpack, if possible, using European/Canadian sources, what blankets were to the Coast Salish and what role they played in the unique Coast Salish economy. Even in such sources there are glimpses into how the Coast Salish valued blankets and how they viewed trade. The same sources that have obscured Native people and subsumed them in the European/Canadian world offer hints and traces of a world apart, where blankets aren't bedding and traders aren't capitalists.[3]

For years historians have been confounded by the apparent illogic in the relationship between Native people and European trade goods. Fur-trade historians once concurred with missionaries and anthropologists that Native people were naive, gullible participants in the trade, fascinated by brightly coloured beads and baubles, and blankets with stripes and diamonds, apparently satisfying their embryonic

[3] There has been much debate on the similarities between West Coast Native economies and European capitalism, however, in spite of work such as John Lutz's which argues that the Songhees' social organization prepared them for the wage labour market, my argument focuses much more heavily on the differences between the Coast Salish and European economic concepts. Difference undergirds the arguments of indigenous authors such as Haunani-Kay Trask. "As in most indigenous societies, there was no money, no idea or practice of surplus appropriation, value storing or payment deferral because there was no idea of financial profit from exchange. In other words, there was no basis for economic exploitation in pre-haole Hawai'i." Trask's argument demands other categories of economic analysis. Haunani-Kay Trask, From a Native Daughter: Colonialism and Sovereignty in Hawai'I (Monroe, Me.: Common Courage Press, 1993), p. 5. Pierre Bourdieu presents an interesting discussion on "archaic economies" in his article "Structures, Habitus, Power." He extends economy beyond strict economism and its narrow material calculations or as Marx said, "callous cash payment," to include "symbolic capital." Bourdieu describes symbolic capital as the spiritual or cultural calculation in such expressions as a handshake, insult, and gossip. Much in the Coast Salish economy would be better defined in this way. The Coast Salish exchange system cannot be described as capitalistic in any satisfactory way. Pierre Bourdieu, "Structures, Habitus, Power," in Culture/Power/History: A Reader in Contemporary Social Theory Nicholas B. Dirks, Geoff Eley, and Sherry B. Ortner, eds. (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1994), pp. 167-178.

curiosity. Observations such as Robert Brown's prompted scholars to impute to Native traders irrational motives which in turn apparently enabled unscrupulous Europeans to exploit Native traders and coerce them into selling - as the famous story goes - Manhattan for twenty-four dollars in beads.

However, this argument was seared with the 19th century Social Darwinism common to the era in which most of the informing documents were written. By the 1960s indigenous peoples world-wide began to draw attention to the limited scope of the Western-centredness of such arguments and challenged western scholars to revise contact history.[4]

By the late 1970's works such as Robin Fisher's *Contact and Conflict* undertook to write Native agency into the history of Native/White relations in British Columbia. Fisher posited that West Coast Native traders were neither naive nor ignorant, but as crafty in trade as any newcomer from Europe. Modern historians like Fisher maintain that the extensive Native practice of intertribal trade was structured on the same basic principles as European commerce. Underpinning this argument is the assumption that a common understanding existed between Natives and Europeans because both were motivated by the same straightforward concerns of exchange and individual material gain.[5] This effort to acknowledge Native agency, intelligence and

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[4] Native Americans such as Vine Deloria discuss the emerging consciousness-raising Indian movements since the mid-1960's. He points to the political and cultural questions raised by Native people in regard to their past, and to the response by academics, politicians and the general public to those questions. Vine Deloria, Jr., Custer Died for Your Sins: An Indian Manifesto (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1988). Trask deals with the same emergence in the indigenous Hawai'ian people in From a Native Daughter. A Canadian perspective can be found in Harold Cardinal, The Unjust Society: The Tragedy of Canada's Indians (Edmonton: M.G. Hurtig, 1969) and in Howard Adams, Prison of Grass: Canada from a Native Point of View (Saskatoon: Fifth House Publishers, 1975).

[5] Fisher argues from a purely rational, economic perspective, maintaining that the Native traders were inspired only by the same material concerns as European traders. "The trade meant that the furs were not used for clothing as much as they had been prior to the arrival of the Europeans. The need for an alternative arose,

independence had widespread appeal in academic circles. Historians uncritically attributed European concepts to Native people and thus 'granted' them some sort of equality--a kind of level playing field--with the newcomers.

However important and necessary this revised argument was to the historical debate, it did little more than include Native people in some marginal way in the European world. The idea of a shared humanity which replaced Social Darwinism[6] was confused with the notion that all peoples shared a common, and very European, perception of the world, yet all the while indigenous people appealed for recognition of their distinctness--for acknowledgement of their cultural specificity. Indigenous peoples' rejection of the mainstream portrayal of the "discovery of America" during the anniversary in 1992 of Columbus' first Atlantic voyage is a recent illustration of what has been their consistent petition for non indigenous people to acknowledge the complexity and uniqueness of the worlds of Native North and South America. Raised awareness made it increasingly unacceptable to consider only a European-centered

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and the Indians turned their attention to trading cloth, clothing, and blankets. The demand for blankets particularly remained fairly constant, and they became a staple in the trade. As a garment, blankets served an important function for the Indians. But the blanket was also an article that could be easily counted and compared." This, of course, is in complete contradiction to Robert Brown's observations recorded on page one. Robin Fisher, Contact and Conflict: Indian-European Relations in British Columbia, 1774-1890 (Vancouver: University of British Columbia Press, 1977), p. 6. Similar arguments are made by Arthur J. Ray in Indians in the Fur Trade: their role as trappers, hunters, and middlemen southwest of Hudson Bay 1660-1870 (Toronto:University of Toronto Press, 1974), Rolf Knight in Indians at Work: An Informal History of Native Indian Labour in British Columbia, 1858-1930 (Vancouver: New Star Books, 1978). This argument is made more recently and explicitly by BruceTrigger in "Early Native North American Responses to European Contact: Romantic versus Rationalist Interpretations" The Journal of American History, (March 1991).

[6] Social Darwinism (which held that human races had evolved like animal species and that "coloured" races were at the bottom of the human evolutionary hierarchy and "white" races were at the top) has not been seriously quoted since the 19th century. However, Social Darwinistic thinking can be easily traced in Canadian Indian policy. Most of Canada's Indian policy throughout the 19th and 20th century holds that Native people are childlike and must be protected, taught, and corrected.

point of view or to impose a Western-centered valuation of events and material on indigenous peoples.

Having discarded the argument that Native people were irrational savages, historians are left debating a new hypothesis of sameness - that Native people were "rational, economic beings in the European sense."[7] There is an underlying false dichotomy informing this debate which is exposed by scholars such as Elizabeth Vibert, who argue alternatively that Native people needed neither to be rational nor irrational from the European perspective, but rather that they operated from the internal rationale of their distinctive world view. Vibert maintains that it is imperative to consider the internal logic of the actions and motivations of all parties examined.[8] However, drawing on Calvin Martin's argument that the cosmology of many indigenous peoples incorporates the animal and spirit realm into the material world, it becomes increasingly difficult to decide what categories are necessary, or whether we are even aware of the categories necessary to examine the perceptual framework in which the Coast Salish embedded their blankets and practised their trade.[9] If, in fact, their world was an integrated realm involving animal and spirit along with human concerns, the academic is at somewhat of a loss as to what

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[7] Christopher L. Miller and George R. Hamell critique this view in "A New Perspective on Indian-White Contact: Cultural Symbols and Colonial Trade," The Journal of American History, p. 14.

[8] Elizabeth Vibert, "'The Natives Were Strong to Live': Reinterpreting Early-Nineteenth-Century Prophetic Movements in the Columbia Plateau", Ethnohistory 42 (Spring 1995): p. 197.

[9] Martin discusses the "other-than-persons" notions of many Native groups. "For hunter societies, words of animal and plant, words of place, and the enabling powers of one's earth-derived artifice were transmitted by these beings themselves." Calvin Luther Martin, In the Spirit of the Earth: Rethinking History and Time (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1992), p. 103. Martin also observes that "their ideals and mode of action, phenomenology, ontology, and epistemology differed radically from that of Europeans then and Westerners now." Calvin Martin, "The Metaphysics of Writing Indian-White History," Ethnohistory, 26 (Spring 1979): pp. 153-59.

categories of analysis to use in a world that is not human centered. My work acknowledges its deficiencies in this regard but must be satisfied to catch a few threads woven into the records and to provide glimpses of what the Coast Salish were doing when they wove their blankets, and subsequently, when they traded their goods for Hudson's Bay Company imports.

European traders may have assumed that when a blanket was traded for a sea otter skin a simple material transaction was completed. However, when a Hudson's Bay Company blanket passed from the hands of a European to a Coast Salish trader not only was its ownership transferred but its meaning was also transformed. The HBC blanket entered a world where traditional blankets had long held a complex and honoured position. The trading blanket's worth inflated from mere utility to include the symbolic and ceremonial.

Culturally relevant valuation of events and material goods has recently come under close scrutiny, exposing the central weakness of solely economic arguments such as Fisher's. Christopher Miller and George Hamell maintain that in the early contact years European notions of utility and economics played almost no role in Native trade. And while Native people increasingly acquired a more European concept of utility attached to many trade items, they continued to purchase what might be called "non-utilitarian" commodities in huge volumes.[10] This seems to be so with the Coast Salish. Although blankets can hardly be called non-utilitarian the reason the

[10] Miller and Hamell, "A New Perspective on Indian-White Contact," p. 314.

Coast Salish gathered them in large quantities was distinct from a European concept of their utility.[11]

The distinction between utilitarian and non-utilitarian, along with the meaning of blankets and trade, must be made relative to the particular cultural context in which it is embedded. There is a historical retranslation of meaning required that challenges historians to reveal the contradictions which exist between records such as Brown's and historical analysis such as Fisher's, and to attempt to unpack the logic of the Coast Salish/European trade in blankets beyond what is revealed in the HBC ledgers.[12]

In attempting to get at the distinctive logic of Native perceptions, one often engages in the purely speculative and risks losing credibility with those requiring absolute conclusions. However, if nothing else, observations such as Robert Brown's demand a re-analysis of the Coast Salish trade in blankets. West Coast Native people were not trading in blankets simply because there was a decrease in the number of skins available for their clothing requirements, as economic analyses such as Fisher's would have us believe.[13] Rather, there was an overarching internal symbolic logic operating on the Native side of what has previously been depicted by historians as a standardized economic trade relation between Natives and newcomers.[14]

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[11] Bruce White raises the important question of how the Ojibwa differentiated between what was natural and supernatural or what was utilitarian and nonutilitarian. Bruce M. White "Encounters with Spirits: Ojibwa and Dakota Theories about the French and Their Merchandise," Ethnohistory 41.3, (Summer 1994).

[12] Bruce Trigger questions whether it is a sound argument to "assign cultural relativism a dominant role in the discussion" of how Native people perceived the first Europeans and their goods. Trigger argues from a rationalist perspective that "practical reason has the capacity to transcend culture." Trigger, "Early Native North American Responses to European Contact:," pp. 1195-97.

[13] Fisher, Contact & Conflict, p. 6.

[14] The Hudson's Bay Company used blankets as a standardized trade item in exchange for Native pelts. The famous 'point' blankets became increasingly important after the 1780s. "Blankets were standardized with

While the material logic of the trade in blankets has been widely studied in fur trade history, the symbolic nature of the logic behind Native trade practices has been largely overlooked until recently. Although this study is informed by current scholarly contributions by Lutz, Vibert, Miller and Hammel and others, I can only guardedly examine Coast Salish motivation using new categories such as prestige economy or symbolic value as they carry with them, once again, Western notions as old as economy and utility. A world integrating humans, spirits, animals and the earth may require unique and very separate analytical categories. Most of what we know about the 19th century Coast Salish world comes from traders or European observers informed by European values, an understanding of suprahuman categories remains elusive.

If history has overlooked the Coast Salish symbolic attachment to blankets, it is not in the least because of its insignificance. Blankets maintained their pre-eminent place in Coast Salish culture even into the late nineteenth century, well after the people began to make the transition into the cash economy. My analysis of the evidence persuades me to contend that it was likely the intensity of the Coast Salish symbolic attachment to blankets and what they meant in Coast Salish cosmology that prevented the people from readily adopting the new cash economy.

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the application of the 'point system'. The 'points' were marks on the side of the blankets, denoting its size and its value in beaver, a three point blanket being traded for three beaver, and so on, according to the number of points." Richard Somerset Mackie, "The Hudson's Bay Company on the Pacific, 1821-1843," (Ph..D. diss., University of British Columbia, 1993), p. 367. For more information on the introduction of 'point' blankets see: Alice M. Johnson, "Mons. Maugenest Suggests," The Beaver, 291 (Summer, 1960): pp. 36-9.

For centuries Coast Salish women engaged in the manufacture of textiles. Although weaving was prominent among Pacific Northwest Coast peoples, the Coast Salish wove unique and particularly coveted colourful, durable blankets.[15] The historical record, however, characterizes the Coast Salish as primarily fishers and farmers. Whether weaving escaped the notice of historians because of its 'feminine' nature or because it falls outside of their narrow focus on resource material history, textile manufactures have been given little critical attention. However, evidence indicates that the wool working tradition played a critical role in Coast Salish culture. This tradition adapted over time and the product changed with the influence of settlement, but wool working remained a significant factor in Coast Salish life until the late 1980s when it became severely threatened.

Ozette, a Makah fishing village near the tip of Washington State's Cape Flattery near southern Coast Salish territory, was unearthed by archaeologists in the early 1980's. In addition to finding looms, spinning whorls, combs, beaters, and several blanket boxes, researchers discovered a folded blanket, preserved in a wooden box under a thick layer of clay. Archaeologists estimate the blanket to be between 300 and 500 years old. Weaving specialists determine that "the weaving technique of [the] five-hundred-year-old blanket is almost identical with that of a Salish mountain goat hair blanket from the Fraser Valley which dates from 1830."[16]

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[15] Of all the coastal weavers it was the Northern Tlingit women who wove intricate Chilkat blankets that rival yet are quite different from the Coast Salish weavings. They also played an important role in the northern Native trade system. (The Navajo and Hope are the next nearest tribes to weave similar textiles to the Coast Salish.).

[16] Paula Gustafson, Salish Weaving (Vancouver: Douglas & McIntyre, 1980), p. 14.

Noted anthropologist Homer Barnett's work questions the antiquity of blanket weaving amongst the Coast Salish. He surmised that goat blankets were a late product on Vancouver Island, Puget Sound and in other areas where mountain goats weren't indigenous. Barnett maintains that it wasn't until the 19th century that the Coast Salish began trading for goat hair and weaving blankets in any number.[17] However, the Ozette blanket challenges his theory and such archaeological evidence makes it nearly certain the Coast Salish trade in mountain goat wool and the manufacture of blankets dates at least as far back as the Ozette site.

Although the antiquity of Coast Salish weaving cannot be exactly established, it was certainly a common practice when the first travellers and fur traders arrived in Coast Salish territory in the early 19th century. Early 20th century anthropologists recorded how grandmothers taught young Coast Salish girls the art of spinning, dyeing, weaving and designing in preparation for the manufacture of blankets. At first the young girls only helped more experienced weavers with wool preparation, but as soon as the girls were old enough, they were responsible for completing their own blankets. Coast Salish women from the time of their puberty were expected to spend much of their time making wool.

> [T]he age of puberty was an important, portentous time, and its onset, especially in girls, was marked by special observances ... But most of all she had to learn to work, to be industrious, because if she didn't learn it now she never would. Her grandmother made her practise weaving or basketry, training her fingers.[18]

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[17] Homer G. Barnett, The Coast Salish of British Columbia (Eugene: The University Press, 1955), pp. 119-20.

[18] Wilson Duff quoted in Paula Gustafson's Salish Weaving, p. 87.

Charles Hill-Tout noted that the "[girls] on arriving at womanhood and ... women during their periods ... customarily spent their time in making yarn."[19]

Coast Salish women also controlled the industry and trade necessary to acquire the material for making blanket wool. Although relatively scarce today because of logging and development in the coastal mountains, large numbers of mountain goats once occupied the mountain slopes flanking the Fraser Valley and Fraser Canyon. Fleeces were available when the goats were hunted for their meat and hides, but it was not always necessary to kill the animal to secure the wool. In the spring and summer women and children collected wool when the goats shed their winter coats. At that time "every bush and tall dry weed above the timber line is festooned with tufts of wool that can be picked off in handfuls."[20] No doubt acquiring sufficient hair to complete a whole blanket would be difficult. It is estimated that an average size blanket of approximately 150 cm by 115 cm (60 inches by 45 inches) required the hair from at least two mountain goats.[21]

Coast Salish women from the mainland traded their valuable goat hair for the hair from woolly white dogs owned by other Coast Salish women from Vancouver Island. In spite of the fact that blankets can be woven from goat hair alone, curiously, mainland weavers sought out the dog hair from the island to mix into their wool. Dog hair, however, cannot be used independently but requires the more stable fibre from the mountain goats in order to be woven. Yet dog hair was sought after by mainland

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[19] Gustafson, Salish Weaving, p. 87.

[20] Charles C. Willoughby, "A New Type of Ceremonial Blanket from the Northwest Coast" American Anthropologist,, Vol. 12, No. 1, (January - March 1910): p. 6.

[21] Gustafson, Salish Weaving, p. 70.

weavers and appears to have had equal value with the necessary goat hair.[22] Ed Brown, a Native from Nanaimo, recalls the goat and dog hair trade.

> At certain times canoes would arrive at Nanaimo for Sliammon Indians from Squirrel Cove, Cortez Island. They brought bales of mountain goat's hair in trade for the native dog's hair; the Sliammon Indians had procured the hair from the mainland (possibly by barter). The mountain goat is not native to Vancouver Island. In the business of exchange the bales of hair would be laid side by side, the hair patted down by hand, adding more of this kind or that of hair, until all were satisfied the bales were even then agreement was reached.[23]

In addition to the goat and dog hair weavers used fillers such as fluff from fireweed, cattail, feathers and fur to add bulk to their wool.[24]

The mysterious, and now extinct, white wool dogs[25] received a lot of attention from early visitors and settlers. Travellers especially interested in the natural history of the West Coast noted the curious cedar bark and woollen clothing worn by the Native people. They speculated that the wool coverings must have been made from the wool of the equally curious flocks of little white dogs. In 1792 Captain George

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[22] Paula Gustafson argues that canine hair is almost impossible to spin using the suspension-spindle method employed by Coast Salish weavers. There are no hair samples from the Coast Salish wool dogs because the dogs are extinct. But Gustafson maintains that no matter how curly or long and no matter how much clay was mixed with the hair, as the Coast Salish often did, the fibres would still automatically unwind after they had been twisted. My inquiries among dog wool workers confirm Gustafson's contention. Although dog hair is often spun finely and knitted, it would not respond well to the techniques used by the Coast Salish. Gustafson, Salish Weaving, p. 83. A careful fibre analysis would be required to clearly understand the characteristics of the dog hair used in the weavings. Based on the lack of this kind of evidence it appears at this time that it was highly unlikely Coast Salish weavers ever used solely dog hair. However, one comment by George Vancouver indicates that their dogs did, in fact, have unique canine hair. "[The dogs] were all shorn as close to the skin as sheep are in England; and so compact were their fleeces, that large portions could be lifted up by a corner without causing any separation." Edmond S. Meany, Vancouver's Discovery of Puget Sound (Portland: Binfords & Mort, Publishers, 1942), pp. 135-36.

[23] Wm. Barraclough, "The White Woolly Dogs," B.C. Historical News, May 1969, p. 11.

[24] Barraclough, "The White Wooly Dogs," p.69.

[25] The records indicate that Coast Salish wool dogs were likely extinct by the late 1890s.

Vancouver was the first among many who recorded their observations of the wool dogs on the West Coast.

> Having reached the place where they intended to land, they were met by upwards of two hundred, some in canoes with their families, and others walking along the shore, attended by about forty dogs in a drove, shorn close to the skin like sheep.[26]

The dogs also caught the attention of Valdez and Galiano on their visit to the coast in 1792.

> Their clothes were reduced in general to blankets of coarse and well woven wool fastened by two pins on the shoulder, but only long enough to reach to the knees ... They also offered new blankets which we afterwards concluded were of dog's hair, partly because when the woven hair was compared with that of those animals there was no apparent difference, and partly from the great number of dogs they keep in those villages, most of them being shorn. These animals are of moderate size, resembling those of English breed, with very thick coats, and usually white; among other things they differ from those of Europe in their manner of barking, which is simply a miserable howl.[27]

In order to keep the wool breed pure, Coast Salish women isolated the dogs on the Gulf Islands. It was observed that this rare strain "possessed by only a few tribes inhabiting the coast [and] scrupulously kept on islands to prevent their extending or escaping, [were] differing in every specific detail from all the other breeds of dogs belonging to either coast or inland Indians."[28]

The evidence strongly suggests that one of the primary occupations of both mainland and island Coast Salish women was the complex manufacture of the famous

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[26] Meany, Vancouver's Discovery of Puget Sound, p. 162.

[27] F.W. Howay and E.O.S. Scholefield, British Columbia From the Earliest Times to the Present (Vancouver: The S.J. Clarke Publishing Company, 1914), p. 170.

[28] John Lord, The Naturalist in Vancouver Island and British Columbia (London, 1866), p. 215.

blankets. It also appears that the women had sole control over all the aspects of the industry including wool trading, wool production, and weaving. It appears that even after the introduction of Hudson's Bay Company trade-blankets women held some level of authority over the quality and choice of blankets traded. In his record of a trading encounter R.C. Mayne infers that the Coast Salish women were a nuisance during trade. But given the central role women played in the wool trade and in the manufacture of traditional Coast Salish blankets, it is likely rather that the women were called on for their expertise, as can be witnessed in Mayne's account.

> I have said that it was partly curiosity to see the white man, and still more the hope of making larger sums for their furs than the Hudson Bay Company's agents would give them that led the Indians to make the journey to Victoria. In the latter hope they were often disappointed; but it must not therefore, be inferred that the Indians are bad traders. On the contrary, they are some of the best hands at a bargain or deal I have ever met with; the squaws, as may be usual with their sex, having the most to say upon the matter, and being the harder to persuade. In buying of Indians, if the squaw be present, it is always advisable to win her favour. The man never concludes a bargain without consulting her; and I have frequently seen her put a veto upon some commercial arrangement that I had at the eleventh moment, if she disapproves of their make or material. It is therefore imagined settled, simply because she happened to be annoyed, and was sulky at something that had transpired while the bargain was being made. So when the matter is settled, the shirts, blankets, or other articles taken in exchange are always passed to the woman for her inspection and approval; and she claims the right of declaring the deal at an end, it is always advisable to win her to your side, if possible, when buying anything; and this can generally be done by a judicious present of beads or perhaps a pair of gorgeous earrings.[29]

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[29] R.C. Mayne, Four Years in British Columbia and Vancouver Island, John Murray, ed. (London: 1862), p. 76.

Mayne's interpretation buries what may have been the women's legitimate role in scrutinising the blankets' colour and fabric in order to ensure that each blanket met the particular requirements of the Native traders. In a similar way John Work's account of a trading encounter limits the Native trader's criteria to the price they were to receive:

> Several of the Natives visited us and examined all our goods, and have a good deal to talk about our prices which they seem not inclined to accept of but stand out for the extravagant prices of these years past which their expectation of Americans arriving induces them to hope they will be able to obtain ... The quality of our goods particularly blankets and other woollens are also complained of and said to be far inferior to those that Capt. Allan [Captain Allan, of the American brig Europa] had and also to those which they get from the Russians.[30]

It is important to note that in this incident the Native traders did not hold out for more blankets or fewer skins, but rather they specifically demanded American blankets. In the end they received nothing more from the Americans apart from a small bonus of alcohol. This may indicate that American blankets possessed certain unspecified characteristics that attracted Native traders. It is difficult to ascertain what the particular features were that made the American blankets favourable, but it appears the Native traders were not only bargaining for higher prices, as has been previously argued,[31] but for certain colours and patterns which were in some way meaningful to them.

Although it appears the HBC trade blankets were incorporated into similar roles as their hand-woven counterparts, they took on a slightly different meaning that

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[30] John Work, The Journal of John Work January to October, 1835 (Victoria: Charles F. Banfield, 1945), p. 21.

[31] Fisher's argument in Contact and Conflict on pp. 26-27 focuses exclusively on the Native traders' demand for high prices. His focus masks many of the subtleties in the records. While one element in the "tiresome bargaining" of the Native traders was their determination to get the best price and while they may very well have "manipulated" competing traders, it is also very likely that the traders and Fisher were not privy to what the internal Native criteria was or to what meaning the Native traders put on material gain.

will be discussed later. At this point we will discuss the general role blankets played in Coast Salish society.

While blankets possessed both material and symbolic value in the Coast Salish world, it is probably incorrect to concentrate on their value in terms of this dichotomy. A close look at the records indicates that blankets had multiple layers of meaning in Coast Salish society. Meanings attributed to the spirit or animal world may not be accessible through an academic enquiry, but even the limited documents available reveal that Native people did not apply strictly European utilitarian valuation to their blankets.

The Coast Salish used their hand-woven blankets along with rush and cedar mats as clothing and bedding. Most records give priority to the cedar weavings, but wool blankets were often mentioned. Archibald Menzies, a botanist on Captain Vancouver's voyage describes Coast Salish weaving.

> In some place [somewhere between the Gulf of Georgia and Birch Bay] we saw them at work on a kind of coarse blanket made of double twisted woollen yarn and curiously wove by their fingers with great patience and ingenuity into various figures [sic] thick cloth that would baffle the powers of more civilized artists with all their implements to imitate.[32]

Some early observers noted the high quality of the woollen capes worn by the

[32] Quoted in Paula Gustafson, Salish Weaving, p. 31.

Coast Salish, but there is little evidence that the Coast Salish used their most highly favoured blankets on their backs or their beds. On the contrary, as Robert Brown observed, it appeared to the early observers that they used their most threadbare weavings for clothing while reserving the best for other functions.[33]

Besides their common utility, blankets were also the main form of currency and the most prestigious wealth item in the Coast Salish economy.[34] They traded their blankets with the Haida for the celebrated Haida ocean-going canoes. A measure of the relative value of the blankets is revealed in the 1843 purchase by Jean Baptiste Bolduc, a Catholic missionary. He received a canoe measuring 42 feet long, three feet wide with a six-bow and capable of carrying 30 people in exchange for four hand-woven blankets.[35]

Slaves were also often purchased with blankets, although it does not seem that there was a consistent internal standard of trade. On the lower Columbia River in 1837, the price of a slave varied from eight to fifteen blankets,[36] while the price of a slave in Cowichan in 1849 was 80 blankets. Charles Jones maintains that in the late 19th century his grandfather paid 600-700 blankets for each of his sixteen slaves.[37]

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33 Brown, Robert Brown and the Vancouver Island Exploring Expedition, p. 158.

34 The use of currency as a category of analysis is, in itself, problematic as it denotes a purely material exchange. However, as I explained in the opening I am constrained by the limited categories available to me. Therefore, I describe blankets as the main currency for large trade items in the Coast Salish economy and the haiqua shell as currency for smaller items. For a more detailed discussion of the haiqua shell, see Richard Mackie and Robert Galois' article, "A Curious Currency Part 1: Haiqua Shells on the Northwest Coast in the 19th Century," The Midden: Publication of the Archaeological Society of British Columbia, Vol. 22, No. 4, (October 1990).

35 John Lutz, "Work, Wages and Welfare in Aboriginal-Non-Aboriginal Relations, British Columbia, 1849-1970," (PhD. diss., University of Ottawa, 1994), p. 170.

36 James Gibson, Otter Skins, Boston Ships, and China Goods: The Maritime Fur Trade of the Northwest Coast, 1784 -1867 (Montreal: McGill-Queen's University Press, 1992), p. 370.

37 Charles Jones, with Stephen Bosustow, Queesto: Pacheenaht Chief by Birthright (Nanaimo: Theytus, 1981), p. 27.

These numbers can be accounted for at least in part by the inflation caused by the importation of HBC blankets, which will be discussed later.

Bride prices were often calculated in blankets. In 1889 Boas noted that a bride was taken for 40 goat hair blankets.[38] It is also likely that the estimation of the value of a woman as slave or bride would be assessed in terms of her ability to manufacture blankets.

Blankets were also used by some in conflict resolution. George Dawson observed during his 1878 trip to the Queen Charlotte Islands:

> At Masset last winter, a young [man] made some improper [illegible] a young woman, whose father hearing of the matter, was very angry, & immediately tore up twenty blankets. This was not merely to give vent to his feelings, for the young man had to follow suit [sic], & in this case not having the requisite amount of property, the others of his tribe had to subscribe & furnish it, or leave a lasting disgrace in the tribe.[39]

On the same visit Dawson noted the blankets being used as an election device.

> If for instance a contest is to be carried on between two men or three as to who is to be chief. One may tear up ten blankets scattering the fragments, the others must do the same, or retire, & so on till one has mastered the others.[40]

In both of these Haida cases social position was maintained through the demonstration of ownership of blankets. Similar cases are evidenced in Coast Salish

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[38] Franz Boas, The American Anthropologist "Notes on the Snanaimug" (Oct. 1889), p. 323.

[39] Douglas Cole and Bradley Locknew, eds., The Charlottes, George Dawson's 1878 Survey of the Queen Charlotte Islands (Vancouver: UBC Press, 1993), p. 59.

[40] Cole and Locknew, eds., The Charlottes, p. 59.

culture in the curious practice of tearing blankets into small pieces. This was not a random destruction of the weaving as some have imagined, but rather a method of redistributing its worth. Recipients of the small pieces collected the fragments and stitched them together reconstituting a blanket.

Blankets were not only distributed at potlatches as an item of economic exchange or as an investment in social prestige. They were signifiers that an event had been witnessed. The blanket exchange testified that a particular transaction had taken place. For instance, when a person was named, married, or a land transaction took place, the attendants called to witness the event received blankets to attest to the event and encode that transaction in Coast Salish history.[41]

Blankets also held a prominent position in Coast Salish winter-dancing ceremonies. It is in these private Coast Salish rituals that blankets are particularly linked to the most important expression of Coast Salish spirituality. Winter dancing may once have been separate from potlatches and give-aways but it appears over the last century or more they have blended together. The dance ceremony includes a candidate who becomes "sick". A shaman recognises the "sick" person as a "new dancer". The "new dancer" is guided through an initiation process lasting a number of days until he or she learns a specific dance and song. The "new dancer" is then included in the big house ceremonies that take place regularly during the winter months.[42]

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[41] The blanket's function is a combination of a cash payment and a legal document. It invested in the receiver a community responsibility with regards to the particular event.

[42] Wayne Suttles, Coast Salish Essays, (Vancouver: Talonbooks, 1987), pp. 204-6.

Blankets played a key role in the entire "new dancer" ritual. Special blankets were used on the big house floor, the dancer's bed, the tent, the canopy and the doors. Gifts of blankets were distributed as symbols of esteem for both the giver and the receiver. Payment of blankets was made to workers in the bighouse during the ceremonies.[43] The role mountain goat hair played in the winter dance ceremony was not confined to the blankets. Dancers' headresses were made with long twisted strands of mountain goat hair. The belt used to constrain the dancer during the ritual was made of mountain goat hair as were the rattles used on their feet and held in their hands.[44]

Both blankets and goat hair were used extensively in Coast Salish spiritual ceremonies and were imbued with spiritual symbolism. European trade blankets were incorporated into the ceremonies alongside their hand-woven counterparts adopting the spiritual significance.[45] And although sheep wool eventually replaced goat hair belts and rattles, it is important to note here that goat hair was used in bighouse paraphernalia long after sheep wool was readily available and commonly used by Coast Salish women for other things.[46]

The evidence indicates that blankets played a multifaceted role in Coast Salish economy. On one hand blankets were a signifier of material wealth and a means to acquire significant goods such as canoes and wives and on the other

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[43] Suttles, Coast Salish Essays, pp. 204-6.

[44] Samples of goat wool Coast Salish spirit dance regalia are available at the Royal British Columbia Museum.

[45] Gustafson, Salish Weaving, pp. 33-5.

[46] Coast Salish women knit with sheep wool as early as the 1870's yet it appears from museum pieces studied that bighouse rattles and belts were still made exclusively of goat wool until well after the 1920's. The date is purely speculation but there appears to be no sheep wool regalia is dated earlier than the 1940's.

blankets were hoarded and hidden while their owners appeared materially impoverished. Blankets also possessed a spiritual significance illustrated to some degree by the practice of cutting them up and distributing them but best observed through their role in the Coast Salish winter dancing ceremonies.[47]

Early records, such as Robert Brown's, imply that wealth was assessed in terms of how many blankets a person owned and that wealth was demonstrated by giving the blankets away at the potlatch or give-away, in some way converting material wealth into social prestige.[48] While it may be possible that the blanket give - away served primarily to advance the social standing of the giver, my sense is that it was not only personal and immediate gain that was acquired at give-aways, but prestige which accrued to the family and community for posterity. It also seems likely, in a world containing spiritual and animistic entities, that the Coast Salish were not solely benefiting their human standing by rendering themselves destitute. Though I cannot recreate the spiritual and other-worldly values that surely played into their cosmology, the evidence intimates a logic which is not necessarily completely human centred, certainly not material centred and not part of a European capitalist style economy. In spite of there being incalculable factors, it is strongly suggested here that the symbolic value of blankets superseded the material in the cultural assessments of the Coast Salish.

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[47] Coast Salish winter dancing retains a highly secretive nature even to this day. For this reason I have limited my comments concerning these dances to information which has already been published by Wayne Suttles. Although the discussion of significance and meaning of blankets within these rituals could be much more detailed I respect the Coast Salish desire that their private ceremonies remain that way.

[48] Hayman, Robert Brown and the Vancouver Island Exploring Expedition, p. 158.

Up until this point I have largely left the hand-woven Coast Salish blankets and the HBC imports undifferentiated. The exact location in time and meaning where the hand-woven blanket begins and ends, and the HBC blankets take over, is blurred but I will attempt to clarify that distinction in this section. In 1866 John Lord, a British naturalist travelling through Vancouver Island, noted that "Since the Hudson's Bay Company introduced blankets the native manufacture has entirely ceased, and the dog from which the hair was procured is extinct or very nearly."[49] Yet other evidence indicates that the exchange of mountain goat/dog hair blankets continued long after the introduction of Hudson's Bay Company blankets as the principal trade good in the early 19th century, and even after the dollar replaced blankets as the main Coast Salish currency. Edward Curtis, the famous photographer of the early 1900's, stated that "the value of mountain goat hair as currency in the non pecuniary society of the Salish appears to have been considerable even after the introduction of cash." He noted that ordinary trade articles were usually measured in dentalium shells while larger items were measured in mountain goat hair blankets.

> Among the Cowichan the usual medium of exchange was the goat hair. Dentalium shells (approximately 40 to 60 per fathom length) [on a string] were used mostly in small transactions, about a thousand of the smaller shells (less valuable than the larger ones) being required to buy a blanket. Five blankets, a deerskin skirt, and a fathom of shells would purchase ... one ocean-going canoe. When trade blankets became available they were valued at one-twentieth the cost of a goat

[49] Lord, The Naturalist in Vancouver Island and British Columbia, p. 215.

> hair blanket, ie. a hundred Hudson's Bay point blankets, a deerskin shirt and a fathom of shells would purchase one ocean-going canoe.[50]

However, while the trade in Hudson's Bay Company blankets did not completely destroy the indigenous textile manufacture, significant ruptures occurred in the Coast Salish blanket economy during the 19th century. Early travel records and subsequent histories have stated that the Coast Salish abandoned their local weaving in favour of imported blankets and that by the 1850's or 1860's handwoven blankets had become obsolete. In addition, John Lutz maintains that because the Coast Salish were familiar with blankets as currency they easily substituted Hudson's Bay Company imports for their traditional weaving, thus experiencing a post-contact period of increased wealth, propelling their traditional prestige economy into heights previously unknown.[51]

This argument may be compelling, but there are too many questions left unanswered for it to be totally satisfying. While there may have been a reduction in the manufacture of goat and dog hair blankets by the mid-19th century, it is not sufficient to conclude that the Coast Salish simply found trade blankets more appealing or that they favoured them because they were easier to acquire. This argument has been put forward by writers such as W. Walkem. He recorded in 1914: "Just as soon as the Indian found he could buy from the Hudson's Bay Company a better and warmer blanket for a few dollars, he abandoned the one of native manufacture associated as it was with difficult and hazardous climbing through the mountains."[52]

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[50] Gustafson, Salish Weaving, p. 71.

[51] Lutz, "Work, Wages and Welfare," pp. 185-86

[52] W. Wymond Walkem, Stories of Early British Columbia (Vancouver: News-Advertiser, 1914), p. 118.

The demise of handwoven Coast Salish blankets is a more complex matter than has been previously supposed. The latter half of the century brought with it many significant changes that affected the production of the blankets. Mountain goat hair became increasingly difficult to obtain as logging and settlement encroached on the Fraser Valley and Fraser Canyon. No doubt wool dogs had an equally hard time surviving as a constant stream of settlers invaded the Gulf Islands. Foreign domestic dogs may have interbred with the wool dogs, thus weakening the breed until it was indistinguishable from the common family pet. Settlement also brought increased opportunities for Coast Salish men and women to sell their labour to the developing colony.[53] Blanket manufacture was assaulted on two fronts: the essential materials were threatened at the same time as weavers were drawn to alternative occupations.

It has been commonly thought that the Coast Salish abandoned their traditional weaving and that their wool dogs were extinct by the mid-19th century, yet there are indications that they were still weaving and using goat wool as late as the 1920's. Handmade blankets are difficult to trace through the late 19th century because few observers differentiate between them and HBC imports. In a few cases they are deliberately noted, such as in Franz Boas' 1889 statement that a bride's parents received forty mountain-sheep blankets and other valuable items at the marriage of their daughter.[54] Many photographs from the early 20th century show Coast Salish elders and chiefs wearing traditional handwoven blankets. Saanich elders also recall

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[53] Lutz, "Work, Wages and Welfare," p. 64.

[54] Boas, The American Anthropologist, p. 323.

hand-woven blankets retaining a pre-eminent position as big house and ceremonial attire until as late as the 1930's.[55] In spite of their scarcity by this time, the significance of traditional blankets never waned and, if anything, their value increased, as will be shown later.

It is unclear how long the wool dogs survived, but the later blankets may have been pure goat hair. A Nanaimo resident recalled seeing the dogs as late as 1892 when he was a seven year old child. He remembered the "rather small, short legged, with thick barrel shaped [bodied] dogs" belonging to the Indians from Hope Island at the north end of Vancouver Island.[56]

While it can be argued that the decrease in manufacture of hand-woven blankets shows a shifting value and a waning respect for the indigenous creation, the opposite argument may be equally convincing. Coast Salish lifestyle was undergoing dramatic shifts during this period, consequently the time and labour-intensive production of their traditional repository of wealth was interfered with on many levels. Gradually they lost access to both the materials and the social space within which to make their own wealth items. Time was being restructured and many Coast Salish were removed from the cycles of their traditional subsistence economy into the capitalist labour economy. However, much more research is required into these shifts in practice and values before we can safely conclude that the HBC blankets were

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[55] Saanich elders Laura Olsen and Gabe Bartleman remember hand-woven goat hair blankets being worn in special ceremonies and gatherings.

[56] Barraclough, "The White Woolly Dogs," p. 12.

more highly valued than traditional blankets, or that the Coast Salish enjoyed an increase in overall wealth due to the importation of HBC blankets.

If the Coast Salish once had an integrated economy blending the material with the spiritual/ceremonial in the same sphere, in the late 19th century a rupture fragmented that economy. The distinction between the ceremonial and material realm widened as they slowly adopted the cash economy. A complex shift took place in the Coast Salish blanket economy at this time. A historical paradox occurs when the historical lens is sharply focused on the blanket culture; distinct delineations between symbolic and material blur and fade. When handmade blankets became scarce, they were saved for only the most significant events, eliminating any common utility and thus, perhaps, increasing their symbolic value. As the evidence cited below intimates, it appears that the HBC blanket maintained a more utilitarian function, yet as the Coast Salish entered the cash economy the imports also gained value in the symbolic realm, but at a reduced level, far below that of their handmade counterparts.

It should be reiterated that any effort to distinguish between the two types of blankets in the historical record is hindered because of the undifferentiating eyes of the observers. No doubt if we had records from the Coast Salish people they would distinguish between the two, however we are not afforded that luxury.[57]

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[57] I make this assumption cautiously and by way of inference based on the recollections of Coast Salish elders such as Art Cooper, Gabe Bartleman and Laura Olsen who clearly distinguish between the hand-woven and store-bought blankets.

Although the records homogenize hand-woven and HBC imports into a single category - 'blankets' - there remain glimpses into comparative value. By the 1860s HBC blankets glutted the blanket trade. Bales of HBC blankets were distributed at potlatches in quantities never previously known in Coast Salish territory. Yet, although hand-woven blankets were in fact becoming rare, they were only disappearing in the eyes of the European observer. The proliferation of HBC blankets obscured the view of the mountain goat blankets. As European recorders had no use for the indigenous manufacture and it served no purpose in their new economy, they ceased to impute to it any value for Native people. The incalculable symbolic value attributed by the Coast Salish was thus concealed.

While vast numbers of HBC blankets were dispersed in the potlatch system and used visibly, it is quite possible that the hand-woven blankets that were still being manufactured were being stored in the wooden blanket boxes and were only exhibited and exchanged at the most important ceremonies. Dr. Walkem's account of a Saanich potlatch, which he attended in 1875, indicates that although the traditional blankets were scarce they were still highly valued in the Coast Salish economy. He describes a relatively small give-away in comparison to many of the same time, with only 200 HBC blankets distributed to the crowd of more than 500 heads of families.

> It was 1 p.m. before the last of the two hundred Hudson's Bay blankets was tossed down among the struggling mass beneath the platform. Many of the blankets had been torn in shreds, each one obtaining a small piece. It was [sic] now the turn of the goat-hair blankets. These were only eight in number, but before they were thrown out, each one was divided into halves, sixteen pieces in all. I saw one Indian exchange one-half

for three Hudson's Bay Co.'s blankets.[58]

Strips of HBC blankets replaced the scarce goat and dog wool and were often woven into the later hand-woven blankets.[59] As traditional blankets became more rare they were divided into smaller and smaller pieces, each recipient hoping eventually to acquire at least one whole blanket. Walkem surmised that by 1914 goat hair blankets had become obsolete, but added that they retained a very high value within the Salish community.

> At potlatches held during the last ten to fifteen years, small squares about six inches each way, are the only specimens one can see of bygone years. When these small pieces are distributed amongst the assembled Indians one or two of them will endeavour to purchase all these small squares, and if they are successful, will join them together to form a larger square, which finds a ready sale at a good figure anywhere along the coast. [60]

Walkem reckoned that in the late 19th century goat hair blankets could be obtained for between $12 and $15, and by 1914 they were worth $60 to $75. At the same time an HBC blanket would cost only a few dollars. The material value of the hand-woven blankets soared as they became the sole property of the ceremonial symbolic economy. Edward Curtis's observations confirm Walkem's calculations. He estimated that in the early 20th century hand-woven blankets were some 20 times the value of a Hudson's Bay import.[61]

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[58] Walkem, Stories of Early British Columbia, p. 119.

[59] Sheep were introduced to Vancouver Island as early as the 1840's and Coast Salish women were knitting with sheep wool as early as the 1860s. However, sheep wool was not used in the manufacture of Coast Salish blankets until the re-emergence of Salish weaving more than a century later. Strips of HBC blankets and other local substances were mixed with goat wool but sheep wool was curiously excluded.

[60] Walkem, Stories of Early British Columbia, p. 118.

[61] Gustafson, Salish Weaving, p. 71.

When HBC blankets were introduced, they entered a social, gender, spiritual, and political economy in which goat and dog hair blankets were the main currency. The Coast Salish incorporated the new blankets into their old valuation structure according to their traditional beliefs. However, the HBC blankets could not and did not introduce them to the new capitalistic economy. Blankets were a one way trade item. The Coast Salish economy overlapped for some time with the new economy of trade goods, often confusing observers from Europe. R.C. Mayne makes a comment similar to Brown's comment that opened this chapter.

> All the pleasure these poor Indians seem to have in their property is in hoarding it up for such an occasion as I have described [a give-away feast]. They never think of appropriating what they gather to enhance their comforts, but are satisfied if they can make a display like this now and then; so that the man possessing but one blanket seems to be as well off as the one who possesses twenty; and thus it is that there is a vast amount of dead stock transferred from hand to hand for the mere vanity of the thing.
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> There is another way, however, in which property is disposed of even more foolishly. If a person be insulted, or meet with an accident or in any way suffer an injury, real or supposed, either of mind or body, property must at once be sacrificed to avoid disgrace. A number of blankets, shirts, or cotton, according to the rank of the person, is torn into small pieces and carried off.[62]

While the Coast Salish were increasingly producing and working for the newcomers in return for blankets as wages, their pay only had value within their old economy. Mayne observed there must have been large stashes of blankets with no other function other than as gifts at give-away feasts. These blankets could hardly be traded back to the newcomers for salt and flour. Lutz points out this conundrum:

> Evidence, not limited to the Songhees, suggests that until at least the

[62] R.C. Mayne, Four Years in British Columbia and Vancouver Island (London: John Murray, 1862), p. 265.

> 1880's, the main reason why so many aboriginal people participated in the capitalist economy was so they could participate more fully in their own. Their wages were converted into goods which were then given away to renew claims on resource sites, to pass on names, to commemorate the dead.[63]

With the establishment of trading forts and consequent settlement of their territory, increasingly the Coast Salish were occupied supplying food resources to the newcomers. Deer, clams, oysters, cranberries, and other items were hunted or gathered and traded, enabling even the poorest Salish to accumulate blanket wealth. [64] In addition to supplying food to the forts, they worked for wages as farm and house labourers, carpenters, tree fallers, and any other labour required in the growing colony.[65] Consequently two important changes took place with respect to blankets. First, huge quantities of imported blankets were infused into the Coast Salish economy; and second, because of the high demand for unspecialized labour, blankets became generally available. At one time blanket wealth accumulation and distribution was restricted to "specialists such as hunters and woodworkers," but now it became possible for even "clam diggers" to hold their own potlatches. Albert Westly, a Nanaimo, maintained that before contact fifty goat blankets would have been a tremendous accumulation, as compared to the hundreds exchanged in the

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[63] Lutz, "Work, Wages and Welfare," p. 186.

[64] For more detailed discussion of the access Coast Salish commoners' had to trade items and their chiefly practices see Lutz, "Work, Wages and Welfare," chapter 6.

[65] Rolf Knight, in Indians at Work provides an in depth discussion of the extent to which Native people were at work in every early British Columbian industry. John Lutz, in "Work, Wages and Welfare" expands Knight's work and looks closely at the work patterns of the Coast Salish particularly.

potlatches of the late 19th century.[66] There was a dilution in prestige, opening access to the once restricted and carefully regulated ritual, as well as introducing inflation in the trade in blankets. This decreased the value of individual blankets, forcing potlatch hosts to give away increasingly greater numbers. At the same time, because of the growing scarcity of the traditional blankets, it appears that their value increased, especially in their symbolic valuation.

In spite of the deep ruptures taking place in the Coast Salish world, they remained entrenched in their traditional world view, incorporating the European material world into their integrated world. Instead of using their wages to accumulate individual material goods, many converted their wages into potlatch goods to be given away.[67] This made no sense to the European observer. Indian Agent James Lenihan manifested his confusion as he described his encounter with the Fraser valley people:

> The Indians generally have views peculiar to the country as to the value of money. One band, numbering about fifteen families, applied to me in the spring for some agricultural implements and seeds. I questioned the Chief respecting a "potlatche" which he had held the previous winter, and ascertained that he himself and two of his headmen had given away in presents to their friends 134 sacks of flour, 140 pairs of blankets, together with a quantity of apples, and had paid in cash out of their earnings as labourers, fishermen and hunter.[68]

Reverend Charles Moser made a similar observation at Kyuquot in his reminiscence of 1886:

> The Chiktlisats came to a potlatch at Kyuquot, given by the Queen.

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[66] Barnett, The Coast Salish of British Columbia, pp. 256-57.

[67] While there is evidence that there was an increase in the number and size of Coast Salish potlatches, it is important to note that not all members of the community were saving for potlatches. The extent to which the potlatches affected the general population would be extremely difficult to calculate.

[68] Agent Lenihan cited in John Lutz, "Work, Wages and Welfare," p. 187.

> Besides smaller potlatches given by different persons during their monotonous dancing and singing, the number of blankets distributed among the Chiktlisats were 180; canoes, 5; iron pots, 10; guns, 8; trunks, 12; and cash, $5. The storekeeper, Mr. Campbell, was quite good humoured during the week of the potlatch, because he saw more cash coming in than he had seen for the last three or four months.[69]

If the blanket trade was being conducted by the Coast Salish for material reasons in common with European newcomers, as has been argued by economic theorists, why did they continue to convert their dollar currency into potlatch goods? It appears that the symbolic value of blankets plays a much larger role in the Coast Salish blanket economy than has been generally calculated. Blankets were never standardized trade items to Native people, nor were they merely a means to accumulate individual wealth and prestige. The significance of blankets was part of an enduring Coast Salish symbolic valuation system that has persistently bewildered observers and historians alike, yet which survived the insidious onslaught of the European/Canadian monetary system.

The Coast Salish practice of converting monetary capital into symbolic wealth items for distribution at potlatches and give-always continues right up to the present day, in spite of the 1885 federal government legislation to ban the potlatch, and other repressive measures. Although the form has changed slightly over the past century, it is still common for a Coast Salish family to expend their entire resources collecting blankets and other material goods only to give them all away at a gathering. This continuing practice provides an important window into the Coast Salish valuation system. Rather than being an indication of what appears on the surface to

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[69] Rev. Charles Moser, O.S.B., Reminiscences of the West Coast of Vancouver Island (Victoria: The Acme Press, Limited, 1926), p. 145.

be the ill management of goods and capital or an incapacity to adapt to the new capitalistic economy, the practice is testimony to the extent to which the Coast Salish remain rooted in their particular economic and cultural/symbolic world view. It is a valuation system that has an internal logic beyond the reaches of western capitalism. Although outside observers' reports obscure Native motivations and valuations, traces of light filter through the cracks in the records, illuminating the possibility of a valuation system different than anything the outsiders could have imagined.

The records provide glimpses into a Coast Salish economy where something very different was going on which the early fur traders and travellers could not account for. In spite of recent historians' focus on the similarities between the two economies, it appears there is still much in the Coast Salish economy that cannot be analyzed by modern western economic analysis. While this essay cannot reconstruct in detail the internal logic of that economy, it can point to evidence of fundamental difference from the western economy.

Although Coast Salish people traded with the HBC and later entered the wage labour market, thus acquiring European goods, they did not quickly adopt the cash economy or capitalistic notions of individual gain and material accumulation. They did not always bargain for higher prices but rather for the blankets that best suited their particular specifications. In spite of blankets being the primary wealth item they had multiple non-material meanings. They were used to validate important events, document rituals, and signify power shifts. Blankets also played the often indescribable and yet most significant role in the Coast Salish sacred spirit dancing. It was in this role that blankets took on their highest ceremonial value.

While it is often argued that rather than accumulating material goods the Coast Salish were accumulating prestige, there is no real evidence that the owner of many blankets necessarily personally occupied an elevated position in the community even after giving a potlatch. The name and prestige accumulated may have had much more to do with family, community, and progeny and possibly otherworldly concerns than with the promotion of the giver of the potlatch. It was more honourable for the Coast Salish to display material deprivation rather than material wealth thus twisting what Europeans had come to know of economy and confounding European analysis.

By intentionally using only European/Canadian sources for this discussion I have attempted to show that even within such biased records there is evidence of a unique Coast Salish economy. However, by far the most significant testimony to the uniqueness of Coast Salish culture and economy is the persistence of their non-capitalist economic practice. This continues to be illustrated in their give-aways, powwows, potlatches, and the like, and by the continuation of their wool working tradition which will be the subject of the remainder of this study.

Chapter Two

"We Knit for Love"

> The old women used to knit sweaters for their men to keep them warm. When the men would go out fishing it was damp and cold and the wool kept them from getting chilled. Sometimes they would knit sweaters with short sleeves so when the men would dip their hands into the water to get their fish their arms wouldn't get wet... We used to knit for love.[1]

The decline in traditional Coast Salish blanket weaving may have begun around the 1850's, but Coast Salish women never totally abandoned their weaving practice until the 1920's.[2] During the wane of the blanket manufacture, there emerged in the wool-working culture of the Coast Salish of Southern Vancouver Island the production of what was to become the famous knitted Cowichan sweater.

The late nineteenth century is characterized by deep fissures in Native society in British Columbia[3] and the subsiding manufacture of traditional goat wool blankets may be an example of that cultural disruption. However, there were also threads of

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[1] Sarah Modeste, personal interview, 15 March 1996. Sarah is from the Cowichan band. She has knit since she was a child and has marketed wool and Cowichan knitting for over 25 years.

[2] Information gathered over the years from Saanich elders such as Art Cooper and Gabe Bartleman.

[3] Howard Adams in Prison of Grass discusses the sweeping cultural disruption occurring in the late nineteenth century. Adams presents a Native perspective on the disintegration of Native societies resulting from the increasing domination of European settlement and government. The natural hunting, fishing and gathering economy was interrupted by both the fur trade and hordes of settlers claiming productive territory. European laws and administration systems replaced tribal council and justice. Native spiritual practices were outlawed and denigrated while European missionaries were given free reign to infiltrate Native communities with their foreign beliefs and practices. Additionally the reserve system, residential schools, government imposed membership regulations, and racism, resulted in deep fractures in Native society. Adams, Prison of Grass, pp. 17-43.

continuity woven into the twentieth century, a fact that is nowhere better illustrated than in the lives of Coast Salish wool workers.

The manufacture of textiles by Coast Salish wool workers was transforming rather than terminating at the close of the century. Traditional Coast Salish looms were replaced by European knitting needles. Native and European wool-working techniques were combined and techniques stimulated by this fusion were invented; for instance ancient Salish basket designs were used in combination with imported designs and incorporated into European-style knitted garments. An example of new technology emerging in direct response to the needs of knitters is the 'Indian head spinner.' In the early years of the twentieth century many Coast Salish knitters continued to employ the traditional hand or whorl spinning method commonly used in the preparation of goat wool.[4] By the 1920's most knitters were using an Indian head spinner, invented by the Coast Salish using a wooden carved spinner head attached to a European treadle sewing machine, which was particularly suited for producing sweater-weight wool.

Knitting is an example of Coast Salish adaptation to the ways of the immigrant economy and society, a society that eventually would colonize Salish territory. At the same time, the rise of knitting manufacture represents a significant thread of continuity with traditional Coast Salish ways. Coast Salish women had been wool workers since time immemorial. Their families had assisted in tending flocks of dogs, shearing their coats, and washing and preparing wool. Although the wool

workers' product changed with the introduction of knitting, the continuation of the Coast Salish wool-working practice reinforced a distinct Coast Salish family identity and lifestyle throughout the twentieth century.

Knitting replaced weaving in the Coast Salish wool working tradition, but the manufacture of sweaters never replaced blanket production economically or symbolically in Coast Salish culture. Little work has been done on the symbolic value of goat wool but the evidence shows the Coast Salish made a distinct delineation between the uses of goat wool and the newly imported sheep's wool; goat wool was reserved exclusively for blanket weaving and spirit dancing regalia and sheep wool for knitting.[5] Knitted garments attained none of the symbolic value or ceremonial significance ascribed their hand-woven predecessors. Sweaters neither replaced blankets as Coast Salish currency nor were they collected as a wealth item.

Initially knitted garments had primarily a practical meaning to the Coast Salish. Sweaters, in addition to other European clothing, replaced HBC blankets commonly worn by the Coast Salish as outer garments. It appears that sweaters were first men's clothing used particularly for outdoor work.[6]

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[4] Barbara Lane, "The Cowichan Knitting Industry," Anthropology in British Columbia (Victoria: Provincial Museum, 1951), p. 14.

[5] As stated earlier there is no evidence of 19th or early 20th century blankets or regalia being made with sheep wool. In addition there is no evidence of any knitting with goat hair. Sheep wool began to be used extensively for weaving during the revival of Salish weaving in the 1960s in Sardis, BC. For further information on the revival of Salish weaving see Oliver N. Wells, Salish Weaving: Primitive and Modern, (Sardis: Oliver Wells Publisher, 1969) and Elisabeth Lominska Johnson and Kathryn Bernick, Hands of Our Ancestors: The Revival of Salish Weaving at Musqueam, (UBC Museum of Anthropology, 1986).

[6] A study of old photos show that Coast Salish women continued to wear the traditional blanket covering once common to both sexes long after the Coast Salish men abandoned blankets in favour of European jackets and sweaters.

> Our grandmothers knit sweaters because their men needed warm clothing. Soon the neighbours around wanted the sweaters so they started trading with them. It has got now so people are just knitting for money but that isn't why we started knitting. It was never for money. If you are Cowichan you have wool in your blood. You work with wool because you love it, it is part of you.[7]

This chapter traces the origins of Coast Salish knitting in the late nineteenth century and how knitting became part of the cultural fabric of Coast Salish society. It follows the emergence of the Cowichan sweater up until the 1920's as a significant element in the Coast Salish economy and as a developing cultural icon not only within Coast Salish communities but also in the wider British Columbian society.

Location/time and space

> The old people say that a frog went up and put his back against a stone to get warm and the Indians called that place Cowichan.[8]

Some say the first Indian sweater[9] was made in the Songhees village close to Fort Victoria,[10] yet what was to become the most famous garment for the cold, damp west coast weather took the name "Cowichan." There is no evidence that proves Cowichan sweaters originated in Cowichan territory specifically. Coast Salish people from Victoria to north of Nanaimo can trace knitters in their families back to the late

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[7] Sarah Modeste, personal interview, 15 March 1996.

[8] Cowichan Indian Sweater exhibit from the UBC Museum of Anthropology on display at the Heritage Center in Duncan B.C.

[9] "Indian sweater" is a generic term that can confuse Cowichan sweaters with imitations. I am conscious of the need to differentiate between the genuine and imitation article yet "Indian sweater" is more widely used amongst the Coast Salish people than is "Cowichan sweater," therefore I use both terms interchangeably.

[10] Victoria Daily Times, 20 October 1949.

nineteenth century.[11] It is possible the sweaters took on the Cowichan name because it is the most populated Native territory on the southern Island and likely had the most knitters right from the early years. It is important to note as the story of the Cowichan sweater unfolds that while the Cowichan name constantly appears and many knitters are from Cowichan territory many also came from the Sooke, Songhees, Saanich, Malahat, Chemainus, Kuper Island and Nanaimo peoples as well as from the small villages in the surrounding area.

In 1843 James Douglas established Fort Victoria on the southwestern tip of what was to become British Columbia. Arable land around Victoria was settled within the next decade and soon Douglas was looking for other suitable farmland for the steady flow of immigrants. Douglas was first introduced to the Cowichan people and their territory in 1852 when he travelled north to explore the east coast of Vancouver Island. Further expeditions followed, forging their way through uncharted passes up the Island in search of gold, coal and farmland. Although the Cowichans were feared by many local peoples, Douglas initially found them hospitable and their territory highly suitable for settlement and agriculture. [12]

The fertile Cowichan Valley fed by the rich Cowichan River was one of the most desirable Island destinations for European immigrants. By 1862 settlers began

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[11] Sarah Modeste, personal interview, 15 March 1996.

[12] Helen B. Akrigg, "The Cowichan Settlers of 1862" BC Historical News, Summer 1993, p. 33. James Douglas, Douglas on Vancouver Island, V24, (1854), pp. 245-46.

arriving in the valley via Victoria from England and Scotland.[13] At first the Cowichan people were friendly and accommodated the early expeditions and missionaries, but they did not welcome the steady flow of trespassers on their territory. Numerous violent incidents with settlers and travellers occurred in their lands, making settlement an uneasy arrangement for the first few decades.[14] Yet in spite of the tension the first male settlers were soon followed by a group of prospective wives in 1864.[15] By the 1880's the Cowichan Valley had an established European settler community living side by side with the Cowichan.

Learning To Knit

By the 1860's homesteads and settler estates were scattered over much of southern Vancouver Island. A significant number of Coast Salish women took domestic jobs in settler homes. Some traveled daily from their villages to the farms while others lived in. [16] Because of the loom, traditional weaving was not only too cumbersome to transport to their new homes but also too time consuming, as new activities crowded the daily life of Coast Salish women. What the Coast Salish

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[13] In 1859 nineteen people bought 9880 acres in the Cowichan Valley between them, however they were not allowed to settle there. British Colonist, 11 July 1859. However, by 1862 there was a steady flow of settlers coming to the area.

[14] Petitions were sent to Governor Douglas complaining that the Cowichans were encroaching on settlements. Settlers complained that they were spoiling the settlers' goods and "tearing up their crops." The newcomers wanted a gunboat sent to the area to "settle the excited Indians who have demonstrated that they believe they have a prior right to the land." BCA, James Douglas Private Papers, 2nd series, B20. Petition from Cowichan to Douglas, 19 May 1863.

[15] In 1864 the first party of twenty-two marriageable women arrived in Cowichan. Within a few months many more arrived. Sister Mary Theodore, Pioneer Nuns of British Columbia (Victoria: Sisters of St. Ann, 1931), p. 16.

women did bring with them were highly developed wool preparation skills and knowledge of a particular type of finger weaving which has much in common with European knitting techniques.[17] In addition, the intricate designs the Coast Salish wove into their baskets used the same basic technique as the Scottish used in the design work for their knitting. Consequently, Coast Salish women quickly adapted their skills to the newcomers' knitting needles that were easily transportable and could produce small, manageable items. In addition, Native farm workers likely had access to a steady supply of sheep's wool, possibly salvaging loose ends from shearing for small knitting projects. This may have given rise to the long observed practice by Coast Salish knitters of using a mixture of available wool for their sweaters. The combination of the Coast Salish women's wool working, design skills and experience, which enabled them to quickly adapt to European knitting techniques, and the ready accessibility of sheep wool in Coast Salish territory were among the constellation of factors giving rise to the rapid emergence of Coast Salish knitting manufacture.

There are neither birth documents for the first Cowichan sweater nor any records of its ancestry, but many popular tales of its conception are often told. One story has it that in the early 1860's one of the first lonely Scottish settlers took a Cowichan wife. Together they whiled away the long, dark, West Coast nights in his rustic log cabin by the light of a coal oil lamp as he taught his new bride the art of

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[16] Gabe Bartleman, personal interview, 20 February 1996.

[17] Weaving is often done in rows of continuous stands of fibre however Coast Salish weaving differs in that it is a form of finger weaving which twists every stitch separately in a style very similar to knitting. Designs are incorporated into finger weaving very much like they are incorporated into knitting.

knitting he had learned from his ancestors on the Shetland Islands.[18] The story continues that as the settler pursued more manly occupations such as clearing the land and tilling the soil, his Cowichan wife gradually revised her husband's Scottish patterns and included some of her own people's basket designs. The result was the eventual creation of the Cowichan sweater, similar to, yet distinct from, its not too distant cousin, the Fairisle sweater.[19]

One of the other most notable stories of the origins of the Cowichan sweater is that of Jeremina Colvin. Jeremina, a Scottish immigrant from the Shetland Islands, came to homestead at Cowichan Station in the late 1880's. She was an avid knitter and traded her knitted goods with the local Cowichan people for baskets, fish, and so forth. It is thought that she befriended neighbouring women and taught some to knit. It is also claimed that Jeremina was the first to introduce the Cowichan to the spinning wheel and to the art of Fairisle designs.[20]

Although there may be traces of truth in each of these tales, the origin of the Cowichan sweater is a much more complex matter than either story implies and predates the arrival of Jeremina Colvin. There were likely many ways the Coast Salish learned to knit. Some may have learned from their Scottish husbands or friendly settler neighbours; early domestic workers may have observed and copied the work of

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[18] Ryan Brothers, "Cowichan Knitters", The Beaver, (Summer 1965): p. 46.

[19] The Fair Isle jersey is knit in a soft 2-ply Shetland wool. It is traditionally knit in a round--even the sleeves cut into the main body and then knit down to the cuff. Numerous bands of small geometric designs using various colours are knit in bands continuously from the bottom rib of the sweater to the neck. The sleeves are worked using the same bands of colour and design.

[20] O.L. Johnston, Westworld, (March-April 1976): pp. 53-4.

their European bosses, while others may have received knitting lessons from their immigrant employers after hours.

In addition to the informal knitting instruction available in the early settler years, many Native women received formal training from the missionaries. In 1858 four Sisters of St. Ann arrived in Victoria. Within a year the Catholic Church built a log cabin schoolhouse for the local children. The first class of thirty-five included "Indians, whites and mixed bloods."[21] The nuns' job of "civilizing" the girls included teaching knitting as well as cooking and sewing. "To the intelligent ones [they] offered every means of rising to the level of a practically equipped woman, a solid elementary education, skill in needle work, a knowledge of care of church linen, that they might be able to help the missionary."[22]

In 1864 the Sisters expanded their work to include a school built at the foot of Mt. Tzouhalem (then Mount Cowichan) in the Cowichan Valley. Girls from the neighbouring Native villages brought their own mats and blankets along with a supply of smoked fish and were tutored by the nuns in the ways of western civilization.[23] Many did not stay long, but this was likely the first and most concerted and formal introduction for many Cowichan and Victoria area Native girls to the arts of knitting

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[21] St. Ann's Catholic Church Archive, Victoria, B.C. St. Ann's Pioneer Schoolhouse pamphlet.

[22] Sister Mary Margaret Down, A Century of Service, 1858-1958 (The Sisters of St. Ann, Victoria, 1966), p. 40.

[23] Down, A Century of Service, p. 49.

and needle work. It appears from the earliest evidence that early Coast Salish knitters used hand-spun wool and produced primarily socks and hats.[24]

Another key to how some of the early knitters learned their craft may be found in the traditional learning style of the Coast Salish people, which dispersed knitting skills quickly throughout Coast Salish communities, resulting in many women being highly skilled by the 1890's. Many older knitters interviewed said they received no formal instruction but learned to knit by watching their mothers and grandmothers. When the time was right a young girl's mother would simply declare, "It is time for you to learn how to knit." After having spent the required time watching her elders she was ready to start her own project. When the young girl finally took up the needles she tried to imitate her mother's sweaters or socks. If the child's effort failed, the work was pulled apart and started again.[25] This process of innovation and trial-and-error may well have been a fundamental part in the creation of what was to become an Indian sweater. In the same manner many original knitters may have learned to make certain garments by analyzing and then retracing the steps knit into items traded by neighbours such as Jeremina Colvin.

Coast Salish women learned to knit both formally from the nuns and schoolteachers and, possibly more casually, from immigrant women and men. Many likely also acquired the new skill by means of their traditional learning style of keen observation, analysis and reproduction. Reconstructing the social and familial space

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[24] Saanich elders Cecelia Smith and Laura Olsen agreed with many other elders that the first items their grandmothers knit were socks and toques and only later did they begin to knit sweaters.

[25] Sarah Modeste, personal interview, 15 March 1996.

in which knitting emerged and developed in the late nineteenth century requires an element of imagination as the written evidence sheds only a dim light inside Salish society. Native women are largely excluded from most written records unless they are taking part in mainstream work. Native knitting was also almost invisible in the early days because it did not take the form of traditional art. It wasn't until the Cowichan created a definable product for the mainstream market that Coast Salish knitting appears in the records. The historical record is weighted heavily in favour of reporting the formal attempts at knitting instruction. The other stories are mostly lost in the vagueness of time as a result of the lack of importance attributed to the development of knitting and women's domestic activities more generally.

However, fragments of historical evidence indicate that by the 1870's all the necessary elements existed within the Coast Salish culture for the advent of the Cowichan sweater.[26] It must be left to historical speculation as to why it was the Coast Salish of Southern Vancouver Island developed a successful knitting industry rather than any other Native group with similar wool working skills and a ready supply of wool. The Coast Salish would say it was because wool working is part of what it means to be Coast Salish—one's hands are always busy with wool. It is their tradition.[27]

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[26] Lane, "The Knitting Industry" p. 15.

[27] Sarah Modeste, personal interview, 15 March 1996.

From Goats to Sheep

If it was their deft fingers and keen eye for design that enabled the Coast Salish to redirect their wool-working skills to incorporate European knitting techniques, it was the importation of thousands of sheep to southern Vancouver Island that determined the distinctive, warm, water-resistant quality of what was to become the Cowichan sweater.

Although initially the Hudson's Bay Company thought Vancouver Island was unsuitable for sheep farming, by the 1850's thousands of sheep were roaming Victoria and the surrounding area. Imported from the U.S., sheep became a staple in the settlers' diet. Feeding the officers and crews on the British navy ships docking in the Victoria harbour created a steady market for lamb and mutton produced on the local farms. Soon a lucrative wool market was established between the new colony and Britain and sheep became an essential part of the agricultural economy on the Island.[28]

In spite of the steady flow of immigrants from Europe to Vancouver Island there was a shortage of labourers, and farms depended heavily on the work of local Native people. Although Native people were commonly employed building, clearing, transporting and as domestics, it appears that initially shepherding was considered "white man's" work. However, when the shortage of labourers became severe in the

[28] Barry M. Gough, "Corporate Farming on Vancouver Island: The Puget's Sound Agricultural Company, 1846-1857," Canadian Papers in Rural History IV, (1984): p. 37.

1850's, farmers taught Native men how to care for the sheep.[29] Shepherding appears to have been strictly men's work but both Native men and women took part in shearing.[30] By the 1870's and 1880's many Native people were seasoned shepherds and numerous Coast Salish villages had large flocks roaming their territories.[31]

Images conjured up of this early settlement period are often of a bucolic scene with Natives and newcomers living and working together in harmony, yet this was not a peaceful time. As settlers invaded the valleys of Vancouver Island and the Gulf Islands, Native peoples defended their territories. Livestock belonging to the settlers, grazing on what had been Native territory were often killed, causing constant aggravation to the new immigrants. Altercations also arose over complaints from newcomers that Native livestock was "trespassing" on settler property. One such event occurred in the spring of 1844. Chief Factor Roderick Finlayson complained that the Songhees had killed cattle belonging to a settler. He asserted that "[u]nless the cattle killed were paid for [he] would demolish all the [Songhees] huts and drive them from the place."[32]

The colonial government, propelled by the compelling need to resolve the land problem and convinced that Native people and immigrant settlers could not coexist, sought ways to suppress Native habits and practices and enforce adherence to

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29 E.E. Rich, ed.., Eden Colvile's Letters, 1849-52 (Hudson's Bay Record Society, London, 1956), p. 181.

30 W.M. Fraser Tolmie, The Resources of British Columbia, Volume 1 No. 12, (February 1884): p. 7.

31 BCA, William Henry Lomas Notebook, 1886, F5 L83.1.

32 Roderick Finlayson, "History of Vancouver Island and the Northwest Coast." BCA, A/B/30/F49B.

European lifeways.[33] One such effort to advance the Euro-Canadian "civilizing" agenda was the promotion of knitting and garment manufacture with the Cowichans and other local tribes.

Knitting For Civilization

The colonial government did not interpret Native violence during the settlement era as a legitimate defense of Native territory, but rather as random violence and unruly and criminal behaviour. Consequently the government made no attempt to settle land disputes and bring peace to the area. Instead government practice was to forcibly detach Native people from their traditional practices and lifestyles which apparently were responsible for the violence.[34] Missionaries joined government administrators in finding suitable "civilized" occupations for Native people to draw them away from their itinerant ways. Hayter Reed, Deputy Superintendent General of Indian Affairs from 1893-1897, aptly expressed the attitude of government officials toward Native people. He stated that the permanent solution to the Indian problem involved the "laborious and often dangerous work of

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[33] Three of the most extreme measures Euro-Canadian society took to suppress West Coast Native lifeways were taking their land without extinguishing aboriginal title, outlawing the potlatch and repressing the use of Indian languages at the residential schools. For further discussion on these subjects see Paul Tennant's Aboriginal Peoples and Politics: The Indian Land Question in British Columbia, 1849-1989 (Vancouver:: University of British Columbia Press, 1990), Douglas Cole and Ira Chaikin, An Iron Hand Upon the People (Vancouver/Toronto: Douglas & McIntyre, 1990)and Breaking the Silence (Assembly of First Nations, 1994).

[34] Sarah Carter, Lost Harvests: Indian Reserve Farmers and Government Policy (McGill-Queen's University Press, 1990), p. 15.

transforming bands of savages into peaceable agricultural labourers."[35] While the same government attitude applied in British Columbia, the agricultural model of civilization had to be adapted slightly because of West Coast geography to include a wider range of "civilized" occupations.

Nowhere was the dual mission of civilization and Christianity practiced more comprehensively than in the Tsimshian mission village of Metlakatla. In 1862 William Duncan, an Anglican lay minister, established what became the most successful utopian Christian village in Canada and a model for other "civilizers." For more than twenty-five years Duncan directed every detail of the Tsimshians' Christian, industrial, commercial and moral training.[36] Bishop Cridge of the Church of England in Victoria supported the Metlakatla project and maintained close personal and ecclesiastical ties with Duncan, visiting him in Metlakatla in the summer of 1867. It was likely Duncan's influence that inspired the southern missionaries to advance industrial education with the Coast Salish.[37] The Church of England planned to develop a clothing-manufacturing project, using the same style as Metlakatla, with the Cowichan.

> Our suggestions relative to the utilization of Indian labour, by imparting judicious instruction to the aborigines, have borne fruit and we now take pleasure in announcing that a systematic course of instruction is to be afforded them in connection with the Church of England missions at Cowichan. Every inducement is to be afforded them for improvement in agriculture, housebuilding and fencing; and a

[35] Carter, Lost Harvests, p. 15.

[36] Jean Usher, William Duncan of Metlakatla: A Victorian Missionary in British Columbia (Ottawa: National Museums of Canada, 1974), pp. 1-17.

[37] BCA, Edward Cridge letters, F395/29, 1867. Edward Cridge to W. Duncan.

> gentleman is about to teach them how to manufacture the wool produced in the vicinity into clothing, the mission being already provided with a carding machine. Such a praiseworthy proceeding is most creditable to the gentlemen who have taken the matter in hand, and will do more than any repressive measures towards the extinction of crime amongst the aborigines.[38]

To date there is no further data on the Church of England's manufacturing project. However it is possible that the Cowichan could have learned to knit socks and toques and the basics of sweater construction from this project if, in fact, it was implemented.

link to Lomas as Indian chatecist

In addition to supplanting Native occupations with what were considered more civilized activities, EuroCanadians attempted to substitute Coast Salish celebrations with European-style events. The most striking example of this was the attempt to extinguish the potlatch and winter dancing ceremonies that the immigrants thought were the work of the devil and the main obstacle blocking Native participation in the capitalist economy. The "potlatch law" prohibiting the rituals was passed in 1885.[39] Officials augmented their legal assault on the potlatch by attempting to replace Native ceremonies with Christmas celebrations,[40] agricultural fairs and exhibitions.

Agricultural fairs and industrial exhibitions performed two functions in the 'civilizing' agenda. First, they attracted Native people to European-style festivities

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[38] The British Colonist, 15 May 1869.

[39] Cole and Chaikin, An Iron Hand Upon the People, p. 1.

[40] William Duncan hoped the Christmas celebration he arranged in Metlakatla would replace all the elements of the potlatch such as gift giving, village arrangements and festivities. See Jean Usher, William Duncan of Metlakatla, pp. 83-7.

and entertainment and second, they acted as a marketing device for Native goods. Since the Middle Ages fairs and exhibitions played a significant role in both the commercial and social spheres of European life. By the late eighteenth century fairs took on an important new dimension of disseminating industrial knowledge and displaying industrial goods. Competitions were introduced at the fairs to stimulate the production of high quality and advanced goods. By 1800 fairs and exhibitions were commonplace in North America, where they became a showcase for colonialism, displaying not only the products but also the values and ideals of western civilization.[41] This is nowhere better expressed than in the opening address by John Baldwin at the 1898 World's Fair in Omaha, Nebraska: "The Exposition has become the instrument of civilization. Being a concomitant to empire, westward it takes its way."[42]

Displays of Native American art and handwork were a popular feature at many fairs and exhibitions. American government official and exhibition enthusiast Herbert Welsh believed there was no better way than the expositions of "reaching the popular mind" with "the 'striking contrast between the original savage condition of the Indian' and the educated Indian in government schools."[43] Indian Agents used the public display of Native arts and crafts at the exhibitions both to demonstrate the "progress" Native people were achieving in adopting settled and "civilized"

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[41] David Breen and Kenneth Coates, Vancouver's Fair: An Administrative and Political History of the Pacific National Exhibition (Vancouver: University of British Columbia Press, 1982), pp. 1-4.

[42] Robert W. Rydell, All the World's a Fair: Visions of Empire at American International Expositions, 1876-1916 (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1984), p. 105.

[43] Rydell, All the World's a Fair, p. 113.

occupations and to elicit profitable markets. By creating a demand for Native crafts and thus stimulating production, agents hoped that craft manufacture would develop into a truly Native industry, neatly fusing Native tradition with modern capitalism.

The treatment of arts and craftwork by collectors at exhibitions illustrates a fundamental contradiction that existed within Indian Affairs and within the Canadian society regarding Native people. On one hand exhibitions were used to display the progress Native people were making towards "civilization"—how they were adapting to western ways. On the other hand, displays also attempted to portray Native art as "authentic" and unaffected by the modern.

Native art collectors drew particular attention to what they considered to be primitive arts and crafts. Collecting of Northwest Coast Native arts and crafts, popular since the arrival of Captain Cook, reached its zenith between 1875 and the 1930's.[44] Many collectors, influenced by the popular trend towards anthropological curiosity, were specifically interested in what they thought was authentic or traditional Native craftwork. In the late nineteenth century there was a particular fascination with reconstructing "pre-contact" indigenous life. Meanwhile as collectors attempted to define what was truly Native tradition, Native craftspeople continued to create new objects and adapt their traditional products for the broader curio market.

Evidence of both influences is illustrated in the use of Native arts and craftwork in exhibitions. Cowichan knitting was displayed as evidence of progress in the very early days of the local farm exhibitions. Coast Salish handwork appeared at

the first Cowichan Agricultural and Industrial Show in October 1869.[45] Craft competition categories included knitting, spinning, needlework, basket weaving and beadwork.[46]

Ostensibly Native people responded positively to the fairs and exhibitions, but some Coast Salish were wary of the exhibitions' organizers, believing their intentions were related to the underlying colonizers' plan to appropriate Native land. Cowichan Indian Agent Lomas dismissed their concern as simply contentious and misguided. He reported:

> One drawback that we had to contend with this year was a report started by some evil-disposed persons, that I was only giving these prizes to get their land from them and that in a year or two I should have paid them for it by this means, and then they would be turned away. Although this was very absurd, still it kept some few away, for the Indians are always uneasy about their lands fearing that more will be taken from them.[47]

In spite of the opposition many Coast Salish continued to participate voluntarily in the exhibitions and it appears the practice became increasingly popular. A rising number of entries at the fairs included many from knitters and from students at local day and residential schools.

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[44] Douglas Cole, Captured Heritage: The Scramble for Northwest Coast Artifacts (Vancouver/Toronto: Douglas & McIntyre, 1985), p. 286.

[45] Eleventh Annual Report of the Columbia Mission of the Year 1869. (London: Rivingtons, Waterloo Place, 1870), p. 19.

[46] There is no way of knowing what type of knitting people were doing although the entry for handspun wool indicates they were likely using their own wool rather than imported yarn from Europe.

[47] Some of the old men tried to get everyone who had won prizes to return them in order to protect their land. Although the Native people may not have known the exact intent of the government's attempt to institute such practices as the exhibitions, there was an underlying suspicion and a lack of trust of of the government. Eleventh Annual Report of the Columbia Mission of the Year 1871. (London: Rivingtons, Waterloo Place, 1871), p. 20,
1871), p. 20.

* Coast Salish knitting was submitted for competition in the Cowichan Agricultural Show in 1871. Judges for the women's craft category reported a "very marked improvement in needlework [and] knitting."[48] Knitting was excluded, however, from the Women's Art Association of Montreal's exhibition in 1904. Although Native craftspeople from British Columbia were invited to send their work, exhibition organizers stipulated that participants must only display Native products that "utiliz[e] the knowledge of their own arts instead of substituting those of civilization."[49]

> We believe that we now see our way to making a market for good Indian work and we feel that the coming exhibition will give an opportunity to draw the attention of the thinking public to the possibilities of artistic and commercial or present day work and so help to stimulate the native skill of the Indians.[50]

Some exhibitions, such as the Montreal art show, differentiated between "traditional" Native art and craftwork and items that incorporated adaptations of immigrant products--many of which were targeted at the tourist market. Ruth Phillips explains that "tourist art" was deliberately excluded from Native arts and handwork displays for several reasons. She argues that art objects that bore the traces of Western influence were excluded from formal exhibiting in order to support the representation of Native Americans as "other, as marginalized and as premodern."

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[48] Eleventh Annual Report of the Columbia Mission (London: Rivington, Waterloo Place, 1871), pgs. 19-21.

[49] BCA, GR 1550; reel B-5903, Indian Affairs Central Registry File Series C 1834-1970. Women's Art Association of Montreal promotional pamphlet, 2456 Catherine Street Montreal.

[50] BCA, GR 1550; reel B-5903, Indian Affairs Central Registry File Series C 1834-1970. Women's Art Association of Montreal memo, 1 December 1904.

Phillips adds that the exclusion of "tourist art" served two interests: "those of the romantic primitivists seeking an escape from industrial modernity, and those of the economic developers seeking hegemony over Indian lands and resources."[51]

Coast Salish knitting was a perfect example of adaptive craftwork and therefore was excluded from many shows and exhibitions. However, two factors determined that Cowichan knitting would become a favourite display item at the Cowichan Agency booths at fairs and exhibitions by the 1930's. First the Cowichan District produced very little Native arts and handwork besides knitting and a dwindling supply of baskets. Second, Cowichan Indian Agents became aware of the economic potential of the knitting industry and so by the early 1930's Cowichan knitting was entered at fairs across the continent.

During the 1930' and 1940's knitted garments were widely circulated at exhibitions and fairs, demonstrating knitting manufacture as a viable occupation and sweaters as a marketable product, even though the art collectors had overlooked them. They did not first became popular with non-Natives because of their artistic or tourist appeal but because they were warm and comfortable to wear. Although Cowichan sweaters could be distinguished from other hand knits by their distinct designs and unique pattern, they were considered neither Native art nor curio.

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[51] Ruth B. Phillips, "Why Not Tourist Art?" After Colonialism: Imperial Histories and Postcolonial Displacements , Gyan Prakash, ed. (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1995), p. 100.

What Was A Cowichan Sweater?

It is hard to say on what basis the early sweaters were considered "Indian sweaters" or when "Indian knitting" became "Cowichan." Initially the label "Indian sweater" or "Cowichan" may have identified the knitter rather than distinguishing a particular style of garment. However there is evidence that by the First World War "Cowichan sweaters" were visibly distinguishable and already popular with non-Native people for their warmth and comfort.

During World War I, officers required special permission to wear clothing other than their uniform. Due to the cold weather in northern Europe officers from Vancouver Island were granted that permission to wear "Cowichan sweaters". The story is told of officers walking down the streets of London identifying their home town comrades clad in Cowichan sweaters, and greeting them with shouts of, "Hello Cowichan."[52]

A "Cowichan sweater" could be spotted from a distance with its muted shades of cream, grey, and brown. Dark designs contained in discreet bands of cream stack one on top of the other separated by background bands of a medium grey/brown-- sometimes three bands of design, sometimes four, five or even six. The designs often resembled those commonly used on Salish baskets--many represented arrows or stylized trees or birds. Other geometric designs resembled those seen on imported Scottish sweaters. Most Cowichan sweaters were pullovers although some

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[52] Jack Fleetwood, personal interview, 29 July 1996. Fleetwood is a long-time Cowichan settler and recognized authority on Cowichan Valley history.

were zippered or buttoned. Some, although not many, had pockets slit in the front. The 'Cowichan' could also be recognized by its generous shawl or turtleneck style collar.

On closer inspection one might notice small twigs or straw spun into the rough wool. If touched, the sweater would feel sticky with lanolin from the raw wool and one would notice the dense texture of the knitted fibre. Close enough, on a damp day, there may be the telltale hint of the aroma of a wet dog. There was no mistaking a 'Cowichan'. It kept one warm and dry even in a windy West Coast storm. Although the sweater became the trademark of the Cowichan knitting industry, garments such as toques, tams, mittens and socks were also easily identified as "Cowichan". The trademark bands of design and the unique texture and quality of the rough, untreated, handspun wool distinguished Cowichan knitting.

The unique quality of Cowichan handspun wool was one of the most important components of the early Cowichan sweaters. Ironically it was the unprocessed, unrefined nature of the wool that made it so remarkable. Flocks kept on the Coast Salish reserves until the mid 20th century provided some wool, but knitters primarily depended on local farms to produce their fleece. Sheep breeders typically bred out dark coloured lambs from their flocks, but black wool was particularly sought after for the designs in Cowichan knitting.[53] The wool industry on Lower

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[53] Priscilla A. Gibson-Roberts, Salish Indian Sweaters: A Pacific Northwest Tradition (Minnesota: Dos Tejedoras Fiber Arts Publications, 1989), p.33.

Vancouver Island responded to the knitters' demand and improved both the quality and production of dark sheep.

Some knitters preferred the wool of a particular breed of sheep such as the Dorset and Suffolk, but more commonly bought wool according to the colours they most preferred. Cowichan knitters did not usually select wool specifically for the long fibers that are commonly considered to be of highest quality. Instead they often choose to mix shorter, fuzzier wool with the longer staple producing a bouncier yarn and a more densely textured garment. The rough quality of Cowichan handspun was also a result of the washing method used by Cowichan knitters. Water was hauled from a common well or river and heated over an open fire. Due to the scarcity of hot water the wool received only a warm wash (with a mild soap) and a cold rinse leaving the wool largely in its natural state--retaining a high level of lanolin. The wool was then hung outside to dry. Once dry the wool was "teased" (fluffed up) and much of the loose dirt removed.[54] At this stage the wool was spun. Some knitters twisted the wool on their knee as they knit, others used the traditional spindle, while most quickly adopted the newly developed "Indian head" spinner described earlier. The retention of the natural coating of lanolin on the wool, in combination with the unusual mixture of short and long fibres, resulted in uniquely dense and tremendously weatherproof and durable wool.

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[54] Sarah Modeste, personal interview, 15 March 1996.

Examining the construction of the Cowichan sweater itself unravels some of the mysteries around its origin. The oldest Cowichan sweaters still in existence[55] show a considerable variation in construction and design detail, supporting the theory that the sweaters had no single origin but were the synthesis of many influences--likely the outcome of years of copying by trial and error. Some early sweaters had no designs, some were buttoned front, some had distinctly capped sleeves, and other sweaters, elders report, were brightly coloured with dyed wool. However, in spite of the variations, a number of common and distinct features emerged early in the sweater's history and have remained identifiably "Cowichan."[56]

The body of the most common pullover style sweater was knit in a round on seven or nine double-ended needles; there were no side seams. The work was divided under the arm and knit to the shoulders where the front and back were knitted together. The stitches were picked up around the armhole and worked down in a continuous round, like the main body, and bound off after a cuff at the wrist. Stitches were also picked up at the neck and knit into either a turtleneck or a shawl style collar.[57] The button or zipper front sweater followed the same general construction. The knitter still used many short, double-ended needles, but separated the work and knit it flat. All Cowichan knitting is knit in one piece, eliminating any hand-sewn

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[55] I have found no examples of sweaters dating before the 1920s. There are a few photographs in BCA that may predate the 1920's by a few years.

[56] An examination of early photos of sweaters shows that the very earliest sweaters may have had very little design on them. Some still available in Judy Hill's collection have no design at all; others had only a few stripes of colour on the cuffs and bands.

[57] Gibson-Roberts, Salish Indian Sweaters, pp. 18-19.

seams. By the 1920s some pullover sweaters were being cut up the center to insert a zipper. This practice became common in later years.

The Cowichan sweater most closely resembles the British fishermen gansey and the Fair Isle jersey. The tradition of knitting in a round, eliminating hand sewing and knitting the sleeves down from the shoulder are common to all three styles. And the use of many-colour stranded bands of designs is a trademark of both the Fair Isle and the Cowichan sweaters. In addition Fair Isle and Cowichan knitting share some simple geometric designs. The Fair Isle jersey has been thought to be the predecessor of the Cowichan sweater, however the Fair Isle did not become internationally popular until the early 1920's—years after the Cowichan had become identified.[58] Consequently it appears the Cowichan and Fair Isle sweaters became popular on the West Coast simultaneously. Experts who have examined the construction of both sweaters agree that while the basic structure of the Cowichan sweater is similar to the Scottish fisherman's sweater, the Cowichan is not a replica—rather it is an adaptation, similar in some construction details yet differing in others, each emerging into distinctly separate styles.

We Knit For Love

Many factors contributed to the Cowichan sweater industry developing into a component element of Coast Salish culture and economy. As has been stated earlier, there were informal associations between Coast Salish wool workers and new

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[58] Gibson-Roberts, Salish Indian Sweaters, p. 18.

immigrants that resulted in a natural fusion of skills and wool working methods. There were formal efforts at instruction in knitting and needlework which were part of the overall civilizing project of the colonizers, such as the work done by Catholic nuns to "civilize" Native women by teaching them domestic occupations. There were broader church programs to promote the development of Native manufacturing. In addition, the promotional work of Indian agents advertised Coast Salish knitting and established outlets in the "white" marketplace, creating an expanding demand.

Simultaneously, within Coast Salish culture many factors came together to stimulate the development of the sweater industry. First, the strength and depth of the Coast Salish wool-working tradition determined that the wool workers, caught in the disruption of the late nineteenth century, transferred from goat wool to sheep wool, or from looms to needles, and from blankets to sweaters. Second, sweater manufacture was a practical response to the need for warm clothing to replace the blankets once worn by the Coast Salish people. Third, once Coast Salish knitting became popular with the non-Native public it provided an important opportunity for the Coast Salish to take part in the dominant cash economy.

Between the 1860's and 1880's, knitting was incorporated into transforming Coast Salish family practices. The work cycle of many Coast Salish families by the late nineteenth century included travelling to farms and orchards on the British Columbia mainland or in the United States in the summer and early fall to pick fruit and vegetables. A similar cycle occurred with many who worked in mills or canneries. Knitters prepared their wool the spring before they traveled and then did

most of the knitting in the winter when the families returned home to their villages. In this way the Coast Salish maintained the familiar cycle of their grandmothers who wove blankets and baskets.[59] Knitting was so portable that it soon became a year-round occupation for the wool workers. Many packed their wool and needles with them to the summer employment destinations.

Most informants interviewed for this study agree that in the late 19th and early 20th century knitting replaced weaving as exclusively women's work. In a similar customary manner, men, and children of both sexes, participated in the wool preparation. However, the traditional division of labour shifted as employment opportunities narrowed and traditional subsistence activities were curtailed.[60] Increasingly knitting became both men and women's work. It is difficult to say when men began knitting in significant numbers because much of their work, especially in the early years, was invisible. Family stories often include evidence of grandfathers and fathers helping their wives knit sweaters. Many men knit their own sweaters and discreetly included them with their wives' when it came time to market the sweaters.

> Mom taught us girls to knit but the boys learned too. Four of them but they never used to like to tell anyone. They used to knit sleeves. A couple of them knit a lot of sweaters. There were a few old men I remember in Chemainus that knit sweaters.[61]

Publicly, however, knitting was always considered women's work thus forcing the men's contribution underground.

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[59] There is very little change in the natural cycles of the Coast Salish who always collected their reeds grasses bark etc. in the spring and did most of their weaving and creating in the winter.

[60] Lutz, "Work, Wages and Welfare," p. iii.

[61] Diane Harris, personal interview, 20 June 1996.

The need for warm clothing was likely one of the most important factors, within Coast Salish society, which led to the development of the knitting industry. Sweaters never replaced goat blankets as ceremonial wear, but they replaced the HBC blankets often worn by the Coast Salish. Initially the Coast Salish knit to clothe their own families. They knit to keep their fishermen warm. But the reputation of Coast Salish knitting could not be contained within the Native communities. New immigrants, chilled by the damp West Coast climate, were in as much need of warm clothing as their Native neighbours.

By the early twentieth century Coast Salish knitting became popular with local settlers and what was once an exchange in knitted goods from settlers to Native was now reversed. Coast Salish knitted garments became a primary barter good.

Commercialization

In addition to the commercialization formally promoted through the "civilizing" efforts of Indian Agents at fairs and exhibitions, Coast Salish knitted goods developed a strong local commercial base as a result of their reputation as practical outdoor garments. Until the early twentieth century, Coast Salish women continued to knit primarily for their families while only trading their work with close neighbours for used clothing and agricultural goods. But the demand for the Native knitting increased quickly amongst the settler population on lower Vancouver Island. Popular lore has it that even in the early days Cowichan knitting gained international recognition. In the 1890's several residents of the Cowichan Valley visited their home

countries, bringing Indian sweaters with them to England and Scotland. Apparently the sweaters were well received and soon became a coveted item overseas. They also became popular in the Canadian North after two Cowichan miners took sweaters to trade in the Klondike as early as 1898.[62]

Up until the 1920's Coast Salish people enjoyed a stable and diverse economy. Their local territory still provided their traditional subsistence economy with sea life, wild game and plant foods. Combined with the income earned by many Coast Salish people working seasonally on local farms or in distant mills, fish packers, or orchards, they maintained a good lifestyle. Cowichan knitting augmented the transitional coast economy, usually in the form of used clothing or garden produce received informally in barter with neighbouring settlers.[63]

In 1913 the McKenna McBride Commission reported that the Songhees of Chatham and Discovery Island were "fishing, sheep raising and working for wages etc, also weaving sweaters." The commissioners considered the Songhees economy to be "comfortable and prosperous."[64]

In these early years of trade each knitter hung her excess knitting which was not required for her family needs, on a line outside her house. Travellers visiting the reserves could see what houses had knitting available and called in to see if there was

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62 Jack Fleetwood , personal interview, 29 July 1996.

63 Sarah Modeste, personal interview, 15 March 1996.

64 BCA, GR 1995; reel B-1454, McKenna McBride Transcripts, 14 June 1913.

anything they wanted to trade or purchase; if not, they would carry on to the next house.[65]

This market enabled knitters to maintain control over both the quality and quantity of their production. Individual knitters became known for a particular specialty, be it mittens or socks or a specific design or size of sweater. [66] As the local non-Native community became increasingly familiar with Coast Salish knitting, a market developed.[67]

> The women used to knit more socks and toques than sweaters. Working people used to like the warm hats and sock. My stepmother used to knit socks and toques and then take them up the road and set them out on the ground and peddle them right there on the road. She used to sell a lot that way.[68]

Evidence of what might be one of the first formal 'sweater buyers' appears in the Cowichan Indian agent's records in 1908. Jim Warnock, possibly a local whiskey trader,[69] was reported trading with a Penelekut woman on Kuper Island just north east of Cowichan.

> The somewhat notorious Jim Warnock was visiting the island buying sweaters and mats from "Old sick Jim's wife" and rather than paying her brings her whiskey. However, if that isn't enough he doesn't even leave her the whiskey but stays and drinks it with her before returning with the sweaters and mats. It seems some in the

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[65] Sarah Modeste, personal interview, 15 March 1996.

[66] Jack Fleetwood's recollections are confirmed by Sarah Modeste and other Cowichan elders who state that in the early days women knit what they wanted and travelling buyers became familiar with each knitters' specialty and knew where to go to get certain items.

[67] Jack Fleetwood, personal interview, 29 July 1996.

[68] Laura Olsen, personal interview, 12 March 1994.

[69] Jack Fleetwood remembers Jim Warnock as a notorious whiskey trader who was finally incarcerated in New Westminster just before the First World War. Fleetwood can't remember what the authorities charged him with but apparently he escaped being charged with whiskey trading.

community did not want the buyer to return to the Island.[70]

There is no indication what Warnock did with the sweaters or whether he was a regular buyer, only that "Old sick Jim's wife" did not want the protection of the agent and was an accomplice in the whiskey deal. Unsavoury as the early dealer's trade ethics were these traders likely played an important role in the early distribution and propagation of the Cowichan sweater. They spread the reputation of the sweaters locally and abroad and they contributed to establishing the foundation of what would become a highly successful commercial industry.

The first reports of local shops carrying Cowichan knitting appear in 1916 and by the 1920's Cowichan knitting was making significant inroads into the marketplace. Local merchants in Duncan, Victoria and Nanaimo showed increasing interest in Cowichan knitted products often setting up special departments and advertising in local newspapers and on billboards.

Cowichan sweaters forged links between the Coast Salish and the newcomers. For many immigrant British Columbians their only contact with their Native neighbours was a trip to the reserve to buy an Indian sweater. Early Cowichan pioneer Jack Fleetwood remembers that many new BC immigrants proudly identified with their Coast Salish neighbours by wearing the local handknits. Local non-Native residents were likely the most effective Cowichan sweater boosters, as they so effectively boasted of the qualities of the sweater to their family and associates.[71]

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[70] BCA, GR 1426; reel B-1874, Indian Affairs correspondence. Request from Indian Agent, Chemainus, 13 November 1908.

[71] Jack Fleetwood, personal interview, 29 July 1996.

Until the 1930's, Coast Salish knitting supplemented what was already a diverse Native economy. Knitters controlled how much they knit and the product they produced. In their own words "we knit for love"--the primary motivation was to keep their families warm. Indian sweaters became popular with the local immigrants because they were a warm and practical way to survive the damp West Coast climate. Commercialization of Indian sweaters was begun both informally by industrious and entrepreneurial individuals who recognized the sweaters' potential and formally by Indian agents hoping to stimulate Native industry. Commercial interest in Cowichan sweaters was not sparked because of their Indianness but rather because they were the best practical garments for the local weather and on this basis they gained popularity; only later did they become identified as icons of Indian arts and crafts.

Chapter Three

"We Indians were sure hard workers"

> My first husband and my second husband used to work in the coal yard. It was just seasonal. All our work was seasonal. We went berry picking in the summer. We made just enough money in the summer to get us through and home again. When we got home I started knitting right away. I used to knit until three o'clock in the morning while the kids were asleep. I knit four or five sweaters a week. We Indians were sure hard workers.[1]

One recent study states that aboriginal people in British Columbia comprised "the majority of the work force in agriculture, fishing, trapping and the burgeoning primary industries" until 1885; subsequently their participation steadily declined.[2] In spite of the dwindling availability of paid work, the Coast Salish maintained a somewhat stable economy through the first three decades of the twentieth century by combining part-time and seasonal work with traditional subsistence activities. However, by the 1930's the Coast Salish economy was strained on two fronts. Employment and income levels slipped to a desperate level and increasing infringement by settlement and government policies on traditional subsistence practices resulted in extreme deprivation.[3]

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[1] Cecelia Smith, personal interview, 15 March 1994.

2 Lutz, "Work, Wages and Welfare", p. ii.

[3] I have not done an economic evaluation of the Cowichan sweater industry nor is there any comprehensive economic analysis available. Therefore I have reached my conclusion from interviews done with old Cowichan residents and Native elders such as Jack Fleetwood and Sarah Modeste and other local historians. Their observations concur with those of John Lutz and Rolf Knight.

While some Native people worked through the 1930's, employment levels previous to the Depression never returned.[4] Government relief allocations made little impact on the slumping Coast Salish economy. In 1935 relief payments[5] averaged "five dollars per capita per year for Indian peoples in BC," and even that was only available to the most incapacitated.[6] Relief usually comprised such staples as flour, tea, sugar, yeast, rice and blankets and did little more than prevent starvation.[7]

The 1930's economic depression was coupled with severely deteriorating social conditions within Coast Salish communities. Continued and increased attendance at residential schools, the interruption of Native leadership by the government system of elected chiefs and councils, and the loss of the Native languages, in addition to many other factors, contributed to the general cultural dissolution, resulting in widespread alcoholism and family breakdown. At the same time health conditions reached an all-time low as influenza and tuberculosis epidemics claimed many lives.

> Many of the children were taken to residential schools. They were alienated from their families. They lost their language from being uprooted from their homes. Our families suffered. But I think people have to remember these were hard times. There was no such thing as welfare. People had to survive under harsh conditions in the 30's. There was deprivation. Many of our homes were really poor. Many suffered from alcohol. We lost a lot of our people in those

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[4] Knight, Indians at Work, pp. 197- 98.

[5] The formal government welfare program was not instituted until the 1960s. However, Indian agents arbitrarily distributed relief funds in the case of emergency need.

[6] Knight, Indians at Work, p. 198.

[7] Lutz, "Work, Wage and Welfare," p. 259.

> days to TB. We were sickly. There were no jobs for Indians. But Indian people had close knit communities. They lived off the land. They shared what they had--clams, oysters, fish, game, deer.[8]

The war industry provided temporary relief for some unemployed Native people, but once the war was over, they were the first to lose their jobs. Rampant racism, common in BC at this time, was the determining factor in the closed-door policy many BC businesses had towards Native labour. The surging Canadian economy of the 1950's brought a demand for technically educated labourers, but Native people did not have the necessary education or skills to enter the new job market. They became so far removed from the labour marketplace that their economy deteriorated into a prolonged depression. By the mid-20th century Native people in B.C. were almost fully excluded from the economic prosperity of the dominant society.[9]

Three important contributing factors to the desperate Coast Salish economic climate of the 1930's and after include the increasing isolation, both geographically and culturally, of most reserves,[10] the drastically widened gap between Native education levels and those needed for the new technological jobs,[11] and the

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[8] Benjamin Paul, personal interview, 30 July 1991.

[9] Knight, Indians at Work, p. 201.

[10] Many reserves were geographically isolated from schools and industry (or work of any kind). In addition Native people often did not have transportation.

[11] Native children were not regularly admitted in public schools until the 1940's. Consequently residential and private church schools offering only elementary grades were the only education available. Very few Coast Salish students on the lower Island even entered high school until the early 1950's.

entrenched racism rampant in British Columbia.[12] Coast Salish people responded to the exclusion from mainstream society by withdrawing to their reserves and relying on fellow community members for support.[13] One of the few economic opportunities opening up to the Coast Salish during this time was the Cowichan knitting industry.

Previously the Cowichan sweater industry has been viewed as of limited economic significance, as merely a supplement to the Coast Salish economy. [14] While it may have begun as a sideline, political, economic and social changes both within Coast Salish society and without determined that the industry would become an economic mainstay. Coast Salish women once knit for family and neighbors to augment their family income, however, during the straitened years following 1930 many families became dependent on knitting income.

The late 1920's were a turning point in the industry. Dry goods and clothing shops in all the major centers in southwestern British Columbia began carrying Cowichan knitting. The four decades from the 1930's to the 1960's saw the knitting industry move from an informal trade between neighbours to the international marketplace.

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[12] British Columbians tolerated Native labour only while there was no one else to take its place. As soon as new immigrants arrived Native people were removed from the job markets. The affects British Columbia's deep racist tradition has on Native labour is discussed by John Lutz in "Work, Wages and Welfare," pp. 213-17.

[13] Coast Salish elders such as Gabe Bartleman and Benjamin Paul remember that in the hungry 30's and 40's neighbours shared whatever they had. Children from disrupted families who were not removed to residential schools found refuge with family or neighbours and the sick were cared for at home.

[14] Knight , Indians at Work, pp. 55-6.

The shifting role Cowichan sweaters played in the Coast Salish economy is difficult to trace for several reasons. The early transactions between knitter and buyer took place privately and were never formally recorded. Once retailers began dealing in Cowichan knitting, bartering remained the common mode of exchange and many of the transactions were 'under the table,' consequently formal business records only tell part of the story.[15] And the complete absence, at this time, of any formal Coast Salish family budgets or income records leads this study to rely totally on the memories of elders for an understanding of what Cowichan knitting meant to the Coast Salish family economy.

Both the available formal records and elders agree that from the 1930's income from Indian sweaters played a paramount role in the Coast Salish economy. In 1933 Susan Cooper appealed to the Indian agent for relief groceries, saying her family was "absolutely penniless."

> My uncle and friends have left yesterday and I owe a great deal to the store which I will pay by making sweaters, but the store keeper will not let me trade with sweaters for groceries any more after I pay him all because he has too many sweaters on hand right now. So that is why I am asking you for some groceries.[16]

In 1933 Elsie Kamai pleaded with Indian Agent Graham for relief on behalf of her ailing mother and for help marketing her sweaters.

> Please give my mother a pint of milk a day - she is very ill…I Understand you are buying Indian sweaters. I have one made.

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[15] Knitters such as Diane Harris and Yvonne Sam recall that most of their sales were done in goods or cash from the till and as far as they could see, never documented. An accurate quantitative economic analysis of the Cowichan sweater industry would therefore be very difficult to achieve.

[16] NAC, RC 10 Vol 9, 170 File; Cowichan Agency General B-48. Correspondence from Mrs. Susan Cooper to H. Graham, Indian Agent. Department of Indian Affairs, 15 March 1933.

> The stores in town offer small money for them so I wondered if
> You could help us many women in this reserve.[17]

As the knitting industry expanded, control of the product shifted from the knitter to the dealer. Shopping for an Indian sweater no longer meant a trip to the reserve looking for a sweater or mitts and a toque that fit just right. Indian sweater shoppers turned to the "downtown" where many shops carried hundreds of sweaters. The increase in choices resulted in many more discerning customers increasingly requesting specific designs and patterns. By the 1960's most knitters were working closely with a buyer, filling orders designed by the dealer and customer, rather than originating their own creations.

The Coast Salish community, federal government, and marketplace were the three principal agents in the development of the commercial Cowichan sweater industry. Each group had its own particular relationship with the industry. Each actor had a separate vision of what a Cowichan sweater was, each had a distinctly different purpose and ambition for sweaters. The interplay among these agents determined how the Cowichan sweater story would unfold.

Sweaters and the Coast Salish People

Laura Olsen attended residential school from the age of five until fifteen. During summer holidays her mother taught her how to knit. Laura has knit ever since

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[17] RCA, RG 10 Vol 9, 170; File: Cowichan Agency General B-45. Department of Indian Affairs. Letter from Elsie Kamai to H. Graham, Cowichan Indian Agent, 6 December 1933.

her return home from school in the mid 1920's. When she was a child, knitting income supplemented her family's seasonal work and food gathering activities.

> My mother always knew how to knit. The women used to knit more socks and toques than sweaters. They used to just knit the small stuff to make extra money. Everyone likes to make a little extra money. Working people used to like the warm hats and socks. My step-mother used to knit them and then peddle them up on the road. She sold a lot that way. We bought food and clothes with the money. Dad was a carpenter, a handyman. He had a team of horses and did work for local farmers. He hired himself out as a carpenter's helper. He had pretty steady work, but it was seasonal.[18]

By the time Laura married and her children came along, times had changed in the knitting business.

> By the time I started having kids all the women learned how to knit, they depended on it. There was no welfare till the 50's or 60's. We had to knit, there was no work and even if the men had work the wages were so low. Ernie worked off and on, on the boom, but I still had to knit all the time. I could knit about three sweaters a week if I had some help from the kids. We always had a houseful living with us. I did most of the washing and carding. The kids helped tease the wool. I did all the spinning. The girls never spun their own wool until after they were on their own. They helped knit the sleeves. Some of the boys knit toques. We used to have the wool and the carder and the spinner in the house. We used to tease the wool in the house. It got real messy. I knit the whole time while I had all my babies. There was no limit to that we had to do. We still had to go digging clams. I knit during the day and at night. The girls helped with the cleaning and cooking but I did most of the knitting. I know two women who just wore themselves out staying up all night knitting. One would sit up all night and sell in the morning. One morning after when they were driving home from town she just died in the car. I believe she just wore herself out. She just knit, knit, knit, knit all night then would sleep just for a few hours then drive to town to sell.[19]

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[18] Laura Olsen, personal interview, 12 March 1994.

[19] Laura Olsen, personal interview, 12 March 1994.

Cecelia Smith was born in 1923. At six years old she was sent from her home in Tsartlip[20] to Coquileetza Residential School in the Fraser Valley. She never mastered the English language well enough to remain in school and was sent home a year later. But while at Coquileetza she learned the art of knitting Cowichan sweaters from a Chemainus woman who was employed at the school. When Cecelia returned home she worked with her mother and father knitting sweaters and has knit steadily ever since.

> I was eight years old when I started knitting with my mother. Our dad went fishing once in a while, but it was seasonal. My dad used to card the wool, my mom would spin and knit and I would knit. They paid us $4.50. I guess that would have been in 1935 about. When I first got started we bought the farmers' wool for 3 cents a pound. We washed it in the spring and summer so it was ready in the winter.... I got left with eight kids when my first husband died. I was knitting about five sweaters a week at that time. I stayed up most of the night. I would pack wood up from the beach for the fire. Then I would knit all night. I always liked knitting. All the kids would go to sleep and I would knit. We didn't have electricity. I don't think anybody got electricity or running water on the reserve until 1958 or 1959. We had oil lamps and if we didn't have enough oil we would use candles. The kids had to eat and we had to work wherever we could.[21]

For Coast Salish knitters their homes became their workplace. However, their homes were no longer the spacious longhouses which accommodated their grandmothers' looms and spindles. By the 1920's single family homes had replaced traditional Coast Salish cooperative dwellings. Under federal initiatives government-issue houses were built for individual Native families. It was not uncommon for a

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[20] Tsartlip is a village of the Saanich people.

[21] Cecilia Smith, personal interview, 15 March 1994.

family of eight or ten to live in a house 20 feet by 30 feet, divided into two rooms, one for sleeping and one for living and cooking, heated by a wood burning cook stove, and with outdoor plumbing.[22]

Once the home became a knitter's workplace, to the general clutter of a small house full of children was added a carder and spinner along with baskets of teased wool, with additional baskets of spun wool and knitting in progress. Lines were stretched from the wood burner to the wall to hang the most recently completed and freshly washed sweaters. Outdoors raw fleece, scouring tubs, fire pots and wool hanging to dry on makeshift racks or fences surrounded the house.[23]

When Diane was being raised in the 1950's her family had a three-room home which housed her mother, father and 11 siblings.

> I remember the spinner in one little corner of the living room. It was unbelievable. In such a crammed little house that we had--it was comfortable. We had the carder in the front porch by the door. There was a bunk bed at one end of the porch and one at the other end (that's where the boys slept) and the carder in the middle. There were bags of wool stacked everywhere. I remember a string line behind the barrel heater. There was always skeins of white wool and sweaters hung up there. We used to wash the white again after it was spun. It was messy work teasing the wool but we must have cleaned it up.[24]

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[22] Reserve housing is too complicated a subject to discuss adequately here but it is sufficient to note that only since the 1990's have Native people been able to borrow money to build a house, and still that is only possible with special provisos from the federal government. Historically a Native person could not borrow for housing because reserve land legally belongs to the federal government and therefore there is no collateral for housing loans. Consequently Indian people are totally dependent on the federal government for housing.

[23] This general information has been gleaned from many of the knitters interviewed.

[24] Diane Harris, personal interview, 20 June 1996.

As economic conditions hardened in the 1930's and 1940's a growing number of Coast Salish became knitters, and increasingly the knitting industry became a family affair.

> I started knitting when I was seven. I started helping with the wool when I was about five. Before that I wasn't allowed to touch the wool. They made me just watch. At some time my cousin carved me my first set of needles. Then I started to learn how to knit. I would sit beside my grandmother and my mother and watch her. When I was seven my neighbour made socks. My grandmother didn't make socks. My neighbour showed me how to turn the heel. I stayed there that day until I finished my pair. I received a whole $1.50 for my socks. That was a whole lot of money. After that I really started pitching in with the washing and teasing of the wool. My grandmother was up at five in the morning and did breakfast. When the men were gone then we would start. We had wash days with the fire outside. We packed the water from the river 200 yards away. Most days were spent making sweaters. I went to school but we patterned our life around working with wool.[25]

As Sarah's account reveals, young people learned the craft one stage at a time starting with wool washing and preparation. Then they learned to knit simple toques and sleeves, later graduating into knitting complex designs and complete sweaters. Carding was often restricted to more experienced workers and spinning was almost exclusively left to the mother or grandmother in the production process. Many women never learned to spin until they were married and removed from their mothers and so forced to learn to spin their own wool.

> It seemed like knitting was our only method of survival. I don't ever remember any of us kids ever owning one [a Cowichan sweater]. We couldn't afford it. When we knit them we always had to sell them because we needed the money. Us kids were like contractors--we knit the sleeves for mom--but we never got paid for it. Dad worked on a part-time basis, but it was always a financial struggle. We had a family of 12 kids and then there

[25] Sarah Modeste, personal interview, 15 March 1996.

> was always more staying with us. We had times when we were busier than others but someone would tease the wool, mom would card and spin, mom knit the body and we would knit the sleeves and toques and mitts. To me it was constant industry. Even some of my brothers learned.[26]

Previous to the 1930's there is no evidence of men knitting, although young boys helped with wool preparation. Within Coast Salish culture knitting appears to have replaced traditional weaving in the realm of women's work. However, as was stated earlier, as job opportunities dried up and knitting became the sole source of income for many families, men took a larger part in sweater production. For some men their involvement was limited to wool preparation while many others carded and knit. Many men took responsibility for selling the knitting.

While the whole family took part in sweater production, most often the money was collected and controlled by the mother. Even when young knitters sold their own mitts or toques the money was not theirs to keep but was added to the family kitty. There was rarely any individual monetary compensation for children knitting other than the benefit to the common family economy. Although some dealers disparaged the inconsistencies resulting from assembly line production, many families worked so well together that it was impossible to tell that the work was not that of a single knitter.

For some families children's work was not in wool or sweater production but in baby-sitting, cooking and housekeeping to free the mother's time for knitting. This was the case in Cecelia's family.

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[26] Diane Harris, personal interview, 20 June 1996.

> None of my kids learned how to knit when they were young. They didn't like to help me with it. Only one daughter has learned since she got married, but she doesn't knit much. My daughters did the cooking and housecleaning, but I did all the knitting.[27]

Taking the Sweaters to Market

As the Coast Salish economy worsened, it became common practice for knitters to sell all their sweaters to non-Native consumers and buy second hand clothing for their families. "As soon as we sold our sweaters we would go straight to the grocery store and then the second hand shop. You could get second hand clothes for all the kids from one sweater."[28] The growing need for cash clearly meant that increasingly, sweaters were for sale.

As the sweater industry matured city merchants expanded their sweater trade and knitters began to rely on the steady income they received from sales to dealers. This created a significant shift in the sweater industry. Knitters lost direct connection with the buyer and the middlemen took over the control of the style and quality of the knitting. Shops stocked with a wide variety of designs and patterns appealed to the increasingly discerning buying public. By the 1960's knitters sold almost exclusively to dealers rather than directly to the wearer. Some stores tagged each sweater with

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[27] Cecelia Smith, personal interview, 15 March 1994.

[28] Laura Olsen, personal interview, 1994.

the name of the knitter, but customers soon came to identify the sweaters with a particular dealer rather than the knitter.[29]

Most knitters marketed their sweaters in one of two ways. Sweater dealers sent buyers out to the reserves as many as three times a week purchasing whatever knitting they needed. These buyers prearranged with the knitters what sizes and designs they were buying. For knitters living on the buyers' route this was often the most convenient way to sell, although the knitter was not necessarily guaranteed the best price from the travelling buyer. Alternatively, those knitters who lived in isolated areas that were not serviced by travelling buyers and those who chose not to sell from their home, brought their sweaters into the urban shops for sale.

Buyers often competed for the sweaters, especially during peak seasons, but most knitters became affiliated with one or two buyers and established steady business relations. This business arrangement was often inflexible for the knitters because each buyer had his or her own standards and requirements, restricting the knitters' freedom to trade. Cecelia describes some of the buying practices the knitters had to work around.

> The buyers were more steady. They were good sometimes. Hindeman used to come around every Wednesday and buy sweaters and sell wool. He would give us cash and some wool, but we didn't have to buy wool if we didn't need it. Mrs. Hill wanted us to trade half for groceries and wool with just a little cash. Sometimes I needed the cash. Bruce wouldn't take your sweaters unless you used his wool so we only got half money and the rest wool even if we didn't want wool.

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[29] The particular selection of sweaters in a shop depended on the tastes and preferences of the dealer. Once the shops had carried sweaters for some time they established their own reputations for carrying a certain type or quality of sweater and on this basis customers chose where to shop for sweaters.

He wouldn't let us use our own wool. I didn't go to him.[30]

Knitters often reserved Saturdays for travelling to town to sell sweaters. For some knitters that meant a lengthy trip. This was the case for Myra who grew up on an isolated peninsula reserve east of Ladysmith. "My mother and I used to row to Ladysmith [3 hours] from here. We sold our sweaters to Ladysmith Trading. We'd get all our household stuff from them."[31] Although weekly or even bi-weekly selling excursions were common, some knitters, especially those close to the market or those in immediate need of money, sold each sweater as soon as it was completed. For many Coast Salish at this time selling a sweater was the only way to get groceries so they sold their knitting as soon as it was finished. Stockpiled sweaters were like savings in the bank; a luxury few knitters could afford.

While some knitters established a satisfactory relationship with a buyer, this could not be said to be the general case. Most knitters found selling to be a constant source of anxiety. The common perception by knitters was that the buyers always pleaded poverty, when in reality, they had no idea what it meant to be poor.

> Buyers used to come around to the reserve sometimes. But we never had a car so I used to hire someone to bring me to Victoria or I would go on the bus. I used to wait until I had five sweaters. I would knit all week and then on Saturdays I would go to town and sell. I would wait for two weeks before I would go sometimes. The buyers always say they are having a hard time selling the sweaters so they pay you less. Sometimes we would argue with them about the price but we never won. Every time you brought in your sweaters they would say they were overloaded with sweaters or that they were

[30] Cecelia Smith, personal interview, 15 March 1994.

[31] Myra Seymour, personal interview, 1 August 1996.

> having trouble selling so they would say they could only give you so much for your sweaters. They always said they were not doing too well, but I noticed that they were going away on holidays. They looked like they were doing all right to me. Buyers always gave such a sob story.[32]

Because selling was often confrontational many women got their husbands or employed an aggressive friend to sell their sweaters. Although this practice was not necessarily reliable, in some cases it worked.

> One Christmas we really needed the money and I made three sweaters. We took them to town and the buyer said he couldn't take them unless I only took $30.00 for them. I was so disgusted I went back to the car. I wasn't going to take that much for them. I saw Catherine and she said "You got sweaters you want to sell?" I told her I could only get $30.00 for them. She took them and came back with $40.00 for them. She was loud and would hang around in the stores when there were customers and she knew the buyers would give her more money for them. The buyers didn't want their customers to know what we got.[33]

Sweater buyers were often one of the only non-Native people knitters had close contact with. Conversely the buyers often had very little real understanding of the Coast Salish other than what they learned buying sweaters. Thus the marketing of Cowichan sweaters became an important location for the meeting of two cultures, and exposed the considerable lack of understanding and tension between the two. A number of Coast Salish people established alternative markets so knitters could regain some independence from the sweater buyers.

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[32] Ann Frenchie, personal interview, 1 August 1996.

[33] Laura Olsen, personal interview, 12 March 1994.

Alternative Markets--Resisting the Sweater Buyer

The consolidation of the sweater business by the downtown merchants in Victoria, Vancouver, Nanaimo and Duncan provided a steady and increasing market for Cowichan sweaters, but many knitters were dissatisfied selling to dealers. A few knitters avoided the merchants by establishing a private clientele for their custom work. Not only did this provide a better price for each sweater (often a compromise somewhere between the retail and wholesale price), but it also allowed custom knitters to maintain more control over their product.

The downside of a private clientele was its insecurity. One knitter had a steady business knitting for the loggers her husband worked with, but once her husband was unemployed her contacts dried up and she had to sell to the buyers.[34]

> Once I was on my own most of my sweaters were for sale not really for the family to wear. We couldn't afford to wear them. If I had a sweater we needed the money. No one really made them for their families in those days as much as they made them for sale. I used to make custom orders from the loggers my husband used to work with and from their families. The men at the mill used to keep me busy until my husband lost his job, then I sold to town.[35]

Knitters also established their own markets by travelling to the United States or the mainland where sweaters were rare and buyers offered a better price.

> My mother used to row over to Anacortes with my dad to sell her sweaters. She would load up with 20 sweaters and socks and hats. She was getting $7.00 American then for a sweater [1940's]. They camped on the island on the way over to fish. It would take three days or so.[36]

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[34] Myra Seymour, personal interview, 1 August 1996.

[35] Myra Seymour, personal interview, 1 August 1996.

Entrepreneurial knitters stockpiled their sweaters and knitted goods collected from friends and neighbours and set up shop in their homes. These home businesses relied on word-of-mouth advertising along with a sign erected on a road or highway. They eventually built up a steady clientele from regular travellers and provided a dependable market for a handful of knitters.

In 1956 Chief Richard Harry of Tsawout, on the Saanich Peninsula, tried to break into the sweater business in a bigger way. Frustrated by the non-Native monopoly of the sweater business, Harry advocated that "Indians [should] become good businessmen. Don't just let the white guys trade in their goods. Get a better deal."[37] He bought sweaters from knitters who could not find a steady buyer. It has been said that he did business with 250 knitters from Victoria to Nanaimo, providing them with wool at cost and wholesaling their sweaters across the continent. However, Harry lacked the capital and business connections needed to compete with the established dealers and his business shut down after only a few years.[38] A number of small sweater shops opened up on reserves although none became serious competition to the non-Native merchants until the 1970's.[39]

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[36] Ann Frenchie, personal interview, 1 August 1996.

[37] Victoria Daily Colonist, 18 November 1956.

[38] This is as the story is told--it is hard to imagine that Dick bought from 250 knitters in 1956. It seems this newspaper article has inflated the numbers.

[39] The Ta-Ta-Yet Indian Craft store in Tswaout is an example of a successful craft shop specializing in Cowichan sweaters located on a reserve. While the small shops may have had some impact on sweater sales, they were not in direct competition with the downtown trade. Small shops on the reserves still required the customers to travel outside the shopping area.

Cowichan Sweater Pride

"If you were Cowichan your hands were busy working with wool."[40] Cowichan sweaters were honoured in the Coast Salish community both for the love of the sweaters and for the critical part they played in the economic survival of the people during desperate times. For most families selling a sweater meant the family could buy food or clothing or celebrate a special occasion.

> One Christmas we depended on my knitting. Well I guess every Christmas we depended on it but the one Christmas we depended on it completely. Ernie came home and gave us the big announcement that we weren't going to get any money before Christmas. He wasn't about to get a draft on his wages so there would be no money. I got busy and knitted three sweaters right away and I brought them to town.[41]

More often than not it was sweater income that was used to pay for winter bighouse ceremonies and giveaways. It was not uncommon for many members of an extended family to knit for most of the fall and winter, stockpiling their work until the late winter or early spring, at which time they would sell all their work to pay for a giveaway or winter dance. One family remembers in the late 1970s saving up 40-50 sweaters then selling them and receiving more than $3000.00 for their dance. "If it weren't for the sweaters we never would have been able to afford to give the dance."[42]

Although sweater production most often was a family affair, the woman spinning and knitting the main part of the sweater was generally credited with its

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[40] Sarah Modeste, personal interview, 15 March 1996.

[41] Laura Olsen, personal interview, 12 March 1994.

[42] Personal interview with a Cowichan family wishing to remain anonymous, 1995.

creation. Most Coast Salish can identify their family's knitting by particular details in the designs, the collar, or in the overall character of the sweater. Most Coast Salish families claim a mother or grandmother who was "One of the best knitters around."

Knitters took pride in their designs, generally sticking with a few favourites. Simple geometric designs were most common during the 1930's to 1950's, however by the 1940,s some carvers began adapting their totem designs into knitting graphs for knitters in their families. Some families carefully guarded these designs for their private use, but once a design was knit it was easily copied and very quickly became generally available.[43] Usually knitters did not copy designs exactly, but adapted them, creating their personal rendering, thus making it almost impossible to trace the origins of most designs.

While a combination of geometrics continued to be the design of choice for most knitters, the buying public grew to favour the new animal designs. Gradually animal designs became associated with Cowichan sweaters and by the 1960's and 1970's dealers requested an increasing number of eagles, whales, and deer. Slowly knitters lost all control over the sweater designs.[44] This is described in more detail below.

> I used to put anything on my sweaters that would come to my head. I like being creative. We copied our own designs from lace curtains or anything with a pattern. Then the buyers gave us patterns to knit. I had to change the patterns cause they looked funny. Some would only take what they call the dancing deer. They sent them to Japan.

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[43] Most knitters respected that some patterns were created and owned by certain families. Today many still know the origins of some designs although most are shared.

[44] Often buyers photocopied designs for all the knitters so that every sweater would have the same version of an animal and complementing geometric designs.

> Everyone in Japan must have a sweater with a dancing deer on it. I don't even think it looks like a deer. One buyer has an order now for thousands of sweaters and they all have to have the same pattern on them. Some other country must want them. They are all going to have sweaters with the eagle on it. It looks like it has an animal head not an eagle.[45]

Changing Meanings

From the 1920's through the decades following the Depression dramatic changes took place in the meaning of Cowichan sweaters within the Coast Salish community. While they continued to be the best garment for the damp West Coast climate, Coast Salish people could no longer afford to own one. Indian sweaters were knit exclusively for non-Indian consumers. Some knitters continued to knit for the love of it, but for most, knitting became an economic necessity. The sweater market was gradually co-opted by urban shops. Knitters lost contact with the customer and lost control over their product. In spite of worsening housing conditions, increasingly homes doubled as workplace as knitting became the sole source of cash income for many families. Knitting became hard work for little pay, but during the mid century Coast Salish people loved their industry and honoured their knitters both for the remarkable sweaters and for the economic stability they provided. As Diane Harris remarked of the 1950's and 1960's, "[it] seemed like knitting was our only method of survival."[46]

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[45] Laura Olsen, personal interview, 12 March 1994.

[46] Diane Harris, personal interview, 20 June 1996.

Government and Cowichan Sweaters

By the 1940's government agents and social activists, concerned with the depressed Native economy, advocated the revival of Native arts and crafts as part of the welfare movement. They believed the manufacture and marketing of arts and crafts would be a way of incorporating Native people into the mainstream economy. The mandate of government organizations such as the Canadian Indian Art and Handicraft Association was to promote the Native craft industry by providing training, developing marketing techniques and pressing for protective legislation. The following excerpt from the Canadian Indian Art and Handicraft Association mission statement illustrates how the government planned to alleviate the Native economic problems through a renaissance of Native art and crafts. They intended the revival to:

> create Indian mindedness in Canada to enhance buying Indian products --to create industry for the next generation of Indians--to encourage students and graduates of Indian residential school in the production of primitive handicrafts when they leave school and return to their home reservations --to foster the making of small attractive novelties and souvenirs of Indian design as a means to capture a fair share of the tourist trade --press for legislation to protect Indian goods against Oriental imports --to promote modern schemes of sales and prevent economic loss by obsolete modes of barter and sale.[47]

Dr. George H. Raley, a former principal of Coqualeetza Indian Residential School and well known commentator on Native affairs, thought the revival of Indian

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[47] BCA, GR 1550; reel-B 5907, Department of Indian Affairs Central Registry File Series c. 1834-1970. Canadian Indian Art and Handicrafts Association leaflet, n.d.

craft manufacture would provide cultural and social benefits, in addition to the financial advantages. In 1935 he argued that a strong arts and crafts industry would

> help the Indians financially, would give a new cultural interest, would provide work of a non-competitive character and would give employment during the winter months to the Indian and so improve his social status.[48]

Raley contended that the stimulus for this movement would come first from the government, "whose wards the Indians are", second from industry and last from individuals. The major players in the movement, Raley argued, would be Indian agents, missionaries, and social and welfare organizations.[49] The primary intention of these interested parties was to use arts and crafts to foster independent industry which would not compete with that of the mainstream position, and which would rectify the social breakdown in Native communities by providing a secure economic base.[50]

There are many examples of groups actively participating in the 'revival' movement promoting Native arts and crafts. The Canadian Handicrafts Guild, a nonprofit organization created under a special act of the federal Parliament, represented many groups across Canada "interested in the promotion of domestic [Native] arts and crafts with a view to the economic and intellectual advantage of the craft workers."[51] The Vancouver Folk Song and Dance Festival committee sought the assistance of Indian Affairs so they could promote Indian work for the tourist market, thus paving "the way for a market in the near future for such articles the Indians of

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[48] Vancouver Province, 28 May 1935.

[49] Vancouver Province, 28 May 1935.

[50] Ottawa Journal, 4 May 1934.

Canada can make and make well without bringing him into competition with the white man."[52]

The Knights of Columbus, a Catholic Church organization, arranged displays of Indian arts and crafts, their "prime object" being the cultivation of

> a market for many articles made by the British Columbian Indians and thereby [to] decrease the poverty existing on some reserves besides instilling in the minds of the natives a spirit of self support and by so doing relieving the Indian Dept. of some of the heavy load carried year after year.[53]

The Knights advocated that an

> official should be appointed to supervise all Welfare and Training for the Province of British Columbia and a systematic and well planned course of action be drawn up. Under this Dept. the Indians would be taught to make articles of a merchantable nature, given instruction on merchandising, ideas and plans placed before them, be shown the evils of imitating the modernistic ideas of the white race.[54]

The evidence demonstrates full agreement among all the groups that the fundamental goal of the revival movement was to advance the economic conditions of Native people and thus relieve the financial commitment of the Indian Affairs Department. However, there was some disagreement on whether there should be a separate Native economy or if it should be integrated into the mainstream economy. Groups such as the Canadian Indian Art and Handicraft Association advocated full

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[51] BCA, GR 1550; reel B-5930, Department of Indian Affairs Central Registry File Series c. 1834-1970. Correspondence, H.M. Rae Convener Social Service to F.J.C. Ball, Indian Agent, Vancouver, 9 April 1936.

[52] BCA, GR 1550; reel B-5930, Department of Indian Affairs Central Registry File Series c. 1834-1970. Correspondence to Indian Affairs from Nellie McCay Director of the Vancouver Folk Song and Dance Festival, 1936.

[53] BCA, GR 1550; reel B-5930, Department of Indian Affairs Central Registry File Series c. 1834-1970. Knights of Columbus leaflet from an exhibition held at the Hudson's Bay Store May 30 -June 9 1938.

[54] Knights of Columbus leaflet.

competitive participation in the marketplace by "captur[ing] a fair share of the tourist trade"[55] while others such as Dr. Raley and the Vancouver Folk Song and Dance Festival promoted a separate economy "of a non-competitive character"[56] that would not bring Native people into "competition with the white man."[57] One thing that is obvious throughout the discussion is the flagrant exclusion of any input from Native people on their intentions and goals for their craft production. Government agents and social activists assumed it was entirely their decision what would become of Native arts and crafts. They engineered "Indian" arts and crafts to suit their own economic goals and objectives "for" Native people. They also believed it was their decision what were "Indian" products and how they should be marketed.

By the 1930's and 1940's there were very few Coast Salish crafts produced for the non Native market. And as was stated earlier, Cowichan sweaters became the only viable craft product for the Cowichan agency to promote. The evidence makes it appear that the government and social agencies were primarily interested in advancing economic stability in Native communities. However, the principal beneficiaries of their effort to revive Native arts and crafts and establish profitable industries such as the manufacture of Cowichan sweaters were the non-Native dealers. These middlemen gradually monopolized the industry. In some cases government officials lobbied on behalf of the knitters for better prices and market conditions in an effort to

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55 Canadian Indian Art and Handicrafts Association leaflet

56 Vancouver Province, 28 May 1935.

57 BCA, GR 1550; reel B-5930, Department of Indian Affairs Central Registry File Series c. 1834-1970. Correspondence to Indian Agent F.J.C. Ball from Nellie McCay Director of the Vancouver Folk Song and Dance Festival, 9 April 1936.

guarantee continued incentive, but knitters received little more than steady work for starvation wages. C.C. Perry, Assistant Indian Commissioner of BC, was well aware of the situation.

> The Indian women find it quite a strenuous job to make one of these sweaters in a week. They have to purchase the wool and to work in the designs when sold or bartered the average price per garment is $5 although in cases where traders barter goods in exchange with the Indians the price of the sweater is lowered by the trader who also profits by the barter of his good thereby obtaining two profits.[58]

In 1940 Cowichan Indian Agent Moore planned to build a sweater production center in Duncan. The facility was to be equipped with washing, carding, and spinning machines. There were also to be work areas for knitters to gather to knit. This plan ignored some very important factors concerning the nature of the industry. First, by working at home knitters could both look after their large families and employ their children in sweater production. Removing the knitter from the home would eliminate half the workforce and the primary caregiver from the family. Second, most knitters lived a considerable distance from Duncan and could not afford transportation to the center to knit and spin–especially when they could already do it at home.[59]

An alternative plan was brought forward by a concerned citizen wishing to improve the lot of the knitters yet maintain the nature of the industry. She urged the Canadian government to follow the U.S. lead and maintain an Indian store in a large

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[58] BCA, GR 1550; reel B-5903, Department of Indian Affairs Central Registry File Series c. 1834-1970. Correspondence from C.C. Perry Assistant Indian Commissioner of B.C. to the Department, June 1936.

[59] BCA, GR 1550; reel B-5907, Department of Indian Affairs Central Registry File Series c. 1834-1970. Correspondence to H.A. Hoey at the Department from H. Glynn Ward in Sidney, B.C. 27 May 1940.

center where all Indian products could be marketed equitably. "As things are the Indians are swindled every time they go to Victoria to sell their wares."[60] However, in the end the government never established either system, but rather handed off the industry to urban merchants in the major centers in B.C.

Merchants and Markets

The decades following the 1920's brought a dramatic expansion in the Cowichan sweater market. Locally their popularity mushroomed as British Columbians embraced the sweaters as one of their favourite outdoor garments. The rise in the tourist industry during the inter-war years added to the increase in trade for local dealers. Clothing and dry goods retailers reserved entire departments for Cowichan knitted goods. At the same time international attention resulted in a flourishing wholesale trade in sweaters. Specialty shops featuring Cowichan knitting also became popular in all the major centers.

Many factors played into the early growth of the knitting industry, not the least of which was the superlative quality and aesthetic appeal of the sweaters. However, the early successes of the sweater dealers must be largely attributed to the free services of the government agents. Although ostensibly working for the benefit of the knitters, Indian agents' promotional work played right into the hands of the growing number of sweater dealers.

[60] Correspondence to H.A. Hoey from H. Glynn Ward.

> Nearly 75 per cent of the sweaters now made by Cowichan Indians leave the district for outside buyers, it is estimated by Mr. H. Graham, Indian agent, who revealed this week a healthy and expansive trade after two years of publicity, dating from the sending of a sweater to H.R.H. the Prince of Wales, two years ago [1932]...Locally Mr. Graham points out, the increased business with the sweaters has been of great assistance to the welfare of the Indians themselves and in this way of indirect benefit to the Dominion Government.[61]

During the 1930's and 1940's sweater outlets were established in England and Switzerland, in addition to Canadian markets in Quebec, Ontario and in various locations in British Columbia. As the sweaters gained a reputation there began to be increased attention to their "Indianness". Graham even had a sweater made of goat hair to attract attention to the traditional character of the Coast Salish handwork.[62]

Although the Cowichan sweater industry adopted a very commercial character it was the garment's homespun quality that captivated the local British Columbian public. Cowichan sweaters became one of the few truly West Coast symbols. They found their way into the lives of most families living in B.C. during the mid century, often getting passed from brother to sister or from generation to generation.[63]

> Everyone had a sweater back in those days. My mother bought them for us when we were little and then just passed the sweaters down as the oldest kid got too big for it. The sweater lasted for however many kids you had. Then I bet the sweater got passed through the second hand store.[64]

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[61] Cowichan Leader, 8 February 1934.

[62] Cowichan Leader, 21 September 1933.

[63] This is my assessment based on anecdotal information received from 15 years in the Indian sweater business.

[64] Susan Johnson, personal interview, 15 April 1997.

Early dealers were optimistic about the future of their business, despairing only that the "[o]ne factor restricting sales is the excellent wearing qualities of the garments, making repeat orders seldom necessary."[65] As a favourite outdoor garment or as a symbol of British Columbia, Native and non-Native alike believed a Cowichan sweater was an essential element of the truly West Coast experience.

Publicity received through the media bolstered the local and international reputation of Cowichan sweaters. Visiting dignitaries such as United States President Harry Truman and Queen Elizabeth and Prince Philip were presented with Cowichan sweaters as tokens of their visit to the west. In 1958 the Toronto Star recognized Prime Minister John Diefenbaker's Cowichan sweater.

> Centennial visitors to the Cowichan tribe's region around the town of Duncan, B.C. on Vancouver Island, will add to the fame of the Cowichan's remarkable sweater as they carry thousands of the colorful garments back to their homes in all parts of the world. The Indian sweater won fresh attention from the world last summer as the inevitable outdoor dress of the new Prime Minister John Diefenbaker during his much-photographed fishing trip...Ideal for outdoor wear, sweaters are rain-repellent because natural oils are left in the wool, and they are equipped with a comfy collar.[66]

The sweater industry thrived through the 1940's to 1960's, stimulated by external factors such as the general improvement of B.C.'s economy, the increase in tourism in the post-war years, and the growing international market. The economic impact on both Native and non-Native economies is difficult to calculate for a number of reasons. For many of the sweaters that were bartered there was no monetary

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[65] Cowichan Leader, 13 April 1933.

[66] The Star Weekly, Toronto, 15 February 1958.

exchange documented. Most of the remainder of the transactions were made with cash. Many knitters remember the buyer bargaining for a price and then finally simply reaching in the till or a drawer and paying. Knitters did not give receipts for their work and rarely did they receive any documentation of the transaction. Consequently an undetermined percentage of the sweater business was done "under the table," leaving no trace. So while many dealers have business records, a full account of the sweater trade cannot be obtained through these documents.[67] In addition to the problems with the dealers' records, status Indian knitters were never under the scrutiny of Revenue Canada because income generated on the reserves is tax exempt. Knitters also have no records, except in their memories, of how many sweaters they sold.

Although reliable figures are difficult to establish, anecdotal evidence indicates that business exploded from possibly 70 to 100 knitters producing up to 1000 sweaters in 1936 to 7000 sweaters being sold by one dealer alone in 1960.[68]

Sweater Dealers

In 1931, Norman Lougheed, a young man from Victoria, bought his first Indian sweater. "It was old Mrs. Peter Jones from Pat Bay that I went to. She spun

[67] I am not charging all dealers with underhanded practices. However, because this practice was so common it is impossible to account for what percentage of the overall business is documented.

[68] This estimate was arrived at largely through information derived from Norman Lougheed's personal scrapbook. In it there are many newspaper articles, most undated and unsourced, and many personal notes from his many years in business.

the wool on her knees. You know, just twisting it not with a spinner." A Chinese cook Lougheed knew was constantly complaining of the damp cold on the west coast so Norman told him he would help the cook get a sweater that would keep him warm. "I bought the sweater for $3 and sold it for $4. Then I knew I was going to buy Indian sweaters." Eventually Lougheed bought Dominion Dry Goods, one of the original sweater outlets in Victoria, and then went on to become one of the largest sweater dealers in the area.[69]

Purchasing sweaters often proved to be as much of a challenge to the dealers as selling was to the knitters. Buying was time consuming because each sweater was purchased separately. And rather than establishing standard criteria for quality (proportions, designs, thickness, etc.) and prices, merchants negotiated the price of every sale--both the buyer and knitter pleading hard times.

Judy Hill, who worked in Duncan with Hill's Trading, a large sweater dealership, explained the buyers' dilemma.

> Some knitters are critical of Mrs. Hill[70] because she encouraged trading. But many Natives were happy to trade. They could bring in a sweater and get food for their lunches. One woman remembers how degrading it was for her mother to bring in a sweater one time when the girl needed a new pair of shoes. Mrs. Hill didn't have the cash to buy the sweater so they could only trade it for shoes, but they didn't have the right size or kind of shoe in stock. The girl says she and her mother felt pressured and humiliated into buying those shoes. She felt they had no other option. It was their only alternative and she has an angry dislike for that experience. But Mrs. Hill didn't always have the cash and the people became very dependent on her so if she didn't have the money she would trade. I was in that position

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[69] Norman Lougheed, personal interview, 1 March 1994.

[70] Mrs. Hill, referred to here, is Judy's mother-in-law. Mrs. Hill owned and operated one of the largest Cowichan Sweater operations with stores in Duncan, Nanaimo, Victoria and Vancouver.

> when it was a slow time and there wasn't much cash moving you couldn't buy sweaters. But it might be the same time that the knitters were desperate for money. It might be big house season and sometimes their only source of money was sweaters. I figured that at least if they could trade a sweater for wool they could knit for another buyer and maybe get some money that way. I see it as generous although some knitters don't see it that way. Lots of families were thankful for her flexibility, some aren't.[71]

All buyers did not extend fair play and generosity as their driving ethic. As one buyer from Victoria put it. "We all know that if we don't make them get half wool then we may not see them again. They will just go drink the money away and I don't see any sweaters. I am in this to make money which ever way I can."[72]

It was common practice for buyers to supply wool to the knitters. While it appeared to be for the convenience of the knitters it was rather for the profit of the buyer. Instead of offering wool for sale many buyers gave the knitters no choice but to trade half the value of the sweater for wool. Some buyers only bought sweaters knit from the wool they supplied, consequently if a knitter started trading sweaters with certain buyers soon they were restricted to that buyer alone. This practice also limited the amount of cash knitters could get for their sweaters. This was a very effective way for buyers to control both where the knitter could sell and how they spent their earnings. Exchanging wool for sweaters also gave buyers the opportunity to profit twice from every deal.[73]

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[71] Judy Hill, personal interview, 15 November 1996.

[72] I received this information during the early 1980's from a sweater dealer in Victoria.

[73] Indian agents were concerned with this problem from the early years of the trade, however they did little about it. And instead of the practice disappearing it became entrenched in the sweater trade. BCA, GR 1550; reel B-5907, Department of Indian Affairs Central Registry File Series c. 1834-1970. Correspondence from C.C. Perry Assistant Indian Commissioner of B.C. to the Department, 3 June 1935.

For the Coast Salish by the 1930's, Cowichan sweaters provided a steady income when most other opportunities had dried up. They represented food money, bighouse money, and clothing money when cash was extremely hard to come by. Cowichan sweaters were once warm clothing, but they soon became too expensive for the producers to own. What could be sold had to be sold. Cowichan sweaters were hard work. They required long hours in cramped quarters for very little gain. But by the mid century they were the most viable cash item the Coast Salish produced and, in spite of the downside, Cowichan sweaters carried with them the pride and honour of their creators and the whole Coast Salish people.

Government agents and social activists saw Cowichan sweaters essentially as an opportunity for Native people to become self-sufficient. They presented the possibility for the Coast Salish to develop their own economy linked to the capitalist marketplace, but not in direct competition with non-Native business. Cowichan sweaters seemed the perfect remedy for the high cost of Indian unemployment.

For the merchants Cowichan sweaters were a new product with endless possibilities. It appeared there would be a secure, steady supply and an unlimited demand. They were no longer just a warm sweater, but an Indian craft--a tradition. Cowichan sweaters became quite possibly the most successful souvenir item on the West Coast.

For most British Columbians, Cowichan sweaters were the most practical West Coast weather beaters on the market. They were not only warm and durable,

felt like a second skin and fit like a friendly old pair of shoes, but they lasted for years at a time when these qualities were treasured.

Cowichan sweaters became many things to many people. They even reached mythological heights in the minds of awestruck journalists. None was any more impressed than Bruce Hutchison, who wrote in the Winnipeg Free Press in 1945.

> The inner meaning and symbolism of it, the soul and psyche of the sweater is the important thing. You will never discover that except on Vancouver Island at Cowichan Bay at four am in the murk of a September morning. Then you will observe a unique race of men rowing upon the dim waters and trailing a salmon spoon behind them... These are the salmon fishermen of Cowichan and there is no other race like them in the world. The sweater is a badge of their civilization, the outward and visible sign of an inward and spiritual grace... [The] distinguishing mark [is] the Cowichan sweater, which no Islander would live without. The Maritime Canadian is identified by his blue nose, the Ontario man can be detected by his prosperity, the Prairie man by the gnarled hands of toil... The Islander has his sweater. If the [President Truman] tackles the problems of the world in a Cowichan sweater, if he is fortified by its peculiar virtue and strength, if the Big Three meet in the noble aroma mentioned above, then man may look forward to an era of brooding peace, the unequalled inward peace of Cowichan.[74]

[74] Winnipeg Free Press, 2 July 1945, p. 6.

Chapter Four

"Our needles are heavy"

> It's hard to knit when you don't like what they want you to do. The price hasn't gone up for so long and we have to fight to get whatever we can. My needles get too heavy I can't pick up my knitting.[1]

British Columbia's economy remained strong through the 1960's and 1970's. Developing primary resource and tourist industries provided economic opportunities for the growing population. Post-secondary education became more readily available to British Columbians as universities and colleges were built and expanded at an increasing rate.

However, economic prosperity was not visible on B.C.'s Indian reserves. The gap between Native communities and their non-Native neighbours had widened to the point that crossing a road onto an Indian reserve was like travelling to a foreign country. Impoverished conditions were evident in every aspect of reserve life. Housing development could not keep pace with the exploding Native population. Often three or four families shared one home, resulting in poor sanitation and health conditions.[2] Unemployment levels remained high and the average Native per capita

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[1] May Sam, personal interview, 10 March 1994.

[2] Pauline Comeau and Aldo Santin, The First Canadians: A Profile of Canada's Native People Today (Toronto: James Lorimer & Company, 1990), pp. 26-31.

income was $600 compared to $1400 for non-Native Canadians.[3] Work for B.C.'s aboriginal population often consisted of temporary, part time, or seasonal jobs such as farm labour, food gathering and craftwork. Mainstream education was a dismal failure for Native children. According to one 1967 study a mere 4 percent of Native children enrolled in grade one ever graduated from high school.[4]

In 1966, Harry B. Hawthorn, the editor and director of *A Survey of the Contemporary Indians of Canada*, Canada's first comprehensive report on Native issues, summed up his conclusion in one sentence:

> Today there is the growing danger that a majority of Indians ...may become a more-or-less permanently isolated, displaced, unemployed or under-employed and dependent group who can find no useful or meaningful role in an increasingly complex urban industrial economy.[5]

During the 1960's government assistance to Native people shifted from food and clothing donations to formal welfare payments similar to what was available to other Canadians. However, the rate of welfare dependence of Native people was two to four times higher than among the general Canadian population.[6] Native communities continued to occupy the lowest possible step on the Canadian social ladder. Family breakdown continued as social workers replaced Indian agents and persisted in indiscriminately removing children from their families and placing them

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[3] Olive Patricia Dickason, Canada's First Nations: A History of Founding Peoples from Earliest Times (Toronto: McClelland & Stewart Inc., 1992), p. 384

[4] E. Richard Atleo, "A Study of Education in Context" In Celebration of Our Survival: The First Nations of British Columbia Doreen Jensen and Cheryl Brooks editors, (Vancouver: UBC Press, 1991), pp. 104-6.

[5] Comeau and Santin, The First Canadians, p. 66.

in government care.[7] In spite of the billions of dollars spent by governments attempting to reverse the downward spiral, in 1986 approximately 66 per cent of Native people were still either unemployed or collecting welfare.[8] Ottawa had clearly failed in the management of Native economic affairs.

There was a constant voice of aboriginal protest against government policies during the 20th century, but the government habitually turned a deaf ear to the appeals and excluded Native people from any decision making in their own affairs. However, during the 1970's and 1980's fundamental changes occurred in the relationship between the Canadian government and aboriginal people. The 1969 White Paper tabled by Prime Minister Trudeau's Liberal Government set out a plan for total aboriginal assimilation and was a major catalyst for the change. Stunned by the government's intentions, Native leaders combined their forces and rejected the Paper.[9] Their response illustrated both the depth and determination of Native protest and the failure of the Canadian government's policies dealing with Indian affairs. The next two decades brought a dramatic increase in Native participation in fisheries, education, social welfare and almost every aspect of Native life. The federal

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[6] People to People, Nation to Nation Highlights from the Report of the Royal Commission on Aboriginal Peoples (Minister of Supply and Services Canada 1996), p. 45.

[7] By the 1960's social workers placed Native children in white foster homes rather than residential schools as they had done in the past. Although the effects were somewhat different the foster homes were no less disruptive to Native families than the residential schools.

[8] Comeau and Santin, The First Canadians, p. 67.

[9] Further discussion on the rising Indian protest in the late sixties and early seventies can be found in the following: Comeau and Santin, The First Canadians chapter 1, James Frideres, Native Peoples in Canada: Contemporary Conflicts (Scarborough: Prentice-Hall Canada Inc., 1988), chapter 8 and Paul Tennant Aboriginal Peoples and Politics, chapter 4.

government held fast to the reins of control, making all the important economic and social decisions but the management of many of the government programs was being steadily transferred to Native people.

This dynamic social and political context informs the transforming Cowichan sweater industry through the 1970's and 1980's. The history of the Cowichan sweater industry is a useful microscopic look at the interplay between the faltering Indian Affairs bureaucracy, emerging Native political and economic confidence, and B.C.'s burgeoning business economy.

The Sweater Industry and Government

The Indian Act prevents Native people on reserves from qualifying for bank financing which in turn leaves them totally dependent on special funding from Ottawa. Therefore the Coast Salish were unable to freely participate in the Cowichan sweater industry because the federal government dictated what financing was available and consequently what role Native people would take in the industry. Up until the 1960's Indian Affairs viewed Native people exclusively as knitters and non-Native people as buyers and merchants. Indian agents established markets for sweaters using white middlemen. The agents' work resulted in increased sweater production and a boost for the industry but Native people were excluded from the business profits to be made from their knitting.

Lacking any clear Native economic policy, Ottawa's general increase in expenditures for business development spilled over into a growth of Native business,[10] indicating a change of direction in government thinking during the 1970's and 1980's. Increasingly federal funds became available for Native entrepreneurs and business training programs. Although the government funding programs were chronically ad hoc affairs offering little more than temporary stimulation to the Native economy, they played an important role in the sweater industry.[11] The results of these changes, the changing nature of the sweater industry, and the impacts on the lives of Coast Salish families are the subject of this chapter.

By the 1960's Cowichan knitting was the only viable craft industry in the lower Vancouver Island Coast Salish territory. However, in spite of the sweater industry's exceptional success, economic prosperity eluded the Coast Salish people. Instead, knitters were ghettoized and non-Native dealers controlled the industry's profits. What had been obvious to Native people for decades gradually became evident to Indian Affairs--no matter how hard a knitter worked, economic security could not be achieved by knitting.[12] This fact is demonstrated by how few families

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[10] Comeau and Santin, The First Canadians, pp. 68-9. For further reading on government spending and its impacts on Native economy see Murray Angus, "and the last shall be first" Native Policy in an Era of Cutbacks (Ottawa: The Aboriginal Rights Coalition, 1990).

[11] Comeau and Santin, The First Canadians, chapter 5.

[12] While I have no evidence of this being explicitly stated there seems to be a shift in federal government policy with the introduction of new assistance programs for knitters and small sweater businesses.

stopped or even reduced their knitting output with the advent of welfare:[13] welfare was needed in addition to knitting income to achieve a bare subsistence income.[14]

The first evidence of the government policy shift affecting the sweater industry was in 1960. The recently formed Economic Development Division of Indian Affairs funded the Goldstream Village Cooperative to market Cowichan knitting. The Cooperative's management team consisted of both Native and non-Native people. Its objective was to establish a reliable market, procure higher prices for the knitters, and include knitters and other Native personnel in the marketing side of the business. Unfortunately the coop was plagued with organizational problems from the start and operated for only a couple of years.[15]

A number of Coast Salish individuals took advantage of the capital provided by the newly available federal loans and grants and established sweater businesses.[16] A few retail outlets were created and most Native buyers brokered sweaters from their homes for large overseas dealers. Some businesses were successful for a number of

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13 Welfare was introduced in Native communities in the 1960's. At the same time there was a steady increase in the production of Cowichan sweaters. It appears knitting did not reduce the number of welfare recipients nor did welfare payments diminish the need for knitting. From my past experience in the sweater business the obvious reason was both were needed for bare survival.

14 Indian welfare rates in the mid 60's for a single person were $30 per month--well below that paid to non-Natives. John Lutz explains "Indians came to be seen as people who needed less relief than whites largely because of the continuation by many aboriginal people of a subsistence economy." John Lutz, "Work, Wages and Welfare", p. 266. By the 1960's most of the subsistence material which once supported Coastal Native people was unavailable because of settlement encroachment and government policies that limited hunting and fishing, yet the same government thinking persisted concerning Native welfare needs.

15 RCA, Vol 8423 801/21-1, reel C-13835, Department of Indian Affairs. Quarterly Report for the Cowichan Agency for the period ending 31 May 1959.

16 Modeste Wool Company is one example. During the period from 1979 to 1990 that I spent in the sweater business I encountered numerous small Native sweater businesses spurred on by federal grants and loans.

years, but most Native entrepreneurs lacked sufficient capital, business experience and market connections to compete with established dealers.

Modeste Wool Carding, located on the Cowichan reserve, was an exception. Provided with impetus from federal economic development initiatives, Modeste Wool Carding has made a significant impact on the Cowichan sweater industry from 1970 to the present. The business was started initially with the purchase of an industrial wool carder to supply knitters with a steady supply of high quality wool and within a few years became the largest wool producer and one of the largest sweater dealers on the island. Primarily a wholesaler, they exported knitted goods to markets in Europe and the United States, and especially specialized in the booming Japanese market.[17] Sarah Modeste, who operates the business with her husband Fred, estimates that in 1976 they were selling only a few hundred sweaters, that by 1984 they sold over 3000, and that in 1985 their volume peaked at 6000 sweaters. Most of the sweaters were shipped to Japan, where there was a frenzy of enthusiasm for Cowichan sweaters.[18] Modeste Wool Carding bought from hundreds of knitters as well as employing wool carders, washers and sales people.

Ottawa's interest in the sweater industry expanded in the mid 1980's when grant initiatives included funds for individual knitters. Grants from the federal Indian Arts and Crafts Society provided knitters with up to $400 per year for wool and

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My business, Mt. Newton Indian Sweaters, took advantage of one such initiative. Therefore I was in constant receipt of information concerning available government programs.

[17] Sarah Modeste, personal interview, 15 March 1996.

[18] Sarah Modeste, personal interview, 15 March 1996.

supplies.[19] The program injected short-term funds into the Coast Salish economy but contributed little to long-term economic stability. The most significant effect of the grants was their stimulus to production, which enabled dealers to fill enormous overseas orders.

By the 1990's government funding cutbacks dominated the economic environment in Canada. Fiscal restraint, first affecting Native programs in the mid 1980's, became the overarching theme of Native policy. The federal government viewed Native businesses as high-risk ventures with a great likelihood of failure, and on that basis funding that was previously offered was withdrawn. Consequently government funding had provided little more than a temporary stop gap measure contributing no solid economic stability.[20] The failure of Ottawa to achieve any success in developing a strong Native economy caused one former Conservative ministerial aide to comment "The Tories are looking for ways to get out of the native business."[21] In stride with Ottawa's frustration over its ineffectiveness in dealing with Native economies and its new direction of fiscal constraints, federal enthusiasm waned for Native arts and crafts and funding for economic development in the sweater business all but dried up.[22]

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[19] Sarah Modeste, personal interview, 15 March 1996.

[20] People to People, Nation to Nation, p. 33-46.

[21] Murray Angus, "and the last shall be first", p. 2.

[22] Sarah Modeste, personal interview, 15 March 1996.

Sweaters and the Market

The Cowichan sweater industry continued to expand through the 1970's and reached its peak sometime in the mid to late 1980's. Dramatic shifts occurred both in the market and in the Coast Salish communities during this period, which redirected the industry into a downward trend by 1990. Some describe the 1990's as the demise of the Cowichan sweater industry, while others more optimistically look at it as a temporary slump.

During the 1970's the sweater industry was caught in the wave of its own success. Local business flourished as the sweaters gained popularity with both BC residents and tourists. Wholesale trade expanded nationally and internationally, especially in the United States and Japan. But the demand for Cowichan sweaters outpaced the supply.[23]

One reason for the increased demand for sweaters was a change in the consumers' perception. Cowichan sweaters enjoyed considerable status as a West Coast icon from the 1930's -50's primarily because of their superior quality as outdoor wear. But during the 1960's, and especially by the 1970's, synthetic fibres became increasingly popular and presented serious competition for natural wool in outdoor

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[23] Information for the ebbs and flows of the industry has been gleaned from Judy Hill, Daryl Foster, Norman Lougheed, Sarah Modeste, Kal Tmana (manager of the Canadian Sweater Company in Nanaimo, B.C.) all who have been in the industry for many years.

garments.[24] However, what Cowichan sweaters lost in terms of popularity as a practical outdoor jacket they gained in prestige as a fashion garment.[25]

The press, which once praised the sweaters for their durability, now applauded their style.[26] Cowichan sweaters became a fashion statement and eventually captured the attention of design companies such as New York's Ralph Lauren.[27] All fashion critics, however, were not impressed. In 1966 Britain's Prime Minister Harold Wilson was seen wearing his Cowichan sweater during a game of golf. Tailor & Cutter, the popular British male fashion magazine, disparaged his choice and described the west coast treasure as a "hideously patterned tummy warmer," a "ghastly garment," and a "horrible jumper."[28]

The shift in emphasis from the practical to the more stylish had dire consequences for the sweater industry. Cowichan sweaters were now vulnerable in a new way to the capricious fashion industry. The Cowichan sweater look gained in popularity, but customers now wanted a more refined wool to replace the rough, lanolin-laden handspun wool which had produced the weatherproof qualities that once made the sweaters famous.[29]

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[24] This was a common explanation from sweater dealers. Norman Lougheed and Daryl Foster both say that the sweater was replaced by light water proof synthetic fibres for hikers and outdoors people.

[25] Daryl Foster, personal interview, 10 November 1996 and Norman Lougheed, personal interview, 1 March 1995.

[26] Peter Rusland "Cowichan Sweaters," n.p., n.d. Judy Hill's personal Cowichan Sweater file.

[27] Rusland "Cowichan Sweaters".

[28] O. L Johnston, Westworld, March-April 1976, pp. 53-4.

[29] Information was collected from personal interviews with Sarah Modeste, Daryl Foster and Norman Lougheed.

The method of wool production changed in response both to the demands of fashion-conscious consumers and the growing strain on the local wool supply. Local production of fleece could not keep pace with demand for wool. Black wool especially was in short supply, often impeding sweater production. The characteristically short staple and yellowish colour of local wool became another problem. Increasingly customers preferred distinct whites, greys and blacks and a refined patina only achieved in long staple wool. Apart from the problems with local wool, generally the growing pressure on knitters to increase production forced them to seek alternatives to the time- and energy-consuming wool preparation process.[30]

Wool Adaptation

Up to the early 1970's individual knitters prepared raw fleece, exclusively producing the wool for Cowichan sweaters. However, this practice was almost totally abandoned during the 1970's. In order to streamline wool production, knitters avoided the hand carding process and began to send their washed wool to commercial carding plants. The larger carding machines not only cut-out work time for the knitters but they produced much smoother, refined wool than could be achieved with hand carders. Gradually, raw, carded, ready-to-spin wool, imported from New Zealand and Australia, became available and was immediately popular with many knitters. Characteristically New Zealand wool had an extremely long staple and very distinct

[30] Sarah Modeste, personal interview, 15 March 1996 and Daryl Foster, personal interview, 10 November

bright colours, fulfilling the new demands of the industry. The only way the Cowichan sweater could compete in the fashion-conscious market and keep up with the increasing demand was to abandon its traditional position as the rough-hewn, practical hand knit garment.

In the late 1970's two businesses responded in significantly different ways to the need for a reliable, high-quality wool supply. In 1979 Sasquatch Sweater Shop in Victoria purchased a small wool import business and immediately expanded to provide carded New Zealand wool to the knitters. Motivated by the maxim "the customer always comes first," Sasquatch sought out the wool that best satisfied the demand for refined sweaters. Daryl Foster, owner of Sasquatch Sweater Shop, describes his business decision.

> The late 1970's was the worst period. The quality of the sweaters was dismal except for a few. There were a lot of buyers vying for the sweaters. One of the real problems was the wool. We had to try and develop a better relationship with the knitters and to please the customer--they didn't want the scratchy wool anymore. They wanted colours that were clean and bright not muddy and yellow. The domestic wools weren't available in the quantity needed, the price was too high and there was no standard of quality. We wanted to improve the quality so in 1980 we began importing New Zealand wool.[31]

Modeste Wool Carding on the Cowichan reserve emerged out of the same need for a controlled quality wool supply although their aim was to preserve the traditional character of the Cowichan sweater. The Modestes thought the mixed length, curly fibres of a rough blend of local fleeces provided the best possible wool

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1996.

for their sweaters. Modeste Wool Carding concentrated on producing a high standard of quality and an expanded reliable supply of wool without compromising the unique characteristics which had become known as Cowichan. Sarah Modeste explains:

> It was hard for the knitters to get their wool. It was such hard work especially for the older ones to wash and card their own wool. They needed a steady and easy supply of wool so I decided I could wash and card it so they could just spin it. In 1970 I bought three tubs for hand washing wool. I started buying direct from farmers--I already knew most of them. I worked alone for the first year the same way my grandmother did it. I had the fire outside and the tubs and I dried the wool on the lines. I brought it into the basement and had it on racks to finish drying. I then bought a small carder which I kept in the basement. I couldn't keep up with it. There was a carder up Island for sale so I went to the bank and they loaned me the money. I was the first Native woman to get a loan like that. We rebuilt the machine and then got two scouring bowls from the States for washing. It takes ten washings to get the wool clean with mild liquid detergent.[32]

Both New Zealand wool and commercially carded local wool produced a much finer, cleaner, and more dependable quality wool than had been previously available. However, a strict distinction was made between the long, silky and bright quality of the import and the shorter, often curly and muted local wool. And once sweater buyers entered the wool business some (especially those importing New Zealand wool) refused to buy sweaters made of wool other than what they supplied. Consequently knitters were often stuck in the middle having sweaters made from local wool and unable to find a buyer, or conversely forced to buy New Zealand wool as

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[31] Daryl Foster, personal interview, 10 November 1996. Previous to Sasquatch Trading in Victoria buying the import business New Zealand wool was available but only in limited quantities. Knitters used New Zealand wool, (some of it dyed) their own carded and washed wool and commercially carded local wool.

[32] Sarah Modeste, personal interview, 15 March 1996.

the precondition to selling their sweaters and thus forced into knitting with imported wool.

One often overlooked consequence of the shift to refined wool was the impact it had on the rise in popularity of imitation Cowichan sweaters. Original Cowichan sweaters lost the high lanolin content and the rough quality that had distinguished them from other hand knits. So, once carded wool was widely used, imitation sweaters began to resemble the original much more closely. Soon non-Native manufacturers hired spinners and knitters and were producing imitation "Cowichan" sweaters that were impossible for the customer to differentiate from the original.[33]

Increasing Markets

The retail trade remained steady, while increasing wholesale sales accounted for the boom in the Cowichan knitting industry in the late 1970's.[34] Some buyers dealing almost exclusively in retail up to this time were selling over 50 percent wholesale by the mid 80's.[35] Markets were strong across Canada and in the U.S. and

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[33] This is my contention. I believe that the painstaking and time consuming process of producing rough raw wool hindered imitators from producing it. Once Cowichan sweater style wool was more easily reproduced imitators quickly caught on.

[34] Norman Lougheed, Daryl Foster and Sarah Modeste, personal interviews. In addition, I knew from my own experience as a buyer and wholesaler that others were in the same position. Most of the Native buyers in the business at this time were wholesalers.

[35] Daryl Foster, personal interview, 10 November 1996.

Germany, but the expansion into the Japanese market took the Cowichan sweater industry by storm.

By the late 1970's Cowichan sweaters reached the fashion market in Japan. Not only were there huge orders for sweaters overseas exports, but Cowichan sweater specialty shops opened in Canadian tourist destinations such as Banff and Jasper that catered wholly to Asian tourists. Sweater designs were modified. Animal designs such as the deer and eagle were almost exclusive favourites among Japanese consumers, consequently almost all exports were limited to the two designs.[36]

Riding the wave of Japanese fashion demands, Cowichan sweaters maintained their popularity throughout the 1980's. However, because of increased demand quality was often compromised for quantity, and even with a reliable supply of carded wool the sky-rocketing demand for sweaters could not be met by Coast Salish knitters. A review of sweater sales at Modeste Wool Carding demonstrates the wild upward swing in the industry as a result of the Japanese market.

> In 1970 - 1972 I was buying a few sweaters in my home and some toques and mittens. In about 1974 I went up to 50 or 60 sweaters I was selling. Then by 1976 it was into the 100's for orders for Japanese. A dealer came over from Vancouver and said the Japanese market was big so I was selling about 800 sweaters that year. By 1984 my sales were up to 3000 sweaters a year. It topped out at about 6000 sweaters in 1985. I wanted to get to 10,000 sweaters a year but I didn't make it. In 1985 I had about 300 knitters. Fifty sweaters a day was about all I could handle. I had two seamstresses installing zippers full time. But at that time the quality really slipped.[37]

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[36] Much of my information regarding the Japanese market comes from years of experience working with Japanese buyers from Banff, Vancouver, Whistler and Japan.

[37] Sarah Modeste, personal interview, 15 March 1996.

The early 1970's employed almost every available Coast Salish knitter in the industry. Knitters worked day and night to fill the dealers' orders while often careless and indiscriminate buyers bought every sweater they could find. The result, as Sarah Modeste indicates, was a dramatic decline in the general quality of Cowichan sweaters.

Although high quality sweaters were still available, the market was flooded with a lower quality product. The expanding wholesale trade brought an increased demand for sweaters while the price to the knitter remained stable and there was very little incentive for knitters to produce high quality garments. Buyer Judy Hill describes the change toward mass production in Coast Salish homes:

> They began to work in assembly lines in the home. One member knitting the body while others knit the sleeves. Armholes were too small or big and the sleeves didn't fit properly. There was inconsistency in the knitting. The wool was spun thicker and the needles were bigger so the sweaters were knit more quickly.[38]

While the Cowichan sweater industry reached peak production by the mid 1980's, quality slumped to an unprecedented low, a weakness that newcomers to the industry were able to exploit. Imitation sweaters were nothing new to the Cowichan sweater industry. As early as 1955 concerns were being raised to the Indian agents that imitation sweaters were edging in on authentic Cowichan sweaters in the market share. In 1955 at a conference concerning the Indian Act A. Paull expressed his desire to protect authentic Indian crafts.

> The white people are knitting [Indian sweaters} and calling them

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[38] Judy Hill, personal interview, 15 November 1996.

> Indian sweaters. They are depriving Indian people of the privilege of selling their own. Is there any way we can stop them from saying they are Indian sweaters?[39]

By the late 1970's that imitation sweaters had driven a wedge into the Cowichan sweater market.[40]

The first significant competition for Cowichan sweaters came from home-knit "Cowichan style" wool kits. Two companies, one from New Zealand and another called the White Buffalo Wool Company from Brandon, Manitoba, successfully marketed "Cowichan style" knitting kits. These kits contained thick, six-strand, unspun wool dyed burgundy or blue, or muted gray and cream shades to reproduce the Cowichan look. The packages included Cowichan style patterns and designs. These kits were widely sold[41] and although the sweaters were easily distinguished from the authentic, the home knits became very popular.[42] By 1979 Cowichan sweater look-a-likes were commercially viable and at least two companies, Tuac Sweaters from Vancouver and The Canadian Sweater Company from Nanaimo, specialized in

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[39] RCA, RG 10 Vol 8570; File: 901/1-2-2-2. Indian Affairs Branch correspondence.

[40] Keith Worlary, "Counterfeit Cowichan: A Vancouver Sweatermaker Cashes in on an Indian Tradition." B.C. Report 2 no 7 (0 15 '90), p. 18-19.

[41] I have no information explicitly stating the numbers of kits sold in the Coast Salish territory but the kits were available at all department stores and wool specialty shops. Since 1979 I have installed zippers in thick wool sweaters and a large part of that business was with imitation Cowichan sweaters especially during the early 1980's.

[42] The home knits differed in many ways from the original such as: the pieces were knit separately and sewn together; the wool was unspun resulting in the garment stretching almost immediately upon wearing, the wool was dyed; they had raglan rather than set-in sleeves, the patterns had a very large cumbersome collar rather than the shawl collar of the original.

mass producing "White Buffalo" sweaters in direct competition with Cowichan sweaters.[43]

At first the imitation sweaters were carried only in gift and novelty shops, but by 1980 many Cowichan sweater specialty shops carried genuine Cowichan and imitation sweaters side-by-side. During this period it was not unusual for a salesperson in a Cowichan sweater specialty shop to try to persuade the customer that the imitation sweaters were the superior product.[44] What appears to have been an obviously misguided business move on the part of Cowichan sweater dealers can be understood in this way: first there was a significant saving, since buyers could get an imitation sweater for as little as $45 while a Cowichan sweater cost $65 -$70; second, imitations were much easier to acquire, as buyers bought imitations from dealers rather than directly from knitters; and third, they became easier to sell, since customers liked the variety of colour and the manufactured look of the imitations.

The imitation sweater business expanded quickly, edging in on both the wholesale and retail Cowichan sweater markets. They were particularly successful in the overseas trade, which had large standardized orders and preferred the polished look of manufactured wool. The Japanese market was especially responsive because, while Japanese consumers appreciated the uniqueness of Cowichan sweaters, they

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[43] Capitalizing on the popularity of the Cowichan sweater look and its imitation made popular by the home knitting kits, these companies hired home knitters, mostly from the immigrant South Asian community, to knit the kits produced by the White Buffalo Company.

[44] This is from my own experience of the business at the time. My market research included visiting many Cowichan sweater shops as a prospective customer and being given the sales pitch for the competition. Soon salespeople sold the imitations off the weaknesses in the original sweaters. Some would keep very poor quality Cowichan sweaters on display to point out their failures and to bemoan the demise of the genuine product and to applaud the higher quality of the imitations.

required very little selection in design, preferring a standardized product. Consequently assembly-line knitters easily filled Japanese orders. Also, as the sweaters were increasingly marketed as a fashion garment rather than a Canadian Native craft, consumers lost appreciation for the distinction between authentic and imitation sweaters. This was especially a factor in distant markets, where the customers had little knowledge of West Coast Native people.[45]

However, in spite of local dealers' initial enthusiasm for imitation sweaters, they soon discovered the sweaters had serious problems. The unspun wool may have appeared to be of superior quality when new but it did not keep its shape and wore very poorly compared to the handspun original. Although imitation sweaters continued to be popular, most local Cowichan specialty shops shunned them after carrying them for only a year or two in favour of promoting and improving authentic sweaters.[46]

The three characteristics that had initially made Cowichan sweaters popular had been gradually abandoned to accommodate shifting market demands and thereby opening the door for competitors. First, the sweaters lost much of their originality in design in order to satisfy dealers requesting standardized garments to fill enormous overseas shipments. Second, knitters worked so fast to fill orders that the once guaranteed quality was compromised in favour of quantity. Third, the rough,

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[45] Kal Tmani, (owner/manager of the Canadian Sweater Company), personal interview, 12 November 1996.

[46] Daryl Foster recalls carrying imitation sweaters alongside the genuine sweaters for only a short time. Some dealers kept a few imitations displayed but they did not actively promote the imitations for long.

weatherproof wool that had endeared the sweaters to many in their early years was replaced with refined wool that was both more easily available and substituted.

Ironically, by the 1980's in many ways the new hallmark of excellence in a Cowichan sweater became how closely it resembled its imitators. Many buyers required knitters to standardize cuffs, collars, sleeve and body proportions, colours, needle size, and wool thickness as if they were working from a pattern. Some dealers even drafted and supplied the knitters with designs that were most popular with their customers. The selling features of imitation sweaters were imposed on the Cowichan sweater industry. Soon the criterion for a good Cowichan knitter was how exactly she or he could reproduce an order rather than how creatively she or he could produce a garment.[47]

By the early 1980's the Cowichan sweater industry was running adrift. Knitters worked as independent producers with no organization, consequently the direction of the industry was left in the hands of the dealers. Dealers seriously compromised the quality of their product in an attempt to maintain a lion's share of the market, and in so doing created a debilitating problem. When commercially produced imitation sweaters made serious inroads into the Cowichan sweater market, dealers, knitters and the Cowichan people responded to protect and improve authentic Cowichan sweaters. Judy Hill worked on enhancing the quality of the sweaters and increasing the price paid to the knitters.

> By the 1980's the quality had deteriorated substantially. I began talking to the knitters. Sleeves shouldn't be sewn on they should

[47] Daryl Foster, personal interview, 10 November 1996.

> be knit on. Many knitters didn't know how to do it any other way so I gave them six months to learn. I critiqued each sweater as it came in and I raised the price as the quality improved. I figure I got the cream and the knitters got more money. By 1984 we were paying between $65 and $90; in 1996 we pay between $100 and $130. I would like to pay between $200 and $250 and charge $400 but the market will not allow for that even if I deliver a better sweater and the knitters get more. Other buyers are still trying to pay the least amount possible. Buyers need education in what they are buying.[48]

Dealers interested in salvaging their industry began applying stricter standards of quality to the sweaters. Some, like Judy Hill, tried to re-educate both knitters and customers. The effort to improve the quality of authentic Cowichan sweaters and maintain a strict differentiation between the original and imitation sweaters proved a very difficult task. Most buyers did not raise their prices like Judy Hill, so there was very little incentive for knitters to apply any extra time to sweater production. Many buyers used the slump in quality as a justification for lowering prices. The result was a drop in prices in the late 1980's to $60-$70 for an average sweater. Meanwhile the margin of difference between imitation sweaters and authentic Cowichan sweaters narrowed as imitation sweater producers began using handspun wool.

The success of imitation sweaters forced the Cowichan sweater to become more specifically identified. What was an authentic Cowichan sweater? In response to this difficult question the Cowichan Band, in conjunction with some sweater dealers, attempted to work out a definition of an authentic Cowichan sweater as distinct from its competitors.

In 1981 the Cowichan band produced a Band Council Resolution stating the necessary requirements for an authentic Cowichan sweater as follows:

a) Durable hand knit finished product made from unprocessed water repelled wool
b) Long stranded wool spun to produce a strong yarn
c) Geometric or animal designs on the clothing
d) Sweaters which are knit in the round producing a tubular seamless body
e) Sleeves are knitted or attached by yarn
f) No artificial or natural dyes[49]

In addition they stipulated that an authentic sweater must be made by a Coast Salish Indian.

Not only did the integrity of the Cowichan sweater need protecting, but the Cowichan name itself had become widely used by imitation sweater companies. Sweaters were sold under various labels, all of which made specific mention of their similarity to Cowichan sweaters, for example "Cowichan style sweaters," "Indian sweaters," "authentic Cowichan style handknits."[50] In order to gain some control of the industry the Cowichan Band acquired a Canadian trademark for both the "Genuine Cowichan Sweater" title and the "Cowichan" name.[51] The Band is also working internationally to rectify a problem in Japan that was created when the legal protection of the Cowichan name was allowed to lapse in that country. This oversight

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[48] Judy Hill, personal interview, 15 November 1996.

[49] Cowichan Band Council Resolution adopted 23 June 1981. From Daryl Foster's personal papers.

[50] These examples are from my survey over the years of labels used in advertising and in packaging of imitation sweaters.

[51] Trade-marks Journal, Industry Canada, Wed., July 10, 1996, pages 39,62, 65.

opened the way for a New Zealand company to acquire the "Cowichan" trademark and market "Authentic Cowichan" sweaters in Japan.

The most recent effort by the Cowichan Band to establish some control over the sweater industry is the development of a knitters' cooperative. Knitters participate in all aspects of the co-op management, including sales, promotion, and safeguarding standards of knitting excellence. Their goal is to recreate a steady demand for genuine, high quality Cowichan sweaters by educating the consumer on the exceptional characteristics of their garments. Their marketing focus emphasizes Cowichan sweaters as a Native handcraft rather than exclusively a fashion garment.[52]

However, in spite of efforts by the industry and the Cowichan people to establish the identity and secure a market for genuine Cowichan sweaters, fashion continues to be a major factor and fashion has changed. Ironically the pressure to identify and defend the Cowichan sweater's authenticity has somewhat boxed it into a corner. With the parameters of the "Cowichan sweater" identity so clearly staked, the sweater industry cannot easily adapt to the vagaries of the fashion market. Meanwhile imitation producers have no such constraints. They can freely adapt patterns and designs as the fashion hand knit sweater market dictates. They constantly increase their range of colours and expand their designs to include Aztec and Navajo motifs and any others currently popular. In response to shifts in the market in recent years the Cowichan style sweater has shrunk to a very small percentage of their

[52] Bill Greenwell, personal interview, 12 November 1996.

business. Kal Tmani, the owner of one of the largest hand knit sweater companies on the coast describes the necessary shifts he has made in recent years.

> It was much easier when we were just producing Indian style sweaters. You could stick to four designs. But times have changed. Indian sweaters is only one very small aspect of the business. We have diversified. A lot more work goes into designs. Whatever is going to sell. We update colours every year. Growth in our business has been in the fashion end. I travel to New York and all over. I must keep myself updated on what is going on all the time. We are now working with several hundred different styles. It is a different market. The primary market is not aware of the Cowichan sweater although in Canada they still relate the sweaters to Cowichan.[53]

The challenge to the Cowichan sweater industry is to recreate a healthy market for their sweaters which no longer hold the same practical or fashion appeal they once did, but which yet still captivate the interest of the consumer seeking high quality Native craft.

The Sweater Industry and The Coast Salish

Knitting continued to be one of the primary sources of cash income for many Coast Salish families throughout the 1970's and 1980's. However, the remarkable success of the sweater industry meant hard work with little financial satisfaction for most knitters.

By the 1960's most knitting families had reached their maximum productive capacity by enlisting all available family members and working day and night

preparing wool, carding, spinning, and knitting. In spite of the long hours and hard work families could never hope to make more than poverty wages. One article states that a family earned $400 per month knitting which was a good income at the time. What the article neglected to say was how many full time family workers were needed to make a reasonable family income.[54]

The common profile of such a family would include a mother and father, three or four participating children and possibly a grandparent, aunt or uncle. Often children were kept home or quit school early in order to contribute to the family knitting. If all the family members worked ten or twelve hour days they could knit seven or eight sweaters a week and receive $65 or $70 per sweater. The wool cost per sweater was about $20, leaving a net income ranging from $315 to $350 per week. As a knitter recalls:

> I did all the spinning, my husband knit the main body of the sweaters and the kids helped with the sleeves and toques and mitts if there was any order for them. I used to help with the knitting too. I knit most of the collars. We all used to knit pretty full time. Sometimes it would be right until two or three in the morning.[55]

The expansion of the wholesale trade in sweaters had two important consequences for the knitters. First, even though the retail price of Cowichan sweaters continued to rise, the price to the knitters levelled off in the early 1970's because of the low wholesale prices. During the two decades previous to 1970 the

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[53] Kal Tmani, personal interview, 12 November 1996.

[54] From Norman Lougheed's private collection, n.p, n.d..

[55] Personal interview, 12 March 1995. Knitter wishes to remain anonymous.

knitter's income for one sweater rose from $15 to $65-$70. Apart from minor fluctuations in the market, the price remains today at the 1970 level.[56] The only way a knitter could raise their income was to increase production.

Second, the standardization of designs to accommodate wholesale customers meant knitting became monotonous and repetitive. Quality was compromised as knitters were discouraged from creativity or innovation as each sweater was to be a clone of the last. For most knitters the challenge was no longer to create the best possible sweater but the greatest number of sweaters. Although buyers increasingly disparaged the lack of quality, their need for sweaters resulted in a general loss of respect for the product rather than an effort to maintain high standards. Morale amongst Cowichan sweater knitters slipped to an all time low. Verna Jack describes how the changes affected her love for knitting.

> You'd have four sweaters and you couldn't get rid of them. I'd sell to Sarah and a few times I would get her wool and then no one would buy her wool, it would have to be New Zealand wool. So then you are stuck. You still only get $65 if you are lucky. Sarah is better, you can get $70 but then you have to go and buy wool. Then the buyers would give you the design to knit. They all want the same design. Don't they ever get tired of it? I don't knit very much.[57]

The shift from hand-prepared wool to commercially washed and carded wool also had a dramatic impact on the work lives of Coast Salish knitters. The change began gradually when knitters began to send their hand washed wool to commercial

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[56] Special orders and particularly popular knitters have always been able to claim a higher price from the dealers. Some buyers such as Judy Hill have concentrated on raising the price for knitters but generally the price is still the same.

[57] Verna Jack, personal interview, 1 August 1996.

carders. For a time knitters continued to wash their fleece and mix the colours in their own way and commercial carding only eliminated the strenuous and time consuming hand carding process.

But by the late 1970's, when local and New Zealand washed, mixed and carded wool was readily available, knitters almost immediately abandoned their own wool preparation in favour of the ready-to-spin wool. A reliable source of processed wool meant families could bypass lengthy wool preparation altogether while also eliminating delays in sweater production caused by a short supply of local wool. Household space once needed for wool preparation was now freed up, only to be replaced by bags of carded wool. Commercially carded rovings were also much easier and quicker to spin.

However, some of the effects of the shift to commercially carded wool were neither necessarily positive nor immediately apparent. In some ways the knitters' work became easier, but it also became more concentrated, monotonous and stationary. The diversity in their work had been narrowed to spinning and knitting which presented significant health risks. Knitters often developed back and shoulder problems from long uninterrupted hours, sitting bent over spinning and knitting.[58] Knitters also lost a significant amount of creative control when they began using pre-prepared wool. In the past knitters could create a wide range of shades of colour as well as streaked and variegated wool by mixing uncarded fleeces. In contrast, large carding machines mixed huge lots of wool in such a way that produced standardized

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flat colours, thus limiting knitters to only a few predetermined choices. Commercially carded wool was also more expensive than farmers' fleece; consequently knitters became doubly dependent on dealers, first for their wool and second for their market.[59]

Production increased substantially with the advent of commercially carded wool. Families that once knitted two sweaters a week now produced four or five. Many knitters adapted to the market and mass produced predesigned sweaters, exchanged half the value in wool from the buyer and returned home to repeat the process. Cecelia Smith recalls some of her knitting days spent on what felt like a treadmill.

> I was working on sweaters for one buyer who had an order for a thousand sweaters. They gave me a pattern to copy and I had to make all the sweaters exactly the same. I was saying they must be making them for an army somewhere. They are all the same design and the same size. You just made one sweater after the other until the order was full. It was better when you could decide what you put on your sweater.[60]

Life for Cowichan knitters became drudgery. While knitting had always been a job, a hard job, and a low-paying job, there had always been a will and a spirit of pride in the knitters that gave their work value and prestige. But by the early 1980's many knitters had lost their will to work. As many have said their needles got too heavy and they were too weary to pick them up.

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58 This was a common complaint from knitters when I was buying sweaters.

59 Hand prepared wool was costly in terms of labour but could be purchased for $1 per pound when carded wool cost $6 per pound.

60 Cecelia Smith, personal interview, 15 March 1994.

> I put my needles away. We used to knit to make a living, me and the girls, all through the time I was raising them. We used to get our wool from the farmers...we used old patterns, just plain. I never heard about eagles. We just knit flowers, most of the Kuper people knit the flower design. But then they got too fussy. They measure it and it has to be just the exact size they want, and all they want is those dancing deer and eagles. Then when you sell it you have to buy half your money in wool. I like to see the money but I just don't feel like knitting anymore.[61]

Knitters Today

The relationship between the knitters and buyers has reached an all time low during the last two decades. Wholesale sales increased the dissociation between knitters and their product. The distance also grew between knitters and the buying public as the majority of sweaters filled massive orders assigned to international destinations. This detachment was another important factor in the plummeting quality of the sweaters. As a result there was an additional strain on the already uneasy association between buyer and knitter. Knitters could not satisfy both the quality and quantity requirements of the industry and constantly felt their work was being criticized.

> You just don't feel like knitting anymore. They have gotten so fussy and they argue with you about every little thing--you never win...If you don't have exactly what they want then you're stuck.[62]

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[61] Sophie Jack, personal interview, 1 August 1996.

[62] Verna Jack, personal interview, 1 August 1996.

Knitters felt betrayed by dealers who sold imitation sweaters alongside and very much on the back of the popularity of Cowichan sweaters. Many buyers kept down the price of genuine Cowichan sweaters paid to the knitters, with the threat that they could purchase an imitation sweater for two thirds the price. Knitters with high quality work became angry at undiscriminating buyers who bought and displayed poor quality work, spoiling the reputation of the sweaters as a whole.

> The buyers bought any old junky sweater and told us they couldn't get a good price for sweaters because the quality was so bad. But they paid me the same for my good sweaters as they did for sweaters with big holes under the arms.[63]

Native buyers who entered the industry in the late 1970's often had a better relationship with the knitters, but could do little to improve the overall condition of the industry. Consequently they worked within the existing framework rather than making significant changes in the industry. Wholesale prices, for example, were set so low by the large companies that there was very little margin to raise prices to knitters.[64] If a buyer did offer a higher price for sweaters they would be inundated by calls from dozens of knitters to buy their sweaters, thus making it extremely difficult for a small scale buyer to work with a select group of knitters and keep them steadily employed. It was also often more difficult for Native buyers to be discriminating or to reject substandard sweaters because they were dealing with close family and neighbours. Lack of buying and business experience and failing market conditions

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[63] Diane Harris, personal interview, 20 June 1996.

[64] During the 1980's sweaters were wholesaled at only $85 - $90 per sweater. Knitters often received $55 from the dealer. If a buyer paid $75 per sweater which some of us tried to do there was only $10-$15 left to

resulted in very few Native buyers staying in business for more than a few years. Modeste Wool Carding is, of course, the obvious exception, but the company is now struggling along with all Cowichan sweater specialists for the survival of the industry.

Not unlike in the days of their great grandmothers who set aside their looms in favour of working in the homes and farms of the settlers, many knitters in the 1970's and 1980's put down their knitting needles to go back to school or work. The new era of political awareness resulted in an increased demand for Native people to work within their own communities. The Cowichan Band, along with its neighbours, was in the forefront of such Native political movements, taking charge of the affairs of their own community. Raised expectations and awareness of economic opportunities stimulated many knitters to return to school to complete their high school and enter post-secondary education or job training.[65] Increasingly families and communities encouraged their children to stay in school and complete their education.

But it was not only political and economic changes that drew knitters away from their trade. The effects of the transformation in the industry eroded the will of many knitters. While once it was an honour, even a celebrated tradition, to teach your children to knit, by the 1980's many families forbade their young people to learn. The Coast Salish perception of the Cowichan sweater industry shifted from a way to make ends meet to a guaranteed life of poverty. Parents wanted more for their

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zipper and ship the product. Native buyers often attempted to work with this margin which of course never provided any opportunity to build capital or even to cover costs.

[65] The number of registered Indians enrolled in university in B.C. has increased from 60 in 1960/61 to 5800 in 1985/86. The number of registered Indians enrolled in post-secondary institutions has nearly doubled

children than what had become the drudgery of knitting Indian sweaters. One young woman describes why she never learned to knit:

> My mother and my grandmother knit. Even my great grandmother knit I think. They were always making sweaters when I was a kid. My older sister learned how to but she doesn't knit now. My mother never let me learn even when I wanted to when I was young. She told me that she didn't want me to learn, she didn't want me stuck with all that hard work. She hates knitting now and wants to make sure we can do something else.[66]

The many years of struggle in the Cowichan sweater industry have left the Coast Salish ambivalent. A deep contradiction remains: on the one hand knitting as an occupation is disparaged, while on the other hand it remains a time honoured tradition. Many who have returned to school or entered the workforce have abandoned their needles completely. Memories of hard work and humiliation prevent them from knitting even as a hobby or an enjoyable pastime. Some, however, do continue to knit for the love of it. Production is likely much lower for these knitters than in bygone years and their knitting income less necessary, which affords them the luxury of knitting for enjoyment. Laura Olsen echoes why many older knitters keep knitting integrated into their lives.

> I'll be 81 this year and I just take things as they come. I still knit mostly the small stuff; socks, mitts, toques. Sometimes I knit a vest but the knitting gets heavy and I have trouble with my shoulders. But I love knitting. Now I can sit and watch TV and knit. I can't just sit and do nothing. My hands have to be doing something and I have knit all my life.[67]

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from 11,170 to 21,566 between 1985/86 and 1992/93. Culture, Canadian Ethnology Society VOL. VIII No 1, (1988): p. 40.

[66] Personal interview, 1 August 1996. Respondent wishes to remain anonymous.

[67] Laura Olsen, personal interview, 12 March 1994.

For those with few other marketable skills, little education and no job opportunities, knitting income continues to be their only means of support or a supplement to low incomes. These knitters still work hard, for long hours and accept desperately low wages only to remain in the clutches of poverty. Native artist Doug Wilson, when discussing Native craftspeople's dependence on such an impoverished lifestyle, stated "The problem is so difficult, because, you have to understand, there are so many of us out there that still don't even know that alternatives exist."[68]

What Now?

In spite of the dramatic downturn in the sweater industry those who remain knitters continue to pursue better marketing conditions for their product. If history does not exactly repeat itself, it can appear to return in cycles. The retail sweater trade has diminished to a mere skeleton of its former self and some customers are disenchanted with the large sweater shops, consequently a few are filtering back to the reserves in search of custom knitters. Some knitters prefer the higher prices and increased control they achieve by dealing directly with the purchasing public. Once again many knitters limit their work to their own families and neighbours. Others market their sweaters at powwows, canoe races and other Native gatherings. There is

[68] Doug Wilson quoted by Daryl Foster, personal interview, 10 November 1996.

also a much more receptive market for Cowichan sweaters within the larger Native community than in previous decades.[69]

An important question for all those remaining in the Cowichan sweater industry is: Where does it go from here? Many unanswered questions follow: Can the market be re-established for a viable industry to continue? Will the Cowichan sweater, itself an adaptation – a synthesis of European and aboriginal art and technology – remain in its present form in spite of losing its market and public interest? Is it possible that those who have conscientiously established and defended an "authentic" identity for the Cowichan sweater have unconsciously arrested its continued adaptation?

The challenge remains for the Coast Salish to defend and promote their tradition. Coast Salish people are wool workers, they have always been wool workers. "We always have to make something, we have always had our hands busy working with wool."[70]

> There was a time when the people of this area were pushed southwards by glaciers of ice until they were nearly pushed into the territories of their enemies. Then the raven transformed the glaciers of ice and snow into the mountain goat and so the people were able to return to their lands and also to hunt the mountain goats in high rocky places where they chose to live. Mountain goat wool was the first wool the Cowichan people chose to use in their blankets and when the Cowichan first began to knit their sweaters it might have been mountain goat wool that they used.[71]

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[69] This is my own observation based on my experience in the Cowichan sweater business and in the Coast Salish communities.

[70] Sarah Modeste, personal interview, 15 March 1996.

[71] The original soundtrack from "Great Deeds" from Share Our Pride director, Paul Smith writer, Paul Beserene.

The stories of the grandmothers and grandfathers teach that the thread that weaves the past into the future is woven by the hands of the Coast Salish with handspun wool and love.

CONCLUSION

This story of Coast Salish wool working begins with the records of European travelers and fur traders as they observed the practices of Native people. Through the blur of the visitors' misunderstandings there are hints and traces of the orderly social world of the Coast Salish. The order, however, was confusion to the Europeans who superimposed their values and meaning on Coast Salish practices. The coming together of the West Coast people and the Europeans and subsequent meetings and struggles over meaning and practice are here illustrated in the history of Coast Salish wool workers.

The story brings into the light the blankets and sweaters produced by Coast Salish wool workers, revealing their significance as material and symbolic points of contact between the Coast Salish and the newcomers. As the story unfolds through time, images and meanings become clearer because the storytellers become more numerous. The records of fur traders and travelers are joined by newspaper articles, government documents and business files. By the early 20th century the story is also told in the voices of people from the Coast Salish villages and those of British Columbians whose lives have been touched by the work of the wool workers.

By covering over one hundred years of history this story can only act as a framework, an outline of a much larger, much fuller story. There are many more voices and images, many more meanings and values that remain buried because of the

scope of this project. It is my intention that this story will locate the Coast Salish wool-working industry in the larger British Columbia labour, gender, economic, family and cultural histories. This story can be told again and again, each time uncovering more and filling in more of the blanks.

Practices such as collecting blankets and knitted things for giveaways are still common in Coast Salish life. However wool working does not play the same cultural role in the Coast Salish world. Coast Salish people are putting down their wool-working tools and going back to school or out into the workforce. There is no longer the social time or space for knitting. Grandmothers are not teaching their grandchildren how to prepare wool and knit sweaters. The few women who are weaving have been taught by specialists in an effort to revive Salish weaving. Woolworking skills are no longer a family tradition in most Coast Salish homes. This has had many cultural consequences. Lucy remembers the significant role wool working played in the teachings she received from her grandmother and comments on how things have changed.

> I am only in my forties but I was raised traditional by my grandmother. When I became a woman my grandmother told me that I had to work. I had to keep busy from the time I got up in the morning until I went to bed. First thing I went down to the beach for a cold bath. Then when I came home I used to tease and card the wool until it was time to go to school. Same thing when I got home. If I wasn't cooking I was working with the wool for mom and my grandmother. Now there is nothing for the girls to do. There is nothing to keep them busy the same as the wool. My grandmother said it was important for women to learn to keep their hands busy. It is part of who we are as a people. It is important to us[72]

[72] Lucy Tom, personal interview, 22 November 1997.

Cowichan sweaters are no longer fashionable. While thriving imitation sweater manufacturers have integrated new styles and colours into their creations, markets for Cowichan sweaters have dried up. Styles have changed but Cowichan sweaters have stayed the same. Ironically the effort to forge a unique place for Cowichan sweaters and to maintain their integrity may be the very thing that has hampered the wool workers' industry from adapting to change and thwarted its vitality.

The Cowichan Sweater Coop in Duncan is attempting to reestablish a market for their sweaters. The Coop is focusing on Cowichan sweaters as high quality authentic Indian crafts. Very few Coast Salish are knitting for their main source of income. Knitting, for many, is a hobby or an income supplement. Once again Coast Salish wool workers are knitting for their families--for love.

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