

Nuxalk House of Smayusta



ISTA: A Nuxalk Reminisces (2009)

By Chief Qwatsinas

This morning I know will bring many new things, maybe unexpected ones, but I believe truly wonderful ones. I feel that we are blessed with meeting the morning: its wonderful grayness creeping into our daily existence. To make us feel that we are given this gift to hold onto for the whole day. I wonder sometimes; will we know within ourselves what is our place in life? As a child, I felt this yearning and feeling towards the land and the land's life. The plants, the soil, the fresh smell of it all; what did it mean? When I was in elementary school I would skip out to go climb the mountain, explore the trails, and just feel the freedom within the trees and moss. Far from all of this never I would imagine that I would be fighting, standing up for the lands, forests, and my rights. I have written my own little stories of this; I have explained through my child's eyes what I felt and what I saw.

It was a long road through those trials of ISTA when I finally stood in front of the court judge who was about to pass sentence on me that warm day in June of 1999. I listened very carefully about what the prosecution lawyers were saying about all the arrestees; their individual profiles and all. I listened to the arguments put forth by the logging company, Interfor. Most of all I listened to the testimony of the other Chiefs and Elders. It was the same feeling that I felt as a child that I had to protect this valley called ISTA; I knew it was something special and that it meant so much to our people. The freedom I felt in the forests, the love I felt for the things it provided for us.

I knew as I camped from day to day at ISTA that the BC law enforcement officials would be coming to remove us. I felt that they no longer felt a yearning or longing for the land or its provision and that the fate of ISTA was in my hands. I felt the cold air in the evenings and in the mornings. I drank the cold glacier waters from the creek and I even bathed in it. It was no longer distant from me; I was in it. I walked amongst the huge trees, into the mountainside, and felt the soft moss beneath my feet. I tasted the medicines, I tasted the marine life at the beach, and I tasted the berries in the forest. My thoughts always wandered into the reality that these things will be gone soon because of the inevitable logging.

I waited intently for the judge's words; I asked to move closer to his bench. He acknowledged my request and motioned me forward; I got as close I could to his bench. I wanted to see his eyes and feel his presence because it was so important to feel his words, to see what they meant. As I looked into his eyes I knew he felt compelled to give me a harsh sentence. When I was arrested at ISTA the police knew I had one day left on my probation from the arrests and protests of 1995. My God, they sure dragged on the courts and its dates; I suppose it was to wear us down spiritually, mentally and physically. The prosecution demanded a harsh sentence for me because they said I was a “ringleader” and an “instigator” and that I had broken probation. My sentence turned out to be 45 days in jail. It was suspended on the condition that I sign a two-year probation order.

I looked at the eyes of the judge who was expecting me to respond to his sentence. It must have seemed like an eternity to the other Chiefs and Elders. Reluctantly I said; “yes, I accept these terms.” In my heart and mind, I was saying to myself “never in a million years.” But I had already given my commitment to the other Chiefs and Elders and that is what counted. They wanted a reprieve and to take a break from it all. But that did not stop me from making other plans for the future.

The days that I spent in jail showed me the enormous contrast from the time I camped at ISTA. The jail food was bland, there were the concrete walls, the sound of the life in forests was absent, the water was not pure, the air was not fresh, and the noise of the city assaulted my ears. During my time in jail I sang our songs to feel the freedom of ISTA. I have gone back there again, to ISTA. I have seen the tremendous sadness of the forest removal: the clearcuts that eat away at one of the last remaining ancient temperate rainforest of the world, destroying the life lungs of Mother Earth and the fresh air of humans. Sometimes I wonder if the huge western cedar will become extinct. This is the way of the Nuxalk; this I can fight for and will continue to do so. I have all the reason to, and no reason not to; it is a must.