

# Remembering Mabel Taylor

## Mabel Taylor Remembered...

It has been a year since Mabel Taylor died and I think it appropriate to reflect upon just who and what this extraordinary woman was.

Born in 1900 in Ditidaht territory, Mabel had a Ditidaht mother and a Tseshaht father. Her father, Joe Hayes (Chimski Joe) was a member of the Hikwuulhsath group of the Tseshaht people as he was related to Santo, the Hikwuulhsath Chief. Mabel spent her childhood amongst her mother's people and did not move to Alberni until she was 15 or 16 years old.

In 1918 she married Jack Cook, an Opetchesaht, and approximately one year later, after Mr. Cook's death, she married Roy Taylor, a prominent Tseshaht. Like her father, Roy Taylor also was Hikwuulhsath through his relationship with Jimmy Santo. For much of their long and successful marriage of over 50 years, they moved about Tseshaht territory using its richness much as their people had done for centuries. At various times they lived in their houses at the Somass River Reserve, Polly's Point, Keith, Nettle, and Village Islands.

While Mabel and Roy had no children of their own, they played an important part in the raising of Adam Shewish. Adam's mother died when he was 12 and Mabel, his aunt, assumed her role. She taught him traditional values: to love people, to show generosity, and to share with his fellow man. She told him to have patience with others who lacked it and to take pride in whatever he achieved.

In a recent letter, anthropologist Susan Golla wrote "In the years I knew her I never heard her raise her voice in anger or speak harshly to anyone. She preferred to teach in the Indian way, by showing and doing, and if someone needed correction, she was most likely to do so with a humorous remark. She had the respect for other people that en-

compassed the willingness to let them make their own mistakes and enough self-respect to make her tolerant of other people's ways ... She found humor in everything. Her laughter was hearty but gentle and embracing."

I first met Mabel during the summer of 1973 while excavating the archaeological site at Shoemaker Bay and was struck by her quiet dignity and authority. While my acquaintanceship with her continued during the several years of the excavation, it was not until 1976 that I began to work closely with her and Margaret and Adam Shewish. These three wonderfully generous, caring, and knowledgeable people introduced me to a world only hinted at in books.

Archaeologists have been slow to acknowledge the importance of Native elders as informants of past events. Unlike their ethnographer colleagues, archaeologists, until recently have overlooked the tremendous value of people such as Mabel who, as repositories of traditional knowledge (history, stories, songs, dances, genealogies, crafts, etc.), are of invaluable help in reconstructing events of the past.

During the years following 1976 I had the good fortune to work with Mabel and was frequently astounded and thrilled by the depth and breadth of her knowledge of Tseshaht life generations ago. Through her I was able to learn so much that was vital to my research but otherwise unobtainable. This was never more apparent than in the summer of 1983 when as part of the Pacific Rim Archaeological Project she accompanied me and a number of other researchers to Barclay Sound. For two days we toured by boat the Tseshaht territory in this region. Her encyclopedic knowledge of places she had not seen for as much as 40 years amazed me. It was dramatic proof positive that the knowledge of people such as Mabel is

invaluable in any attempt to recreate the history of the west coast.

Of course she freely and readily shared her special knowledge and abilities with others as well. Susan Golla travelled thousands of miles to use Mabel's linguistic abilities to translate stories that made up the "Legendary History of the Tseshaht". Her knowledge of Tseshaht history was important to this project as well. When Harry Dyer opened his store in Port Alberni she taught him a great deal about basketry and was a major supplier of his stock.

Indeed her skills as a basketmaker were well known and she gave demonstrations at the University of British Columbia Anthropology Museum and was sought after by the national Museum in Ottawa to do the same. As the Alberni Valley Museum grew from its infancy to its present impressive position, Mabel was frequently called upon for assistance as displays and exhibits were built. Many Tsesaht people sought her advice because of her detailed knowledge of genealogies, songs, dances, and stories. And, of course, her well-known abilities as a fish cutter and smoker made her a very busy person as many people brought her fish during the summer season.

Mabel Taylor's death

was an incalculable loss not only for the Tseshaht but for all people. When people such as Mabel, Jim McKay, Ella Jackson, Ernie Lauder or Robert Sport die an irreplaceable void is created that greatly saddens me. All too often knowledge that is the result of countless generations of mankind's experience dies with them. The world cannot afford such tremendous loss, we need the wisdom and experience of the elders to show us our past, to teach us of a simpler but in many ways richer lifestyle that is so rapidly being left behind.

I am grateful, indeed honored, that I was fortunate enough to have been able to work with Mabel and other recently deceased elders. It is my hope that a substantial scholarship fund could be established in Mabel's name or in the name of elders in general which would be used to encourage young native people to continue their education and receive training by their elders or public institutions in order to preserve the history and culture of their people. I certainly would be eager to contribute to such a scholarship as a small way of expressing my gratitude to Mabel for all that she taught me and my sorrow at her passing.

Sincerely Yours  
Denis E. St. Claire