

Remains returned to Chemainus band

By Jean Compton
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The ongoing history of a First Nations burial box and the remains it holds took another interesting turn Thursday, when it was turned over to the Chemainus First Nation by the owner of the Black Nugget Museum, Kurt Guilbride.

The burial box and the human skeleton it housed had been on display in the museum for the last 28 years.

It had been part of Guilbride's great, great grandfather's artifact collection, and through an odd twist of fate, had come into his possession when he was eight years old.

Guilbride said he had expected that one day it would be claimed. That day came recently when Eric McLay, a researcher with the Hul'qumi'num Treaty Group, visited the museum and asked Guilbride to meet with Chemainus First Nation Chief Terry Sampson to discuss returning the remains.

The two met and agreed that the remains should be returned to the Chemainus band. "We discussed what I knew about the remains and we came to an amiable agreement," said Guilbride.

On Aug. 17, Chemainus First Nation elder Willie Seymour came to the museum to claim the remains and the burial box.

"There's no real ceremony that you can do to appease the spirit of the remains," said Seymour.

"I did a prayer and sang a song and spoke to the person in the burial box to say the gentleman from the museum is doing a good deed, that he's offering you back to your people. You are going to be brought to another place to see if we can identify exactly where you come from.

"And I introduced ourselves, our people to say that we are going to move you to another place," said Seymour.

The remains have been taken to the Royal B.C. Museum for storage until a physical anthropologist can look at it to determine the age of the remains and the origins of the person.

"We will be doing a proper ceremony when we find out more detail. We will be in discussion with the elders as to what the appropriate thing to do is," said Seymour.

"I was pleased with how it went and I think they were too," said Guilbride.

"It's part of their culture and their heritage and I can understand where they're coming from and I respect that."

"Willie said he'd like me to come to the ceremony for re-internment. I said I'd be honoured to be there," said Guilbride.

Seymour said when he heard about the remains being on display, the first thing he felt was shock, to know that it could have been his relative.

"Then I had a feeling of frustration that over and over again, we find these violations taking place. If I or any of my people went into a cemetery in any city and took remains, we'd be in jail."

Guilbride explained how he fell heir to the burial box, which had been part of his great, great grandfather's collection of native artifacts.

His great, great grandfather was an Anglican minister with a fascination for the culture of the North American native people.

He moved to Chemainus from the U.S. in 1917, bringing with him a huge collection of native artifacts.

While in Chemainus, he became friendly with the local chiefs and told one of them he was interested in having an example of how the coastal tribes buried their dead.

"The chief said we can't give you one of ours, but we could possibly give you one of a slave," said Guilbride, recounting the story that was passed down through his family.

Ultimately, the entire collection was sold, but when Guilbride was eight, he and his parents stumbled upon some of the collection in a Duncan antique store.

The store had just sold the bulk of the collection to an American tourist. When the storeowner learned of the family connection to the artifacts and saw the young boy's interest, he gave him the rest of the collection, including the burial box.

"Kurt was saying that there was over 10,000 artifacts in his great, great grandfather's collection," said Seymour.

“The right thing would be for those artifacts to come back to us. It’s not just a piece of art to us, it’s a spiritual connection to our ancestors,” he said.

“It’s going to happen again. There’s what they call artifacts all over the world.”

“I’m glad that Kurt saw fit to return the remains. He did a good deed for us,” said Seymour.

Grant Keddie, Curator of Archaeology at the Royal B.C. Museum, said the museum is conserving the remains until a physical anthropologist can look at them.

He said a preliminary guess is that the remains are those of a six-year old female, with an artificially shaped head.

The shape of the head as well as the carving on the bentwood box may give clues as to what area the girl was from.

Keddie said it looks like the box was taken out of a burial cave and would most likely predate the early 1800s.

In the meantime, the journey still hasn’t ended for this unknown child.