When the white man came, the Lake People were the first to vanish. But traces of their rich civilization still haunt the shoreline.

By David Buerge

Hordes began to swarm up the creeks. Groups began to man the weirs, scooping the fish out with dip nets, or gathered along the shore to let out their seine nets. Parties from outside of the lake basin, from the Pugett or even the Skagit rivers, came to fish for the kokanee, the lake's famed landlocked sockeye, whose flesh was thought tenderer and easier to cure than the salmon that migrated into the lake from the sea.

It was during this season of plenty that the people gathered for social events, for potlatches that celebrated marriages, the assumption of new names, and the consolidation of social power, for gambling matches, sporting contests, and simple conviviality. In the early fall, however, when the fish were running heavily, everyone worked—the men and boys catching the fish, the women and girls cleaning and curing them, and the children energetically imitating their elders.

As the days grew shorter, families moved back to the longhouses to get them in order, and their equestrians' kim nuke in flkes back to their homes in the foothills of the mountains or over the mountains to the east. The in-gathering of great nature continued. Musk rats were hunted, and the bulbs of the washoos, the "Indian potato," were gathered in the shallows. In the fall, too, waterfowl going south on the great annual phase of their seasonal migration darkened the skies and formed huge flocks on the lake inlets. Now the great aerial nets were taken out of their boxes and hoisted between tall poles. In the evening or on foggy days, men in canoes would frighten the flocks into the air, and as they flew along their traditional flyways to less troublesome spots, they became ensnared in the nets hung across them. During the evenings, the surfaces of the inlets were spangled with the lights of fires kindled on earthen beds in canoes. These lured the ducks from the reeds and into the sight of the hunters, who flipped their multi-propped duck spears at them with a quick, underhanded toss.

By the beginning of winter, the rains were bucketing down, but the people were snug in their longhouses with racks of fish drying over the hearths. The spirit guardians of the people returned to the longhouses as well, and night after night the people welcomed them with ceremonies, gift giving, and song. Snow might fall, and by the winter solstice the world had settled into a golden trance.

Photographs courtesy of the Old Seattle Paperworks unless otherwise noted.
Ghosts wandered over the darkened land, lonely for human company, and carried off the sick and weak. The nobles might ward off their influence with the Wabeko's soul-recovery ceremonies. The people remained by the fire, mending nets, toiling the summer's dried salmon, and waiting to hear the sound of the frogs of early spring.

I

It was a world full of beauty and energy. Of all the habitats occupied by the native peoples in Western Washington, Lake Washington was one of the most unique. The largest lake west of the Cascades, it reminded a reduced freshwater microcosm of Puget Sound: a substantial body of water at the mouth of a fresh, curiously unified system of stream drainages, with each drainage the home of an autonomous group or tribe. Yet the people who lived beside the lake for so many generations that they remembered when it had been an area known as the Washington basin terra incognita. To fill in the gap, the name Duwamish was extended across the lake from its rightful focus on the Duwamish and Black rivers. The lake people became the Lake Duwamish.

I first became interested in them in the early 1840s while preparing a manuscript detailing the history and culture of the native peoples of the Duwamish River basin. There, I learned that a century earlier, according to some oral traditions, and by correspondence with some native elders, this place was inhabited by a tribe known as the Wishawnakute, or Wishawnakute.

I

Jim Zorn

The library at Columbia City: a burial ground?

The text discusses the unique habitat of Lake Washington and the people who lived there. It describes the lake as a microcosm of Puget Sound, with each drainage area connected to the lake, and the people who lived there as an autonomous group. The text also mentions the Wishawnakute, a tribe that lived in the area before the Lake Duwamish people.

Lake John & Madeline, c. 1900

This was the land itself, as it existed prior to the enormous changes wrought by white settlement. Enough material survival in the form of survivors' notes, timbers records, and the recollection of early observers for us to reconstruct the aboriginal environment in some detail. One thing these early records reveal is that the large lakes of the area provided their early users with an amazingly rich variety of resources. Wherever, for example, the river valley remained primarily as a source of animal and fish resources, the lake had its own revered population of animals such as lake trout, salmon, and muskrats and other birds that were hunted and trapped. And there were edible plants too, like the wapato, the water lily whose seeds were ground to paste, and the cat-tail, whose root was edible and whose pithy stalk was used to make mats.

To gather in this richness, the people living near the lakes developed tools suited to their habitat such as snares and nets and adapted to the lake, and the special duck-catchers, with toms to lure in the ducks' feathers. Aside from a differing technology, the dwellers on the lakes differed from their river or saltwater kin in their food-gathering schedule, since fish spawned in the lakes and their tributaries at different times than they did on the Sound and in its de-bouching rivers.

It appeared, then, that the resources of the lakes served to identify those who used them as "lake people," just as those who most used the waters' resources were known as "river people," and those who most used marine resources were known as "saltwater people." The term "lake people" as it is applied to those living on Salmon Bay and the Sammamish River is understood to mean that they relied upon the resources of the lake itself, not those that were directly or indirectly dependent upon those of estuary or river. It was an ethnic identifier no different than that of the saltwater people, river people, and inland people like the Snoqualmie, who hunted in their forests and tended their gardens like the lake people as much as they did their fishes.

This trio of chief groups, the people of Lake Washington, the lake people proper, are the people who inhabited the Duwamish valley and the region adjacent to the lake environment. From a variety of sources we can identify 18 of their house sites, and from one source, a remarkable village list submitted as evidence in a court case, we know how many houses stood at many of the sites and even how big they were. According to the list, they were built "of green sod, 8 by 16 fathoms," or about 50 by 40 feet. Houses of this size probably sheltered four or five families, meaning 20 to 30 individuals.

Many of these households appear to have been divided among seven winter villages—groups of people dominated by an individual household or sub-band, and the confluence of the lake outlet and the Cedar River at Montlake and Renton. This group took its name from the SKAI-tau, a supernatural being with long hair that lurked at the foot of the mountain and gave the power to attract wealth to those who were sufficiently connected to it. Another group had three longhouses at Bray Mow, at a place called sub-Tee-chuck or "landing place," and possibly others at Rainier Beach, Wetmore Slough, and Leschi Park. Every winter village had its burial ground where even those who had married into another group returned at death, and if local memory is right, the one for this group was located at the knoll in Columbia City where the public library sits.

This was a shadowy group. One legend, along with many other oral and written informants associated with them, tells of the Lak-SHeli-shuah, a group that never existed, and the confluence of the lake outlet and the Cedar River at Montlake and Renton. This group took its name from the SKAI-tau, a supernatural being with long hair that lurked at the foot of the mountain and gave the power to attract wealth to those who were sufficiently connected to it. Another group had three longhouses at Bray Mow, at a place called sub-Tee-chuck or "landing place," and possibly others at Rainier Beach, Wetmore Slough, and Leschi Park. Every winter village had its burial ground where even those who had married into another group returned at death, and if local memory is right, the one for this group was located at the knoll in Columbia City where the public library sits.

The text also mentions Lake John Madeline, a historic lake in the area, and provides a brief description of its history and significance.
NORTH OF THIS LIVED THE TUI-oh-leh-AH-BISH, a small group that had one house as the mouth of Thornton Creek and possibly another at the mouth of McKee Creek, the outlet of Lake Bullinger. Those at Thornton Creek had access to the large cranberry bog near its head at what is now Neckgate, where the only cranberries one will find now are those frozen at QFC. The burial ground for this group may have been located between the house sites at a spot where children digging in the ground recently discovered a 100-year-old native skull.

At the mouth of the Sammamish River was a village whose inhabitants were said to have been very poor. This and other house sites along the river made up the winter village community of the C-saah-PAH-BISH, the “willow people.” Although they were settled along the largest tributary, the affairs of this group were so closely tied to the rest of the lake peoples that they are included in this description. Poor though they may have been, the Sammamish, as we will call them, were a remarkably vigorous group. They were among the very first to make contact with Humboldt Bay Company traders at Fort Nisqually in 1832—while the fort was still a building—and it was several months before the traders realized that the Duwamish were a separate group and not a subdivision of the Sammamish. The Sammamish are also known to have carried out a raid on the peoples of the Kmeer Skagit River at about this same time. The raiders brought their shallow river canoes down Sound in as far as Punta Cove on Whidbey Island, where they attempted to attack a Skagit encampment at Snellham Point. They were unsuccessful when their shallow craft swamped as they chased the returning Skagits toward Oak Harbor. The raiders had to walk home, building rafts for the crossing to Mulhollon. It was a remarkable venture, perhaps the poverty of the Sammamish River Valley bred hardness among its inhabitants.

The village was once called in the early 1850s in part of the treaty-making process, the Sahash with their relatives on Lake Samish were counted at between 80 and 200 individuals. Their headman, Sahashahlahlah, received the offers of Doctor David Maynard to bring his people down river to Seattle at the beginning of the Indian War, and several of his people are known to have participated in the Battle of Seattle. Later he allowed Henry Yesler, whom he trusted, to bring him and his people over to the reservation at Fort Kitap, where many stayed until they were removed to the Tulalip peninsula and probably social links. This group enjoyed a rich and complex environment, and among their more famous resources were the washtas that grew in the margins of Juanita and Yarrow bays, considered to be some of the finest anywhere in the Puget Sound region. The burial ground of this group appears to have been located on Yarrow Point, where older residents recall seeing grave mounds and finding beads and bones. 

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spirit said to reside at the top of the island. The lake was populated by other supernatural beings also. Thunderbirds were believed to nest in the trees between Livermore and Lake City, and an abYAH-ton, an earthquake monster—spotted and with horns on its head—lived near Colman Park. Fittingly enough, this was the site of a massive landslide in 1898. Another race of beings, the wsh-wshAH-toot or "rain beings," lived at the southern end of Mercer Island in the trunks of a drowned forest, the product of another landslide. These were the kinds of foibles and they could be found at confluences and divides, where they could direct migrating salmon to their various streams. A man who came to strip the bark from the dead stumps was driven mad by these beings, who, it was screamed, had stolen a man from them.

Often these mythic events must be inferred from other sources. In the case of Sand Point, the myth associated with the channel that connected Mud Lake with Lake Washington has been lost, but the name for the channel was TCHAAHIL-bo, "hidden water," and that for Mud Lake was wsh-SAHIL-cubh, which may mean something like "plowed place." From the stories preserved from other similarly named sites in the region we can infer that the myth described how a subterranean water channel was plowed open by whales or other powerful beings. Their actions were a result of the end of the myth time before the beginning of the human era, and it seems that the native people regarded such sites as openings to a underworld and the land of the dead.

But we shall never know for sure, because the rich and ancient world that did know has been swept away. Many of the best sites on the lake had been occupied up to the 1860s; Flastburg at Leschi Park was one of these, and a settlement on Union Bay may have lasted nearly that long. But gradually the old village and its history broke up and the land behind it became overgrown, and the reservations. When they could, family bands took up claims at places near their old houses, and a few did so on Lake Washington, but by the 1960s, most of the population had disappeared. A race of native activity continued on the lake, however, for settlers on the lakeshore could still see people in canoes or at camps harvesting watapoo until 1968.

This was the year the lake level was lowered by the US Army Corps of Engineers with the creation of the ship canal. The lowering was an ecological disaster for the lake and its people. The marshes that had sheltered vast populations of waterfowl were left to dry out and be overrun with willow and cattail. And even though they eventually reshaped themselves at a lower level, the birds never returned in anything like their former numbers. Nor did the muskrats, the sockeye, and any of the other fish whose gravel spawning beds were exposed to the air. The water lilies and cattails took years to reestablish themselves, but the watapoo seems to have disappeared altogether. And so, the wading root gatherers and the flickering lights of the duck hunters were seen no more.

Today the lake has been so thoroughly urbanized that hardly a trace remains of its former aspect. Some native people still live beside it, and as a result of some recent court victories, the Muckleshoot tribe can fish in its waters—although the Damville cannot.

Author's note: If anyone reading this has found or knows of anyone who has found native artifacts near the lake, or remembers hearing old stories about the native people of the lake, the author would appreciate being contacted through The Weekly.

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