

“SouthWest Stories” talk by Ken Workman
“A Conversation with the Great-Great-Great Grandson of Chief Seattle”
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interviewer: Clay Eals

Q: There is a variety of ways to pronounce Seattle. What is the true pronunciation and the spellings that are used?

This is a family name, and there’s all kinds of ways that people could say it, and that’s fine. We have Sealth High School over here, and in the modern vernacular people say S’ath, and they make this sound. And some people from the other side of the mountains, they go, See-ah-λ, with that “K” sound on there. William DeShaw married into the family, so this would be Chief Seattle’s grandson, and he’s quoted as saying, “The old man said it more like Seattle than Sə-at-tlee.” And I’ve seen some actual spellings of it. If you look at the name Seattle, the way we spell it, and then you invert that “e” to a schwa, an upside-down “e,” and then you put a hyphen between that and the “at,” and then you put a hyphen between the “at” and the trailing “tle,” you’re pretty close. Suh-AK-ul. So if you can’t say Suh-AK-ul, with the “K” sound, then you mash all these things together and you end up with this name that is Seattle, and that’s how we pronounce it.

The irony of all this is that in our culture, when people would pass, you don’t mention their name. By mentioning their name, they’re not allowed to go into the second stage of death. We have two stages of death, and the first is what I call purgatory, which is you go into a little earth. It’s under earth. And so you’re forgotten, and when you’re forgotten, then you can go into the second stage, and this is the good part because now you can come back in your descendants. So you’re actually doing people a favor by forgetting, by not saying the word. So if you want to say Seattle any way you want, that’s fine because you’re not saying it right. You’re helping out. So I want to thank you.

What we use in the vernacular around here, in the native Lushootseed language is See-S’ath, and we use it because people can say it. So if you don’t want to say Sealth or Seattle, just go See-S’ath, and this “shs” sound, your tongue is sitting behind your upper teeth, and you’re blowing wind out the side.

Q: We have advertised this conversation as you being “the” great-great-great-great grandson, but how many grandkids of Chief Seattle or Chief See-ATSHS are there, would you estimate?

You know, I've asked the very same question. My guess is that there's around 150 to 200 of us. There weren't a whole lot of children from grandpa. When he had his first wife, he had Princess Angeline, and there's a whole line of descendants who come from that, and I come from his second wife. So it took him a long time to get over his first wife, "the love of his life," and to have more children. I come from the second family that people don't really talk about that much.

My great-great-great-great grandma, Oya, resided right down here at Herring House. That would be off of Terminal 105, the last longhouse in Seattle to be burned down. That was in 1893. So that's where my great-great-great-great grandmother comes from. And my great-great-great-great grandfather Chief Seattle comes from Suquamish, from the big house. That's my origin.

Of course, I grew up over here, on the top of the hill, on the east side of Delridge Way and this library.

Q: So we're going to jump right into that. I think it's all the more remarkable that you are so knowledgeable and embracing of the Duwamish given that you did not grow up in it. Can you talk more specifically about where you grew up, the schools you went to, the size of your family, all of these kinds of things that we all have in common, but that we can identify with you by your pointing out exactly where they were.

Sure. You want me to say what year I was born in?

Q: Absolutely.

I have to do that, huh? OK. So I was born in 1954, and my brother was born in 1953. We were born on the same day one year apart. My mother was born the day before us. So there's something about the area that I don't know about.

On my birth certificate, it says I was born right over here on Alki, and there's a house over there. So I asked my mother about this. "Hey, Mom, how come it says on my birth certificate I was born at this place over on Alki?" She said, "No, you were born in the hospital over there, Harborview." But legally I was born over on Alki and raised on 21st Avenue. So my brother, my sister and stepbrother and I, we all grew up on 21st, where Dawson intersects 21st.

So behind that is Puget Park, and back in the 1950s and 1960s, Puget Park wasn't grown up. All the trees and the underbrush weren't grown up like it is today. It's hard to get through there. But back when I was a child, you could see out across the entire park, and the ferns were out there, and the raccoons were in the trees, and the blue heron were everywhere, the creek ran open, and so it was absolute heaven for us kids. Y'know, Mom would say, "Go outside and play." She always told us, "Get out of the house," and that's what we did.

We just went out in the woods and played all day. We made tree houses, we had rope swings and all that stuff. So all this area here is home because that's where I was born, and so no matter where I go in the world, "Where are you from?" "From Seattle!" If you want to get more specific, "Where am I from?" "West Seattle." So those woods behind our house, it was like a forest, and so we had complete run of all this freedom. There weren't any restrictions. There weren't any fences. Today, all the houses are crammed in really tight, so it's really tough on kids. It's hard to say, "Go outside and play," and you have to go down to the playground.

Q: So your first school was just up the street here, Cooper Elementary?

Yes.

Q: Tell us a bit about your years there, and was there any inkling in your mind of your ancestry at the time?

No, no. I went to the old Cooper School, the brick building down here on Delridge Way.

Q: The one that's called Youngstown Cultural Arts Center today.

Is that what it is?

Q: Yes.

Oh, OK. So my brothers and I went there, and that was our elementary school. Living right up on the hill, wintertime would come, so we would slide down. There was a chain-link fence, and you'd hit the fence at the bottom. So that's where you learned how to throw balls against cement walls and have them bounce back, and so it was great time down there. As a matter of fact, we had this big earthquake here, I think back in 1963?

Q: 1965.

It was early in the morning, and I had just gone inside a door to get a drink out of a drinking fountain, y'know, a drink of water, and all of a sudden the school started shaking, and I'm looking up. "Oh, they're moving it!" That's because my parents had just purchased a house over here in West Seattle, up by California Avenue. They had put the house on a truck, and they had trucked the house over here to Pigeon Point, and so that's what I had as a little kid in my head. "They're moving the school, and I'm in it." So I went running out there.

So lots of good times down there. Of course, I remember my first-grade teacher, Miss West. I guess kids do that. I remember particularly one day I was playing out in the asphalt playground just north of the school, that has this great big chain-link fence on there, and all the little kids are playing out there in the area, and I bent over, when I was up against the chain-link fence, and as I bent over, there was one of those links sticking out, a piece of wire, and the wire just missed my eye and went around the back side of my eye socket. The nurse called me in, and Mom got called in. I think about it today, and I think, "Wow, I was pretty lucky." So every time I go by there, even today, I go, "Oh, yeah, I remember that."

So then junior high was over at Louisa Boren. That was a brand new school.

Q: That was a little farther. Did you walk to that school, too?

Yes. Everybody walked everywhere. We had trails down off of the hill, down into here. There were some steps down by Louisa Boren, but I don't remember using them. We had trails all the way down.

Q: Interesting that you're going to junior high at a school that is named for one of the settlers, one of the pioneers, and still no idea of this at the time, on your side of things, within your family.

That's correct.

Q: What did your parents tell you about your background when you were young?

They said, "You're Duwamish," and that was it. "Don't ask any more questions." When we did ask questions at an early age, "What does that mean?" "Indian? How much Indian are we?" That kind of stuff. My mom didn't know a whole bunch. Then when I said, "I'm going to ask Grandma," I was told, "Don't do that. Don't do that." And that's typical in our culture, because the trauma was so great back in the 1860s right up into the 1920s, probably even more than that, 1930s and 1940s. You did not want to be Indian. You wanted to do everything you could to blend in and look like everybody else. And so I wondered about that, and I'd been tracking it back, and I said, "OK." I thought my grandma had started this thing about "Don't ask about that." And then I tracked it back to my great-grandma. No. It wasn't her. And I kept going back and back and back. It goes back to Chief Seattle. So in my line, every generation married into the white, so every generation got split, split, split. And so you end up with lots of white skin, not nearly as much melanin as we normally would have, although it's very easy to go out in the sun. I just turn dark, y'know. Wintertime I turn white.

And so it was a cultural thing, and we're working our way out of it. I'm glad to see that people across the entire nation, across the entire world, are, I call it, "They're coming back." You can be yourself again. You can be a native person. Whether you're in South America, whether you're up here, whether you're on the East Coast and Canada, it doesn't matter anymore. You can be who you are, know who your ancestors are.

Q: So after junior high, you moved away. You moved up north.

Yes we did. We moved up to the northern end of the Duwamish area, Richmond Beach. That would be the northern boundary of the Duwamish Tribe. Southern boundary would be down there by Sea-Tac.

But sure, we moved up north. High school, these were my formative years. It was a good time. We were in a nice house, but there weren't any woods, so it was hard to go outside and play in the same manner. We had a field across the way that was lots of fun. Snow would come, and it had a hill, so you'd get on tubes, and all the kids in the neighborhood are crashing down the hill and that stuff. And a lake was nearby, so we could go swimming, Echo Lake.

That area was, in general terms, about 185th and Aurora, so we moved right up around there. Richmond Beach was the beach we would go to. That was a real nice beach. My high-school girlfriend always liked to go down there and lie in the sun, and I couldn't stand it, so I'd go out and throw rocks in the water, and I'd look across Puget Sound, and go, "Oh, I wonder what's over there, what's over there?" Little did I know I was looking at my grandpa, Chief Seattle. Goin' "Hey!"

So today when I go up there, I see they've got this great Indian statue, and I see he's looking right over there. I go, "Look at that! Isn't that amazing." So yeah, we went up to Richmond Beach, and those were the formative years, high school and that kind of thing.

Q: So take us up to the time when you started digging into Duwamish culture and learning a whole lot more about the tribe and its history.

That probably was nine years ago or so, maybe eight.

Q: So most of your life this was not a big deal to you.

No, it wasn't, it wasn't, because we learned early on, "Don't ask the question." And so I'd ask the question again when I was in my 50s or late 40s. I'd ask the question, and there wasn't any response, and finally when I was into my 50s, and I asked my mother, "Hey, what's the deal? You've got to tell me." Christmas. Everybody gets together at Christmas? And so I asked her at that time, and she said, "I don't know. Ask your aunt." And so my aunt had a family tree. It was created by the Duwamish Tribe for all its members, and I had mine, and so I recognized all these people on the tree. And then I kept going back and back and back, and finally I'd get to the top, and there's these strange names. "What are these?" And I didn't know, and nobody in my family knew.

But a co-worker of mine, he's been into genealogy for a long time, and he said, "Let me see that." This was probably eight years ago or something like that. So he goes online. We worked at big aerospace, I'm retired now, big aerospace company just down the road. He goes online, and I hear this squeak coming out of him, which is a big thing because his faith, he doesn't make noise, he can't swear and do any of that stuff. He makes this sound, and he says, "Ken, you better look at this." And that's when the whole Chief Seattle thing came out.

So in my family we've said forever, "Oh, there's royalty in the family. There's royalty in the family." My mom goes, "It's German royalty. We have a castle." So I went back and said, "Mom, it's not German. It's Indian." And so Seattle is the castle.

Q: In that moment, what's going on inside your head, in your heart. Did this hit you hard at the time?

No. It's interesting, but it doesn't do any good. I mean, it's a family name, the city is here, the world knows this place by this name, and it just so happens that it's in my family tree. It did not hit me real hard because on my other side – not on my Indian side but on my white side – I'm also related to Jesse Hyatt, and Jesse Hyatt is the original founder of the Delicious apple, the very first one in the entire world. So when you go into a grocery store and there's a Delicious apple, that's on my Quaker side.

So I guess back in the day, tribes would reach out, would extend your territory by reaching out into other tribes, and so it was Chief Seattle's father who paddled up the Duwamish River, way down to the village of Stuck, and he marries a high-status Duwamish lady, and that's where Chief Seattle comes from. You extend your reach out.

So today I go, "Grandpa, I guess we extended it," because we extended it clear back into Ohio – and Iowa, Hawkeye apple. So I guess I'm hoping he would be happy with that. "You did good."

Q: So even when you found out, it didn't hit hard at the moment, but it gradually took hold in you. You're one of the few Duwamish who can speak Lushootseed. Take us into how you embraced all of that and what it came to mean to you, not today, but take us into that process. It's a mental process over years, right?

So with regard to the language, it's been described as polysynthetic, and so you have a whole bunch of core words, roots, and then you begin to build up the meaning of what you are trying to say by attaching characters to the front, and then you extend it by adding characters to the back, very much like a long, long German word. And so once you understand the basic concept, it comes pretty easy. It's just the sounds that are hard.

I've attended a few classes in this language, but I always get kind of reprimanded by my instructors because when I speak, I speak more in a conversational manner and not just a block, block, block, block, monotone, monotone, slow, slow, slow.

So, for example, if I were to welcome people here, I would say: "g^wihg^wihidəq ʔal diiʃədulg^wədɬ^w."

"g^wih" means "invite."

"g^wihg^wihidəq" means "invite all."

"ʔal" means "in-at-on."

"diiʃədulg^wədɬ^w" translates to "d" ("my") "iiʃəd" ("family") "ulg^wədɬ^w" ("this specific land").

In English, this means "Welcome to this, my family land."

A long time ago, everybody knew this place by the name of Duwamish, and so when you hear me talking like this, it's more of a flow. There's inflection in my voice, character. I've been told not to do the character part, but I can't help it.

Q: How would it sound without the character?

I don't know. I don't know what it would sound like without the character.

So for me, I just sit down with books with old stories in them. There are audio tapes of people who actually talk, and they sound like me. They don't sound like my instructors are trying to tell me. Even when I am out in public like this and I talk, my instructors say, "Slow down, Ken. You speak too fast." Well, it just comes out. I just talk. It's not like I have a canned speech and I'm reading it off a piece of paper. We're talking exactly like we're talking here today, and this is what I asked Clay for, is this conversation that we're having.

So for me, the language just sort of comes. And the reason I concentrate on the language is because of those trees out there. They haven't heard these words for a long time. And here in West Seattle we are extremely fortunate, in all of Seattle, all of it. This place is special, and those trees are still there. We still have Puget Park. We still have Schmitz Park over here. You've got the Log House Museum, and in the Log House Museum there are logs that are older than Seattle itself.

Q: Let's clarify that. The museum was built, along with the Fir Lodge, now Alki Homestead, in 1904, but what you have been able to clarify for us, or open our minds to, is those logs did not just come into being in 1904 when they were cut down and used to build. If you count the rings, you go back quite a few many years before. And then you also say that your people are actually in the logs.

Right. So for thousands of years, before any of this stuff was here, all of the things that you see here today, all of the bricks, all of the mortar and all this stuff, it's a blink of an eye to us. It's nothing in our terms of time. And so for today, everybody says, "Oh, we've been here for 160 years." Yeah, yesterday. And so for all of the thousands of years that people would pass, we would take them, and we would put them into trees – into the stump of a tree or a crock of a tree – and if you were really rich, a high-status person, you got to be put in a tree in a canoe. And so you would decay naturally and go down into the ground. That's how life is.

And so when you decay naturally and go down into the ground, everybody around here knows that when the spring rains come, all that water goes down there, and the trees suck all that water up, the leaves begin to bloom. And so our people are in the roots of the trees. And so when the wind blows through those trees, those are the sounds of our ancestors. Sometimes they're angry, but sometimes there just a nice, gentle blow. But those are our people.

And so when Grandpa said in his 1854 speech that white people will never be alone, that we will always be here, it wasn't a figure of speech. It was literal. And so we're just part of nature. We all are. Those trees up there are very important to us. And so when you look at these old buildings, like up there in the Junction and some of the old buildings in downtown Seattle, massive timbers, and when I go down there, I look at the timber, I go, "Oh, I wonder who's in there."

And so when we make our canoes out of those trees, I tell our people, "Be gentle with the canoe. Your grandma and your grandpa are in that canoe." So these things are all spiritual to us. And so when we're rebuilding downtown Seattle, I explained the very same concept the other day. Those big timbers should be held with reverence. Don't go burn 'em up and all that kind of stuff. And sitting in your houses around here, you've got some of those timbers. You have to know where they came from because not all trees have people in them. They have other things. They might have ants in them and all kinds of stuff.

But we would put our people out in the woods, and so therefore we are in fact part of the trees. The trees make oxygen. I breathe oxygen. I am in fact my ancestors, so the chain goes on and on and on.

That's why I say we've got this entire greenbelt here on the west Duwamish waterway called Puget Park, and it runs all the way down to White Center, and so West Seattle is very fortunate in that the people are still there and that this city seems to be uniquely positioned in the country, that the original people are still here. You just have to know where they are. And then you have to be able to respect. That "Ah," that "there they are, right there."

So it's a good thing. When I'm in Seattle and I'm running around, I go, "Oh, yeah. There's my cousin right there. There's my aunt over there." But this is what we've done, and that's why the trees are so important to us. Save the trees.

They'll ask, "Well, what can we do?," because there are places in Seattle where we have tribal members, and they will not drive on the streets. That's because those streets were paved over, the burial places of our people, and so they won't go there. So they say, "Ken, what can we do in the city?" I say, "Well, where this place is, you dig a hole in that parking lot and you plant a tree. Those roots will go down, and they'll find the people, and the people will then come alive again. They'll be in the tree."

Q: The passion is obviously there, but I want to take you back nine years or so. Take us through your personal journey. What was your first contact, if you will, with the tribe itself. How did you get involved? How did things stair-step into how important it is to your life today, to embrace and to know as much as you can about the Duwamish Tribe?

Well, at the time that I discovered our family tree, the new longhouse was being built or had just finished being built, and now that I understood more about who I was, I started researching, and it said, "Oh, there's a longhouse right over here." And then it said, "Well, you can be a member, too. You just have to be a Duwamish and be able to prove the family tree."

And so I called up the longhouse, and they said, "Well, who are you?," and I said, "I'm Ken," and they go, "Yeah, OK." And so I started naming off my mother and my grandmother and my great-grandmother and their surnames, and when I got to my great-grandmother, the name Fowler, everything stopped because the longhouse then recited my own tree back to me, and they said, "Paperwork's in the mail."

So that's how I became involved with the tribe and the longhouse, and we're always in need for volunteers and help. So I just worked down the street a little, at the Boeing Tukwila offices, and it happens that I was on the third floor looking north. So I was looking out at the Black River, all of my ancestors, because that river right there, when it was big and was in Renton, that was like New York, that was like L.A., that was like Chicago. Big here, because the salmon were so many going up the Duwamish.

And so since I worked right down the road, I'd drive past the longhouse, and I'd say, "Hey, how you doing?" I'd change light bulbs and help them out any way I could and just gradually became more and more and more involved, and all the while, the language, the language, bring that language back, and now what we're finding out is, that's some sort of trick. Not a trick, but a key. So these people across the country are trying to restore the languages we weren't allowed to speak. And so now I do it for the trees, I do it for the people, I do it for Seattle so that we can bring all of this stuff back. And that the Duwamish are still here, the native people are still here, and there's still the trees over there.

And so my involvement in the longhouse just went from member and on to the nonprofit board, and, as in today, I'm a council member.

Q: It's just sort of a strange thing to think of that had you not had that Internet connection, you might not be involved today. Or do you think one way or another you would have become more involved because of the public promotion of the tribal cause?

Yeah, I would have been involved, but not to the extent. It's a good question. I like it. But I also have to ask how many more are out there. I'm just me, but how many more? And so as Duwamish we try to identify young people and bring them up, and so that way when people like me move on that there's this steady succession of leaders and teachers and singers and dancers, business people, all of that stuff to keep a tribe going, a society going.

Q: When did you first become aware of the recognition struggle? This is something you had been oblivious to, actually had been encouraged not to get involved with for most of your life. And now, recognition is the marquee issue for the tribe, and deservedly so. When you first heard of that, were you aware that the tribe was not recognized? How did you feel, how did you react when you learned that it wasn't and that it had been decades and decades of effort and still no recognition? Take us through your mental process.

It's a progression. So at first when you say, "Oh, we're not a federally recognized tribe," you'd say, "How come?" and then, of course, there were some newspaper articles that say the Duwamish are extinct, and I say, "How can we be extinct? We're right here."

There's this decision that happened about 40 years ago called the Boldt decision, and this is where all the fishing rights for the entire country come from, where the natives get half of the fish. So by extension, then, the recognized tribes are able to fish and get that quantity, that half, but the non-recognized tribes are not. So that's a revenue source. Because you're not recognized, you can't partake in that.

And then they go, "Well, you're not sitting on a reservation." A reservation, and all of them across the whole country, they're defined by the ruling government. And so if you look at the Trail of Tears, all of those guys, they came out of lush land back in Georgia and that area, and they ended up in Oklahoma. What are they doing in Oklahoma? It's because somebody decided that this is going to be a reservation and these people are going to be displaced and put over there. So now they're sitting in this defined section of land, and the United States government goes, "OK, now I recognize you, and so you get aid."

Now what happened here in 1855 when this treaty was signed, the Point Elliott Treaty, that all of the people that were here, the native people, were all rounded up and were pushed over to Suquamish, two little square miles of land. Now if you're over there today, you look around the area, there's no river, so there's no food source, there's no salmon. There's a little creek or two where this great, massive longhouse used to be, but the longhouse was a gathering spot. It wasn't a functional place for food. So it was for the high status. Lots of chiefs lived in that longhouse.

As a result, we're starving to death, and so a lot of people left, and they went out into this timber industry. Remember I said the trees are sacred? "Well, you certainly don't want to take that burial ground over there, don't take those trees, but you can have these over here." So this was a cash cow, Seattle, starting in the 1850s. This was nothing but money. It was where Yesler Mill and all the founding fathers, the Borens and all this stuff.

Q: The title of the book *Sons of the Profits* was a great pun.

Yeah. Right. And so my family, we left Suquamish and we went over to Dewatto, over on Hood Canal. It was a little spot, it was a creek, it was a logging company. And so a lot of families did that. Sackmans, they went up by Bremerton, so they were in timber as well. And so you had to do this just in order to survive.

And so because you don't have a reservation, because they put right here, you're not recognized. You could die and be recognized, but you can't live off reservation.

Q: So you were learning about this, and as you learned more and more, what was going on inside your head? What was your reaction to this? What made you care about it?

Well, what makes me care about it is resources. Really, that's it. We have people that could use help in school, they could use help health-wise, medical, that kind of stuff. We have all of the problems everybody else has, except we have to deal with them on our own. So we're treated as a person, U.S. citizen, just like anybody else, because you're not a recognized Indian, and so you get none of the aid that the recognized tribes do. One of those is the ability to put up a thing like a casino. We can't put up a casino. Well, you can. Raise your own funds and stuff. But because the tribe can do that, they can have this gambling on their sovereign land. It helps them out. So it's a revenue source.

Q: Often you hear that a tribe is identified by casinos, but I try to redirect the conversation back to just basic identity. Talk about what it means. You use the word "extinct," to walk around with the government thinking you are extinct. This is all about identity, I think, but I don't want to put words in your mouth. Talk about your feelings about this.

Well, the government determined the rules on what an Indian is, and so if you fit their definition, what a native person is, then OK, you're a native person. But if you don't, you're in trouble, and so you ask a native person, "What makes you native?" And it's the culture. It's all of this stuff. So it's hutch. It's like soul, but it's more than that. It's your whole being. And so if you don't check off those little check boxes, where the government says, "This, this, this, this and this," including reservation, you're on a piece of land, then you're not native.

Some tribes have different ways of determining that. Some use this thing called blood quantum, where you have to be half or you have to be quarter or an eighth. It keeps going down and down and down and down. The number gets smaller, sixteenth and that kind of stuff. And other tribes have lineage. You have to prove lineage.

Q: Could you summarize what you think are barriers for recognition of the Duwamish? What are the hurdles? This has been a long process, and it's likely to continue to be a long process. What are the hurdles here that the tribe has to cross, and what help is going to have an effect?

Well, the first hurdle was in the Boldt decision where Judge Boldt said the Duwamish don't exist. "So you're not a tribe. We don't recognize you as a tribe." So that's the first one.

Then following that, the recognized tribes became wealthier through all kinds of means: salmon fishing, casinos and all manner. But not all tribes have casinos. So it becomes a resource thing, so that's a real hurdle, and that's been documented on C-SPAN. We've had local tribes testifying in Washington, D.C., that they would not like to see new tribes recognized, that the resources that are out there today are limited and they would be diminished. So it's a resource access thing. There's a lot of people in the country, and they're all asking for things, so that's a major hurdle.

And then prestige. Duwamish are a known name around the world. Seattle, Chief Seattle, headquarters of the Boeing company, headquarters of Amazon, headquarters of Microsoft, it's all here. People around the world know what this is. And so by being Duwamish you carry with it the responsibility of the name. It's a high-status name, and other tribes do well by saying they are Duwamish.

So it's a status thing, it's a resource thing, these are the hurdles.

Q: And yet it's a grand irony that Seattle is so well known, it's one of the few big cities named for a native chief in our country, and yet it's an unrecognized tribe. What's it going to take, do you think, from your knowledge?

It's going to take a change of attitude in people. And so it could take a legal thing, and we're in that process right now, the Duwamish Tribe are, so we're still in court back in Washington, D.C. Yet again we're in court. But it also, it's going to take a change in people just all around.

The Duwamish aren't unique in this tribal recognition thing. It's all kinds of tribes across the country. It's just that we happen to be the canary in the gold mine, if I could say. We just happen to have name recognition. And, of course, when I'm in Seattle, and I hear people saying, "Seattle, Seattle, Seattle," I just kind of shake my head and grin because I live in North Bend today, and so I often up in the mountains, and there's Seattle's watershed, Cedar River Watershed, and they have signs all up and down this watershed, and it says, "No Trespassing by Penalty of Law. You're Going to Get in Lots of Trouble," and there's my name, it's right there. So they say, "You can't come here because this is Seattle's land," but if I go in there, I get arrested. It's irony.

Q: The phrase that is continually used for recognition is "proving a continuous existence." And you obviously have an appreciation for history, and I and many people in our organization are grateful that you agreed to be on our Advisory Council, for instance, and history can turn up some interesting things that are unexpected. For instance, right now, this year, we are about to hear about for the next year the 100th birthday, the centennial, of the Lake Washington Ship Canal, the Hiram Chittenden Locks, and a lot of good came from that, but something not so good came for the Duwamish. Can you tell that story to us? People here probably don't know.

As Clay said, this is the 100th anniversary, one, of Boeing, and, of course of the lowering of Lake Washington. It used to be called Lake Duwamish. The story starts back in 1856. We had a Battle of Seattle. It was the 1856 one, and that's after we were pushed over to this reservation starving to death, and people came back here, and they warred. And so after we lost that war, a bunch of people over on the Suquamish reservation said, "Can we come back to Seattle?", a whole bunch of them, back to Seattle on the Duwamish and their traditional home, on the Black River in Renton.

Q: And where was the Black River? Because you have to understand that today's Duwamish River is not the Duwamish of back then.

Right. The Black River used to tie Lake Washington into the Duwamish, so it would be right at the southern end of Lake Washington. Lake Washington was the only outflow.

Q: And the Black River was a very short river.

Yeah, it was only five miles long or something like that. But that's where all the salmon would go. There were massive quantities of salmon that would come up the Duwamish. They'd go up the Black, they'd go up Lake Washington, up the slough into Lake Sammamish and back into the mountains. They'd also go down the Green (River) and all that, but the salmon that were running up there were massive. That's why it was a very rich village.

And so after 1856 people lived there for about 60 years. So these people that asked to come back and live, back in their traditional land had lived there for those many years, fishing in their traditional way in little houses along there. And then the Chittenden Locks were opened up, the ones that we know today. The lake then dropped.

Q: Let me explain. Before the locks went in, there was not a passageway between Puget Sound and the lake, and this was the purpose for creating the ship canal and the locks, right?

Right. So there's a little sidebar here, and I think this is what Clay is getting into, and that is about three years ago I got a phone call from a friend, and he says, "Hey, my girlfriend's best friend is from China, and she thinks that you're related." And I went, "Whoa!" "Would you like to meet her?" And I said, "Yes, I'd like to meet her." And so she's writing a book about her great-great grandfather, the first Chinese merchant in Seattle. It turns out hiring cheap labor was more profitable than selling goods, and so her great-great grandfather brought the laborers over from China.

First, they displaced the Duwamish at Yesler's mill because the Duwamish cost too much, so we were displaced, and then they dug the Montlake Cut. So Montlake Cut is now dug by this gal that I just met, and I'm glad for it, proud of her grandfather for doing all this stuff. Lake Washington goes down, the Black River dries up, and the last of the Duwamish again are run off their land. We were run off our land in downtown Seattle, so they piled up a bunch of rocks, Ballast Island, ballast from ships. So the people in Seattle said, "Hey, you Duwamish, you people can have this pile of rocks, and that's why you see these pictures with tents on those rocks. But the rocks became too valuable, so we got kicked off of there.

So this whole gentrification thing we're very familiar with. So Lake Washington dropped, Charinne's great-great grandfather dug the channel, our people got run off the channel, and our people sit here today going, "What happened?" You could say my (great-great-great-great) grandpa put his X on the line, and it all started.

That's quite a story on the building of the locks and the lowering of Lake Washington, the last of the Duwamish are removed or taken off their land. One of our family members, they live up on the Lummi reservation now, the family had a little house down there on the Black, native house, native people. And so a gentleman walks up, and he says, "This is my land," and the native guy goes, "What are you talking about? This is ours. We've been here for a long, long time. Generations we've been here." And this settler, he goes, "Do you have a deed to this land?" and the Indian guy goes, "What's a deed?" He doesn't have a deed to the land. Native people don't have deeds to land. What's that? The settler had a deed to the land, and the native guy got evicted from his house.

He packed up everything in a canoe, and he paddles up to Bellingham, he and his wife in one canoe. These canoes we call kalepi, a generic term for any kind of transportation device. So two people in this canoe paddle all their belongings clear up to Bellingham. It takes a week. He comes back. So you learn how to ride the tides. You ride the eddies and that stuff. If you don't know that, you're not going to go anywhere. He comes back and picks up Grandma, and they go back. And so we have, even today, this gentrification thing is very close to us, so all of the things that are happening in Seattle, I am just, I ache. I ache for this.

Q: We're coming up on an hour here, and I want to give people a chance to ask a couple of questions. I have two that I don't want to let you get out of here without answering. One is very specific, and one is more helicopter. I'll get through these very quickly, and then think of some questions that you might have. The more specific one, some people in this room I'm sure remember the controversy over changing the name of the mascot from the Indians to what became the Wildcats. Now you didn't go to West Seattle High School and so were not directly connected in the community when this was going on about 15 years ago, but you can speak to the general issue of this. What goes through your mind? This isn't just an issue here in West Seattle but all over the country. I know there are some people who feel that West Seattle Indians is an honorific, it's not a degradation, but the idea of making a cultural ethnic group a mascot is not the best thing in the world, either. What are your thoughts on this issue as you see it played out? And it's played out all the time. The Seattle Times, for instance, doesn't even use the mascot name of the football team from Washington, D.C., for this very reason. Can you talk about this topic?

Right, and I've talked about this, football teams with these native names. I'm OK with it, other people I talk to are OK with it, as long as it's not treated in some derogatory way. Y'know, you're good to go. These are the teams and the mascots that we've known all along, and even down here in Renton they're talking about changing that mascot, and they've asked us, the town, "What should we do?" And so we as Duwamish said, "No, no, no, you're fine. You're OK." So all you have to do is just treat it with some respect. "Oh, that's my team." That's all.

Q: Great, and then the other question I have is more from a helicopter view. What if the old chief could come back today – you've probably had some thoughts about this – and he would look at this region. What would he think, what would he feel, and would he have any advice for us?

Well, I don't know about any advice. I would say he prophesied pretty good because he was siding with the white people.

And so, at that time, natives were always against natives, warring against natives, so there was lots of killing, lots of taking back of slaves and all of that kind of thing. And so when the colonists settled here, it was obvious they were strong people. They had guns, and they had iron, and they had axes, saws, all these kind of wonderful things. And so that's why you hear over on Alki, a bunch of people gathered around this little house or two, this log cabin, and so you just go next to where all the power is. So we had been beaten up for a long time, and we have stories about the people from the north coming down and doing this very same thing, y'know, conking us on the head and taking us back. Up north, they have stories about, they would run up in the woods when people from the north would come down. The further up north you get in our culture, the more scary they were. And we have friends today from those very same tribes. And so we laugh when we are in our canoes, side by side, and I tell my side of the story, he tells his side of the story. It's the same story from the opposite ends. We share the same thing.

So if this was 300 years ago, this would be one of those Hatfield and McCoy feuding kind of things because we have long memories, and we've all learned, and so we all try to get along now. So I would think he would say, "Yeah, look at, the place has really grown up, it's really big, and there's too many people." So that's about all I could say. I don't know if he had any sage advice or anything. I can just tell you that I'm proud of Seattle, it's doing good, it's working hard. There's obviously, in any kind of society, there's trouble, and all of this stuff. Once you understand a bad thing and you come to appreciate it, you go, "Now I know, and I can change my behavior." Prior to that, you're still stuck doing the same thing. We're environmentalists today. We hug trees. We didn't always do that. We chopped them down.

Audience questions

Q: Were you involved with the art and music festival last summer?

Yes, I was involved because I was one of those speakers, actually in a couple of events. This was the Duwamish Revealed project that we had in the summer of 2015, and so for the tribe, on our particular event, we put canoes in down at Alki, and we paddled up the Duwamish River up to our longhouse. We tied them up and were welcomed on shore, and we had singers and our canoes. Of course, the seal are about there. The seal are returning. They're coming back to the Duwamish, and so it's always interesting when you come through with a canoe, and these seals, they go, "What is that, all these paddles digging in and going through?" They always pop their heads up. And so yes, to answer your question, we were involved with that project last year, Duwamish Revealed.

Q: OK, a question over here.

It seems to me you didn't talk about from generation to generation, but there was a reverence that must have been permeating the family that this all came natural to you, as I listen to you, and it's only eight years ago that you found the true tree. It amazes me that it wasn't lost.

Q: Her question, I guess it's a question, she is amazed that the reverence did not come through the generations. It was only eight years ago.

Well, the reverence had to be there, but how does that pass through? Did your mother talk about her childhood enough?

No, no. In my family, so, the reverence wasn't passed on from family to family to family. It was discouraged. You were discouraged from being Native American in a very hard way, and so I have in my immediate family history of my great-grandmother marrying my great-grandfather. I suspect she was told, "You will marry that guy," and that happened to my grandmother as well, "You will marry that guy." That's my grandpa. And so my mother, she revolted. She was the first one who said, "No, I'm not going to do that." Now she wasn't told that she had to marry this person. She was just a rebel. And so whatever reverence that I have, it just, like the language, it's just there. I don't know why it's there. It's just there.

Q: It's probably fair to say, Ken, that you're not going to let the reverence die within your family.

No, no, no. I've pulled them all back, kicking and screaming. I've pulled them back. Aunts and uncles and brothers and sisters. I said, "This is who we are." Now they don't have to participate like this, but, yeah, we're all back.

And so like many of us here, in our family we tend to stay put. We don't end up somewhere on the other side of the world, y'know. Everybody in my family lives on a river. Well, my mother doesn't anymore. She lives in assisted living. But yeah, she lived on a river, I live on a river, my brother lives on a river. There's something about rivers and Duwamish people. I don't know what it is.

And isn't it sad, just to add, that great-great-great-great grandfather is buried without a river, over in Suquamish.

Q: The question is, isn't it that Chief Seattle is buried not next to a river?

It is. It is. Because he spent most of his life over here. So it was only after the treaty signing that he was told he has to go back where he is today. And so what I tell people when they're over at Suquamish and they go visit his grave, I say, "That's very good, that's fine. Go hug that tree. There's a big tree. It's been there a long, long time." I say, "That's where he's at. Hug the tree."

Q: And just to be clear for some of you who may not know, Chief Seattle is buried, you go over to Bainbridge Island across the bridge, and you'll see the sign to his grave, a beautiful shrine right there. Question:

Do you have children, grandchildren, nieces, nephews who are into learning the language alongside you the culture?

I don't have any children, but my nieces are, and they have kids, and so they're engaged, and so that's where the line continues. And so they're already doing their thing, and that's good. The language is a little bit harder, but I use the word "Yo," spelled Y-U, and this is how you teach young people. "Can you say Yo?" And the word means wonderful. It means very nice. And so little people go, "Yeah, I can say Yo." And they go, "Yo, yo, yo." And so I say, "Now all of a sudden you're fluent in the native language called Lushootseed, and it starts 'em off."

Q: Do we have another question from out in the hall?

Yes, as a teacher, how can we help the kids today to better understand the culture of your people and keep that alive within them?

Q: How can we help the kids understand the culture and keep it alive with them?

Understanding the culture? Well, in the first place we have, when it comes to education, we've got two rules, and they're equally difficult. We have the rule of going to school, going through your degree, your advanced degree, your PhDs and all of that. But on the other side, the native side, you have all of that, and that starts almost at birth. And so then you have to learn all these dances and the songs and the culture, respect your elders.

When everybody gets together, little children are taught, "Go get dinner for Grandma." She's invalid. "Help your grandma and then clean up behind." So this is what we do, all these kind of things. And then, of course, we have these canoes, so they get to go out on this stuff, and we have drums and singing and dancing. All that's all well and fine.

What's difficult is when people say, "Can you come in regalia?" That's a tough one, because, y'know, there many tribes, and you look back east, and they have fantastic regalia, head staff, and you look up north, fantastic clothes. My cousin, she has a wedding dress like you wouldn't believe, y'know, height. But here, here in this area, we didn't have clothes. Guys ran around in nothing, and the girls ran around with skirts. And so when you ask, in this area, for me to come in regalia, I put some beads on.

And so it's hard. And so, appreciate that yeah, we can sing, yes, we can sing, yes, we have dances, and we share all of this. This is all public, it's out there. But they can help by saying, "Get away from the regalia thing." Stereotyping, and it hurts.

And so, teach them simple things, and this is what told people at the Burke Museum in Seattle. They asked, "How can we help? We're putting up a new museum." I said, "You put this great big piece of wood up in the front, a tree or something, and you write 'Welcome' in as many languages as you can."

For example, here in Seattle, when I'm asked to welcome people here, I will use the word do-no-tsteece. It's a Tlingit word, and it means "Thank you." And then if I go down to Vancouver Island, halfway up the new Chenault, they say, klay-ko, klay-ko. It means same thing. If you get to Makah, Makah is klay-ko, klay-ko. If you get to the Lummi, which is Bellingham, right on the Canadian border, they go hi-ski-de-el. You get to Everett, the Tulalip, they use the word tig, so tig-we-see. And then here we go Es-qui-de, es-qui-de-shuh. And if I get down to the Columbia River, it's hi-ah-smas-ee. So this is what we do here, and so that way people will know when they come here, they can hear this word that they understand, and they go, "Oh, this is a good place.

And so way back in the day, 1851 or so, y'know, when we had the Denny Party land over here on the beach, it was something like that. "Welcome. Welcome. Come ashore." So that's how you can help, is just appreciate that there's a lot of work going on. Things can and cannot be talked about, and just don't say, try to refrain from the regalia thing.

Q: We have a question over here.

I worked for the Underground Tour for 20 years, and we used to do benefits for the longhouse, to get it started, and it was a happy day when they opened it up. But I remember Cecile and Cindy, they had told me that, I think it was Clinton, when Clinton was in that they did get recognition, and also, I think the Chinook, and then Bush came in after that and threw it out from the Muckleshoots, the Suquamish, people that had the casinos, because they didn't want anybody to have a casino, if it was land, if the Duwamish were landed, and from what I understand, this may be wrong, that's why I'm asking the question, that if federal lands like Sand Point and some of the other parks that were being used by the federal government and they were abandoned, then according to the treaty the land would revert back to the indigenous people, which would be the Duwamish, and if that happened, then they could put up a casino or something, and the other tribes didn't want this, and they were lobbying, I guess, constantly against the Duwamish to make sure that they weren't landed because basically they didn't want any casinos closer to town so they would have to go out where the casinos were, and that just irritates the heck out of me, and believe that with things the way they are today, and, well, there was always infighting among tribes, any tribes, Caucasian tribes, Danes and Swedes, whatever. But was that true? I think it was Cecile told me that they were recognized when Clinton was in, but then when Bush came in, a certain amount of time he had the right to kick it out, not only the Duwamish but the Chinook both lost their recognition. Is that true?

Q: The question is, and I'm sure the answer is yes, in the last week of the Clinton administration, in 2001, January, the Duwamish were recognized. Big headlines. And the first week of the next administration, the Bush administration, that was rescinded. Can you talk about that a little bit? I know this goes back further than your personal involvement, but certainly you know about it and can describe the tribe's posture at that time.

To answer your question, yes, it was true that the Duwamish were recognized, and then they weren't, in exactly the same way that you described, that the Clinton administration said yes, and then the Bush administration said no. But the Bush administration put a stop on many things, two of which included the Duwamish and the Chinook, I should say one of which included the Duwamish and Chinook tribes.

And so that's the very thing that we continue to fight against. So our chair, Cecile Hansen, when she talks about this word "recognition," is the word you used earlier, Clay, she says, "Restoration." Restore our rights. Not recognize them. We're here. But restore those rights that you haven't given us.

How do you fight the money? That's what I'm thinking. If the other tribes have the money, the casinos, the Duwamish do not have the money, then how can that be overcome?

Q: The question is how can the opposition be overcome?

You can use a legal defense, and we have wonderful supporters in Seattle, our legal team. And so this past July of 2015, we were once again denied recognition. Now our attorneys had lobbied the Bureau of Indian Affairs on the then-pending new regulations, and the request was, "We would like you to recognize the Duwamish into the new, revised, easier-to-recognize-tribes regulations." So the tribe, then, was notified two days before the regulations went out that they were denied access and that they had exhausted all means of asking for access again. And so that's when our legal team went together, and they put rebuttals, they made something on the order of 78 pages of rebuttals, and these are just the rebuttal to point, rebuttal to point, rebuttal to point, reference documents, reference documents, and so that process has been going on for about a year now. And so we're still in court, and those things happen.

Now I don't know about other people lobbying or that stuff, but the simple fact of that matter is that yes, in the recent history, the Duwamish were recognized and then not recognized.

Q: It's interesting the nomenclature, from recognition to restoration. There's another example of this. There's a new documentary film that you'll probably be hearing about very soon in the coming months, and it reminds me of this because the title of the film is "Promised Land." And we often, we hear the phrase "the promised land" and think of something else in our culture, but this certainly applies to the Duwamish and the Chinook. Other questions? Yes.

Can you recommend any particular literature to us to learn more about your people?

Q: Ken can you recommend books, other literature?

Well, yeah, there's books.

Q: Was there any particular book that inspired you?

Well, yeah, was it Speidel, Sunny Speidel's "Profits"?

Q: "Sons of the Profits."

"Sons of the Profits," yeah. I found that one particularly interesting. But historylink.org is a good online source. And so they manage to put a whole bunch of stuff out there so you can drill down and down and down and down, and then, of course, there's reference to reading material, but Coll Thrush, professor Coll Thrush out of Vancouver, what's that one called, "Seattle" something.

Q: Yeah, I can't remember the name, but I know Coll.

Coll Thrush.

Q: Coll Thrush has been researching this for years, and he's spoken.

"Native Seattle." That would be the one, Coll Thrush. I like that one, too. He's got some stuff in there, some maps and things, and so that's real neat. I like that.

Is it in print?

It is in print. Right.

Q: Other questions.

We found the "Princess Angeline" documentary very informative. We saw it at the longhouse. What you told us about the Black River, we learned about it then. There's a lot of information and photographs in that documentary.

So there's this documentary that's coming out. On the 27th of September will be a showing in Seattle. There's a trailer out on the web right now. It's called "Promised Land." Clay had mentioned that. And it profiles the Duwamish and Chinook and their struggles. Now this is intended to go worldwide, because, as I was saying, our struggles are not unique to us, but it's those people and those tribes, of which I'm in there, and we have Chinook members that are in there, and it's, I kind of like it, but it's up to you guys to figure out.

But it's an extension, where the "Princess Angeline" film is good, and it is what it is, this is an additional thing to that.

Q: And our organization is working on getting scheduled a screening in West Seattle sometime soon. We don't have a date and a place yet, but we will let you know, and if you've signed up on the e-mail list, you certainly will be notified about that.

Well, could you please give Ken a big round of applause for this?

Time: 1:15:36