

Joe McKay meets the Pentlatch

by Graham Brazier

It wasn't until 1874 that the first European settlers showed up on Denman Island. By that time, the island had been a virtual human vacuum since 1862 when a small-pox epidemic devastated the indigenous community of the Pentlatch people at Village Point (now called 'Denman Point'). Consequently, as there was no overlapping occupancy of indigenous and European peoples, there was little possibility of interaction between the two races. (While it might be interesting to speculate on how history may have taken a different course if the two communities had ever shared the island it seems that experiences in other parts of the province suggest that history's course would not likely have altered in any appreciable way.) In any case, there *was* one non-indigenous man who experienced the indigenous community at Village Point in, what may well have been, its heyday; that is, before the white-man's disease struck.

Joseph William McKay, a Metis employed in a variety of capacities by the Hudson's Bay Company throughout the 1840s and 50s visited the grand and extensive village and conducted an exchange with some of its residents in 1852. McKay had been educated at the Red River Academy and became a skilled and versatile employee, much relied upon by James Douglas, Governor of Vancouver Island. McKay was appointed postmaster at Fort Victoria at age 17 and at the age of 21 he was called upon to witness the formal signing of several of the historic treaties with indigenous groups in their southern Vancouver Island homelands. He was also selected by Governor Douglas to undertake a variety of exploring and mapping expeditions, but is best remembered for his discovery of coal in the Nanaimo district where he was reported to have been seen dancing the Red River Jig "on top of coal seams with great joy".

Subsequently, he supervised the development and operation of the Nanaimo coal mine while simultaneously extending his search for coal further north into the waters of Valdez Inlet (now known as Baynes Sound). It was late October of 1852 when he set out from Nanaimo in 'a well manned canoe' for the stated purpose of investigating a 'disturbance' at the village he called 'Siklaults', on the island we now know as 'Denman'. The

source for this name, 'Siklault', is not known but it may be significant to note that it was not used by McKay until *after* his visit to the village. This would seem to suggest that it was a Pentlatch name passed on to him during his stay at, what is today called 'Denman Point' for, while he was there, it is clear that he had an exchange with some of the residents when he, not only, purchased a canoe, but also, learned that coal was known to 'crop on both sides of Valdez Inlet'. Yes, that's right, coal on Denman Island....let's not tell anyone.