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HIGHLIGHTS:

- Discusses the establishment of Alert Bay.
Imbert: (inaudible) as a settlement, I mean, in a sense.

William: Well, from what I can gather the first people, the non-Indian, that ever come to Alert Bay was the ones that started this saltery here. I just can't recollect the name of the people that started the saltery, but instead of a cannery they had established a saltery here. But there has always been dispute or controversy of whoever first settled here in Alert Bay. But seeing a ship anchored out here in the earliest picture that I could see of Alert Bay was the ship Alert with... and the shoreline, it showed the small saltery at the end of the village here where the present B.C. Packer plant is. And quite a lengthy row of Indian community houses, standing. It didn't appear to me as it had been recently built in compliance with the saltery. Because we will recollect, or anyone would recollect the size of timbers that was put into those houses, those community houses. You can't erect those kind of houses just overnight. So I'm firmly convinced that those Indian inhabitants were here long before the saltery ever come here. But if we are going to analyze the thing, I would analyze it this way: that this was quite close to the salmon

stream straight across from here, why they settled here, why they established the saltery here. Because that river was just teeming with salmon in those days, I've been told.

Imbert: What river was that?

William: The Nimpkish, just straight across here, the Nimpkish River. And I investigated while I was still quite young. Your grandparents will tell you historical background. Well, your grandparents they would just tell you when you want anything, you know. They tell you historical background of various places anytime they felt like it. That's why the older

generation of people were knowledgeable of some of these affairs even if it hadn't been written. They gave it to you, not just once, but different times -- repetition of some of the things they want to impress upon you. This, there's a big rock still there today, down the other end, where someone was supposed to have stabbed or they had a fight of some kind down the other end of the town here.

(Break in Tape)

Imbert: Could you begin about the rock? You were saying, you started off by saying there was a rock there.

William: Yeah, there's a rock down there, a white one. And it has, they gave it a name when these people, two different members of tribes had met there. There's a big rock down here. And those people they've kind of got into a sharp difference of opinion and then one of them was wounded, and he walked over to here where people had give him, if I may say, medical aid, you know. I think he survived. But, however, this is beside the point. You know yourself if you lived here that it's very difficult in the wintertime to get in and out of the Nimpkish. You know where the Nimpkish flows right on the island called Green Island, it's almost impossible for a canoe to enter the river in the wintertime when you have your bad southeasters. Sometimes it carries on for a week sometimes, there's no let-up in that kind of wind. It was prior to the advent of the white man. But when they got to associate with one another in these festivities that they had, you know... This was about the time, I don't know, when they began to practise their customs. And then they decided that they should have this as a winter village.

Imbert: What is this?

William: This Alert Bay. As a matter of convenience for these customs, for the gatherings that they had, if I may not use the word customs. But they used to gather for different things, you know. So here in Alert Bay they used to trade with one another -- various villages -- salmon, berries, meat or what have you. But Alert Bay is quite handy to the islands. You can still come in here even in the worst storms in the winter. And I know the Indians themselves they picked this site. You

will know in the wintertime that this is a quiet spot right here where the Indian village is, and it's also partially protected from your west winds. But then they used to bring their canoes in there if they're not used, you know, down the sheltered end from west winds. But they were established here before the cannery come.

Imbert: You mean to say that this was a village where people from a lot of other villages collected. It was not belonging to one people only, but it was a sort of a winter place where they can meet and pray because it was impossible to get into the Nimpkish River at that time. This is the... It grew up as a kind of, you might say, almost an international village in the sense that...

William: No, I wouldn't say that. It was the Nimpkish proper, the residents of the other side. They decided, "Let us make ourselves available to the other people, and move across there and build houses for ourselves." And then they were quite receptive to the other people. They had houses here and then any time there's a band of people come here, you become the guest of these people here while you're negotiating for your trade or what have you. So therefore they were here long before the advent of the white man. If you will look at that picture... Some people have published books with regards to

Alert Bay, saying that the Indians they only moved over here just because of the cannery. But I say no, if you look at that picture you'll see the trees. The Indians in those days they never buried their dead, they packed you up on trees and put you in the Indian wooden boxes they had. You will see in some of the oldest pictures that there was boxes strapped onto those trees. So the Nimpkish they were here before that.

Imbert: Was there a name that they gave to the village here?

William: Yes, Yileese. Yileese. I guess you could recognize those people, they were not altogether stupid, you know. They described the formation of the island. It reminds you of a person -- if you had your back lying down on the ground and you spread your legs out like this, you know, not stretched but doubled up and you spread it, open it out this way, that's Yileese, and that's the shape of the bay. So that's his name, Yileese. I've seen some wonderful things going on here in my childhood.

Imbert: What sort of things?

William: Weddings. I remember when the white men were here then, there was all board sidewalk here. They had a big Indian wedding here. That was quite an event any time there was a big wedding of some high ranking family. This bride, she was set on a platform and she sat on a pedestal. And her attendant was standing here in the corner, and he had a rod stuck on his head with a feather on the end. Say about six feet of line onto this rod with an eagle feather on the bottom. And all the high ranking people from the various tribes, or various families,

you were given a chance to rush towards this feather to catch it. If you caught that feather the marriage is concluded, you

can go ahead with the marriage. The bridegroom himself he doesn't enter into the picture, but the various people they, they acted on behalf of the bridegroom in the tribe, his own tribe.

So one old gentleman -- he was a high ranking fellow, you know -- he had a crook which they used when they go oolachan fishing, you know, has this crook, you know, or sapling. It draw his net up, you know, his trawl net in the river to empty a net into your canoe. And he had this, used this as a weapon when he came forward. And he tried to reach, to grab this feather, but he couldn't catch it. And then he got quite annoyed. He thought he would booked to be made so he could be able to catch this thing due to his rank. Of course, mind you, the chap that was there he know who he was going to give this to. No man would ever catch his feather because every time he see you coming he would lift it, wait for the opportune time and let you get it, you see. So this old gentleman that had this crook in his hand he figured that he was designated to get it. So he got quite annoyed at the thing. He twisted his thing and he hooked the guy around the neck and was going to drag him off the pedestal. (laughs) But one of the old chiefs from the, where the bride's family, you know, he was a powerful man. He just grabbed the guy and twisted that stick; broke it in half. So right after that the thing got kind of worked up, people got agitated, you know. And the next man come along, which happened to be my wife's late brother, he got the feather. And he was awarded 350 blankets, and that more or less concluded the wedding. Oh, we used to have some great old times at Indian weddings.

Imbert: Anything about the... Well then, the first thing then was this herring saltery and then...

William: Salmon.

Imbert: ...salmon saltery, rather. And then how did it go from there, and when did the missionaries come and so on?

William: Well, the colonial people, the factories they set up in Fort Rupert, that's where the missionaries were in the first place. But... Do you know the first missionaries that come to this area was a Catholic? They established themselves on Hobbledown(?) Island, near Vancouver. And he had an Indian interpreter went around all the villages here, and his name was Bird. He was the interpreter for the Catholics. But for some unknown reason the Catholics they moved out of here. Then the Anglicans they were established in Fort Rupert. So I hear that Fort Rupert is a hard place to get in and out of in the wintertime. So the first Anglican missionary he moved here to Alert Bay. And he was the one that start, he opened up the residential school.

Imbert: Was that before the cannery came?

William: No. It was after the cannery.

Imbert: The saltery was first and then the cannery and then the Anglican mission?

William: The cannery and then Anglican mission, the saltery and the Anglican mission.

Imbert: The saltery and the Anglican mission and then the cannery?

William: Well, the cannery is the offshoot of the saltery anyway. In the early times -- you know yourself -- I believe

I've read where they started salteries in the Fraser River too, to start with, before they turned them into canneries. And the missionaries they done quite a lot of good as far as employment was concerned. They opened up a mill here, down the other end, right where the A.B.C. Packing Company is now. That was the missionary mill -- they started that and some of the Indians used to be employed there.

Imbert: Did you ever...? (break in tape)

William: ...did hear about, you know. One of the things that was being mentioned to me -- this wasn't such way back either, it was when they started to survey this area. We had friends in those non-Indians even as early as the surveying time, you know. They had advised whatever help they had to talk to the old chiefs, recognized chiefs of various families, to stake out land for yourself. They said, "Why should we stake out land for ourselves? This is ours." And then the interpreters would say, "Well, these people tell us there's going to be all kinds of people coming in here." "Oh, we shouldn't worry about that," he says, "those people must be numerous as pine needles to overpopulate our area." He says, "We got lots of area. They're quite welcome to come." And then the interpreters in those days come back and try to tell them, they said, "There's thousands of people from where these people come from." "Oh no," he says, "we've got vast areas here." He says, "They must as numerous as the sand that they could overpopulate our area. We shouldn't worry about them." So they just helped these people before there's too many white men here. So they didn't feel any, they didn't feel any, they wasn't bothered with the first white man that come to this country, I mean around this area.

And there was a story told about Kingcome, these four tribes at Kingcome in the spring of the year. They'd come out in the flats to spear seals, you know. So those boys were down there

by the flats and they went back up river and they said, "You know the island in Belle Isle Sound is going across the inlet so fast fire is coming out of the top of that rock." So they

dispatched half a dozen canoes to go and see what was happening to that island. They come back and they said, "The island is still there."

Imbert: Yes, the island was still there.

William: Yeah, the ones, the half a dozen canoes that come down to investigate these canoes supposed to have been moving across the inlet there at such a high rate of speed, with smoke coming out of the top of the island. They went back and reported to the people. He says, "There's nothing happened to that island. It's still there." And those people that had brought that information they were quite put out about the thing, because they know for a fact that that island was moving with black smoke coming out of the top side of it. It was only in later years that they found out it must have been a first steamer that come around that neighborhood, what they had seen going across. (laughs)

Imbert: It must have been the Beaver, I guess.

William: I suppose.

Imbert: (laughs) Any stories about the time of Vancouver, and the big sails and things like that?

William: Not of any too great a significance, other than what you will find in some of the publications that had been made with regards to his trips, where reference was being made to Nimpkish River, you know. But if I may be allowed to borrow the version of the west coast people... You take us Kwakuitls,

we've no name for a white man because we were not the first contact they made when they come to this continent. We merely adopted the west coast word for a white man which is Ma Masna. Ma Masna. The Kwakuitls have no interpretation for that word. I know I got in trouble with my late uncle when I try to ask him to interpret, tell me the interpretation of Ma Masna in our own language. He thought I was going off my rocker. He says, "I knew that it was going to get you in the end. You've been mixed up with this brotherhood movement too long," he says. He says, "You better quit it before it really deteriorates your mind." And I kept asking him -- he was giving me a dinner, you know, both him and his late wife -- they're both gone now. And I waited a bit, you know, and I come back at him again. By this time he was really annoyed at me. And I said, "You know why I ask you this question?" I said, "In my travels I met with those people on the west coast of Vancouver Island. The white man appeared to them in these great big ships, come from nowhere. They had established in their minds that these people merely live in a house in the water and that's the name they gave the white man, that's what Ma Masna means. People that live in a house in the water, Ma Masna." You know the old chap, my late uncle, he sat up beaming from ear to ear. He says, "Do you know any more stories that you could tell us?" (laughs) He was really impressed and interested. (laughs)

Imbert: Hold it a second here. Tell us about the, what was this...

William: The Kitimats. The first contact with the white man. The ship had come in at the head of Dean Channel, you know, Kitimat. And they dispatched this canoe to go and investigate what was going on, and half a dozen canoes went out, and all these bunch of men around the deck, you know. When they got

within a certain distance from the ship everybody disappeared as if they were going through, falling through the ground. And that's what they call themselves, Kumshewa. You know, you've fallen through. So they figured this bunch of people they had fallen through the deck of the ship. Of course they didn't know there was a deck there but they figured, it appeared to them, that they had fallen through something. So today the Kitimat still the white man Kumshewa. It means 'falling through'.

Imbert: This is very interesting. Yeah.

William: Talking about Alert Bay it might be appropriate for me to tell you at this time that I'm part Nimpkish. My grandfather was one of its leading chiefs as you will see today. He's right in the centre of the village at that time. No doubt, even in primitive times, whoever was the high ranking person must have the protection of the community. (Break in tape)

Imbert: Excuse me a moment. Yes, you were talking about... you were going to begin to tell us. Could you begin again about the Nimpkish?

William: Yeah, to give you the historical background of the Nimpkish I've already stated my position of my late grandfather here. But the Nimpkish proper, within the Nimpkish proper there is four groups, like all the other tribes which I had related earlier. Well the Nimpkish proper they originated from the sea. They had their wise men in those days, verifies my ideas about the background of different people. This man is supposed to have surfaced in one corner of (Indian). It's a flat sea monster of some sorts. It had... No one has ever described whether it had tentacles, or arms, or what have you,

but it was just a flat thing. And the man was standing right on one corner of it. (Indian), whoever gave it that name, (Indian), that's the name of that sea monster. Therefore he was all by himself, Namook(?) is one person -- 'Nam' is 'one'. And then he became (Indian) because of that monster he stood on when he surfaced and became man. Nimpkish, that's how the people originated, Nimpkish. I would say it's somewhere around Stubbs Island here. So no one can challenge me and say that the Nimpkish didn't originate here. They originated here because they couldn't migrate from Stubbs Island to the river there, they were here in Alert Bay. If they originated from

anywhere else I think they originated from here. And for food purposes they crossed the river there, up and down the river there in the lake shore; sockeye, spring salmon, oh what have you. It would be a lengthy thing. I could go on and tell the other leading and connecting historical background of the (Indian), sea monster.

Imbert: The... Do you remember Fort Rupert when it was a fort? Or was that... that goes a way back.

William: Oh, that goes way back before my time. It was already, it was already, it had already deteriorated when I become aware that there was such a place as Fort Rupert. The only thing that I know about Fort Rupert, which was told to me by my cousin's grandfather -- he's quite an elderly chap when I was in my teens. He said, the people were so numerous in Fort Rupert that they didn't know one another. He wasn't allowed to play with all the children, he just had to play with a certain group. It was laid out in such a way, same as your town sites. You're not all water front residents, you lived further back a way -- no doubt where the airport is now. And they were so numerous that they became known as (Indian). (Indian) is smoke, (Indian). And if there's lots of smoke coming together

that's (Indian). So that's the name of the tribe, (Indian) on account of the smoke. You notice if there's smoke coming from Alert Bay it all goes in one direction. But people was so numerous over there the smoke come together, all directions. So that's how you arrive at Kwakuitl.

Imbert: And Kwakuitls, that's the... They were the people that first got called that.

William: Yeah, they were the people that first got called that. I, it was merely for identification, I think, that the anthropologists call us Kwakuitls, because there's a similarity in our dialect with the Kitimats, Oowekeenos in Rivers Inlet, and Bella Bella. Our language is almost the same.

Imbert: Well, did the people here have a name for themselves, though? I mean all these people...

William: That's right. My tribe over across, eighteen miles northeast of here, is (Indian). They are the people across the other shore, that's the interpretation of (Indian).

Imbert: But they didn't belong, regard themselves as belonging to a sort of a nation of people that spoke the same?

William: No, we didn't consider ourselves as a nation. We didn't consider ourselves as a nation. But the anthropologists they established their different groups as belonging to a certain nation. We became known as a Kwakuitl nation. And then the Salish became known as a nation there. Yet there'd be Cowichans, Sechelts and what not, you see, and so on, and even

back in the Interior.

Imbert: It seems that some of the...

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(END OF TAPE)

INDEX

INDEX TERM	IH NUMBER	DOC NAME	DISC #	PAGE #
MARRIAGE				
-ceremonies	IH-BC.61	W. SCOW #2	178	5,6
NON-INDIANS				
-first contact with	IH-BC.61	W. SCOW #2	178	9-12
STORIES AND STORYTELLING (GENERAL)				
-landscape features	IH-BC.61	W. SCOW #2	178	3
STORIES AND STORYTELLING (GENERAL)				
-origin myths	IH-BC.61	W. SCOW #2	178	11,12

PROPER NAME INDEX

PROPER NAME	IH NUMBER	DOC NAME	DISC #	PAGE #
ALERT BAY, B.C.	IH-BC.61	W. SCOW #2	178	2,4,11,12
FORT RUPERT, B.C.	IH-BC.61	W. SCOW #2	178	7,12
KINGCOME, B.C.	IH-BC.61	W. SCOW #2	178	8