



Above: Entry to pithouse, 2013.

Photo Credit: Sncəwips Heritage Museum

Sharing Okanagan Stories

Jordan Coble

It is a dark yet restless winter evening in the heart of the Okanagan valley. The sounds of the first frostbitten snowflakes blanketing the earth and the faint trickle of the nearby frigid creek is all that can be heard outside the winter dwelling / q^wačⁱ? (pronounced qwa-tsee). But, it's far too cold to be outside. The sqilx^w people of the Okanagan are familiar with this inhospitable weather in this unforgiving land. It has been a whole season since the leaves turned and the Sandhill cranes flew overhead. The preparations have been made. It is time to allow the embrace of Mother Earth to keep the people warm until the sunflowers appear once again.

Now is the time to share stories of the work that was done, the adventures the travellers endured, and for the Elders to communicate with the land, resources, and spiritual realm in a way only they know how to do.

There are dozens of q^wačⁱ? along what is known today as Mission Creek, but at this time it is still sənč^wa? q^wa?stn, the place where arrowheads are formed. Each q^wačⁱ? houses between 10 – 20 individuals and there are thousands of sqilx^w just in this section of the Okanagan alone making their way inside their respective pit-houses.

Inside, the smell of freshly gathered fir boughs and burning pine fills the spacious and comfortable interior. Most of the young children are sleeping while the more mischievous ones keep one ear open as there is an unsettling discussion taking place. Although each q^wačⁱ? is having its own conversation, they are all telling the same story. The smoke from each fire carries talk of new people that have entered into the territories of neighbouring tribes with different beliefs, technologies and ideologies. This is not a new conversation as prophecies of these visitors have been shared for thousands of years through cəptik^wəł, the history and living oral documentation of the syilx / Okanagan people.

Some of the leaders become upset while Elders speak of the final stages of evolution of the

Okanagan people - the time when we are no longer able to hunt or gather. Uncertainty billows with the heat of the flame as the people agree their ways of being will be forever altered. Although it will be a particularly unforgiving season, it will also be the last peaceful winter they will see in their lifetimes as the new people will arrive soon after the trails are free from the clutches of the winter snow.

Although the first few years of shared experiences between the sqilx^w and non-indigenous people were mostly positive, we are now recognizing that it was based on necessity as opposed to genuine appreciation for what was provided.

The Okanagan people have always cared for their guests. In this instance, they shared resources and knowledge in regards to how to live in this fragile and unforgiving land based on thousands of years of experience and understanding.

In return, the guests shared their resources and knowledge amongst other things, not all of which has been to the benefit to the sqilx^w people.



Above: Traditional Okanagan pithouse, ca.1920.
Photo Credit: Sncəwips Heritage Museum

The most important resource the Okanagan people provided was a safe and warm place to live during the harsh winter months. These are the winter dwellings of the Okanagan people, the pit-houses / q^wačì?. Without this, the first stories of the pioneers of this area could easily have been of demise, death and failure.

Despite the sharing of knowledge, there has been persistent misunderstanding and miscommunication which have dictated the relationships between the sqilx^w and non-Indigenous people. These misunderstandings have resulted in the devaluing of Indigenous knowledge, language, people as well as the land and resources.

This lack of appreciation and connection to Okanagan worldview has been tenaciously misrepresented in institutions such as museums for decades adding to the depression and identity crisis within our communities.

As we enter our present day and age, the Okanagan Nation, which is now separated into 8 communities, have come to realize that the concerns of the Elders were extremely close to becoming a reality. The land and resources have been altered so drastically by a Eurocentric mentality that people no longer harvest the kokanee salmon that inhabit the beautiful and world-renowned Okanagan Lake. Wetlands which were home to thousands of diverse flora and fauna species are dead silent or non-existent while rivers and creeks have been depleted to the point of little use. The unforgiving environment is still a reality but for different reasons. The culture, language and spirit of the Okanagan people has been battered, beaten, stolen, displaced and replaced since that last peaceful winter in the mid-1800s. It has been a long and devastating season for our people... but, we are still here.



The Okanagan people are starting to believe that spring may be upon us. We have never relinquished our rights to our territory and we have begun to reclaim our land, our connections and our identities in numerous ways. Although we have endured suffering over the last 100 years, it has resulted in our becoming more resilient and more vigilant. We are now starting to reap the benefits of the efforts of our Elders to establish recognized institutions to teach our children our culture, language and history. The architectural design of Sensisyusten, Westbank First Nation's (WFN) community school, is based on the design of the q^wač̓i?, not just for the aesthetic appeal but because it provides the appropriate cultural setting that encourages learning and growth based on our experiences. Sensisyusten is just one example of Okanagan communities taking charge of their education.

To complement this growth, in 2014 WFN opened the Sncəwips Heritage Museum so that our own people could reclaim our history and reconnect to our past in order to build a healthier and more inclusive future for our children.

The Sncəwips Museum is our way to claim our place in history, to acknowledge that our perspective is quite different from that of representations in educational institutions and quite often other museums.

Prior to the opening of Sncəwips, we constructed our very own q^wač̓i?, a space for our community to remember where we came from. The Sncəwips Museum expands well beyond the walls of the actual building space; it is the land and people who are still here and the q^wač̓i? is part of our ways of being. This q^wač̓i? is also a great representation of where we are today as a community. It combines western technologies with Okanagan tradition - a cement foundation as opposed to rammed earth and metal spikes in place of traditional ties. This was done to ensure the space is safe and secure for all peoples who are fortunate enough to enter. The architecture is still based on traditional practices utilizing the four foundation poles, which also represent our Four Food Chiefs ntitiyix (King Salmon), spiłəm (bit-

Secwepemctsin Language

Spring Salmon = ntityix

Bitterroot = spiłəm

Black Bear = skəmxist

Saskatoon Berry = siya?

Place where arrowheads are shaped (commonly known today as Mission Creek)
= sənXʷa?qʷastn

Ceptikʷəɬ (oral history, stories, how things came to be) = ceptikʷəɬ

Pit house (Okanagan) = qʷaʕi?

Pit house (Shuswap) = kekuli

Sqilxʷ (Indigenous People from anywhere)
= sqilxʷ

Sylx (weaving many strands to make one strong whole / original name for Okanagan people) = sylx

Sensisyusten (house of learning / name of our community school) = sensisyusten

Sncəwips (how our collections tell of how we came to be / name of our museum)
= sncəwips

terroot), siya? (saskatoon berry), and skəmxist (black bear). In this way, the Okanagan people provide life and spirit to their qʷaʕi?. They were to be respected and always kept clean. Each pole and Food Chief represent more than just a resource, they are reminders of the responsibility of each individual to look after each other and the land no matter what age or gender we identify with.

Now that our people are reconnecting with our identities as sylx / Okanagan people, we are making our presence felt through partnerships with other organizations, institutions and community projects and events. A prime example of this is the relationship between Westbank First Nation (WFN) and the Okanagan Heritage Museum (OHM). It started with the presentation on WFN's behalf to provide a unity staff which connects our communities to ensure we will help each other on this journey.

Yes, we still have quite the trail ahead of us, but finally Okanagan Nation members are being asked to sit at the table to provide insight to ensure authenticity and respect is maintained.

As the OHM continues to revitalize their primary exhibition space, one main aspect is the rebuilding of their pit-house to better reflect Okanagan practices and culture. The OHM reached out to WFN who in turn suggested they invite Okanagan Nation member Dr. Eric Mitchell to aid in the construction of the pit-house to ensure it is a reflection of our traditional qʷaʕi?. The original pit-house was not a good representation of Okanagan culture despite being located in the heart of the Okanagan valley and was even referred to as a kekuli, the Secwepemc word for winter dwelling as opposed to qʷaʕi?, the Okanagan word for pit-house. We are beginning to speak the same language.

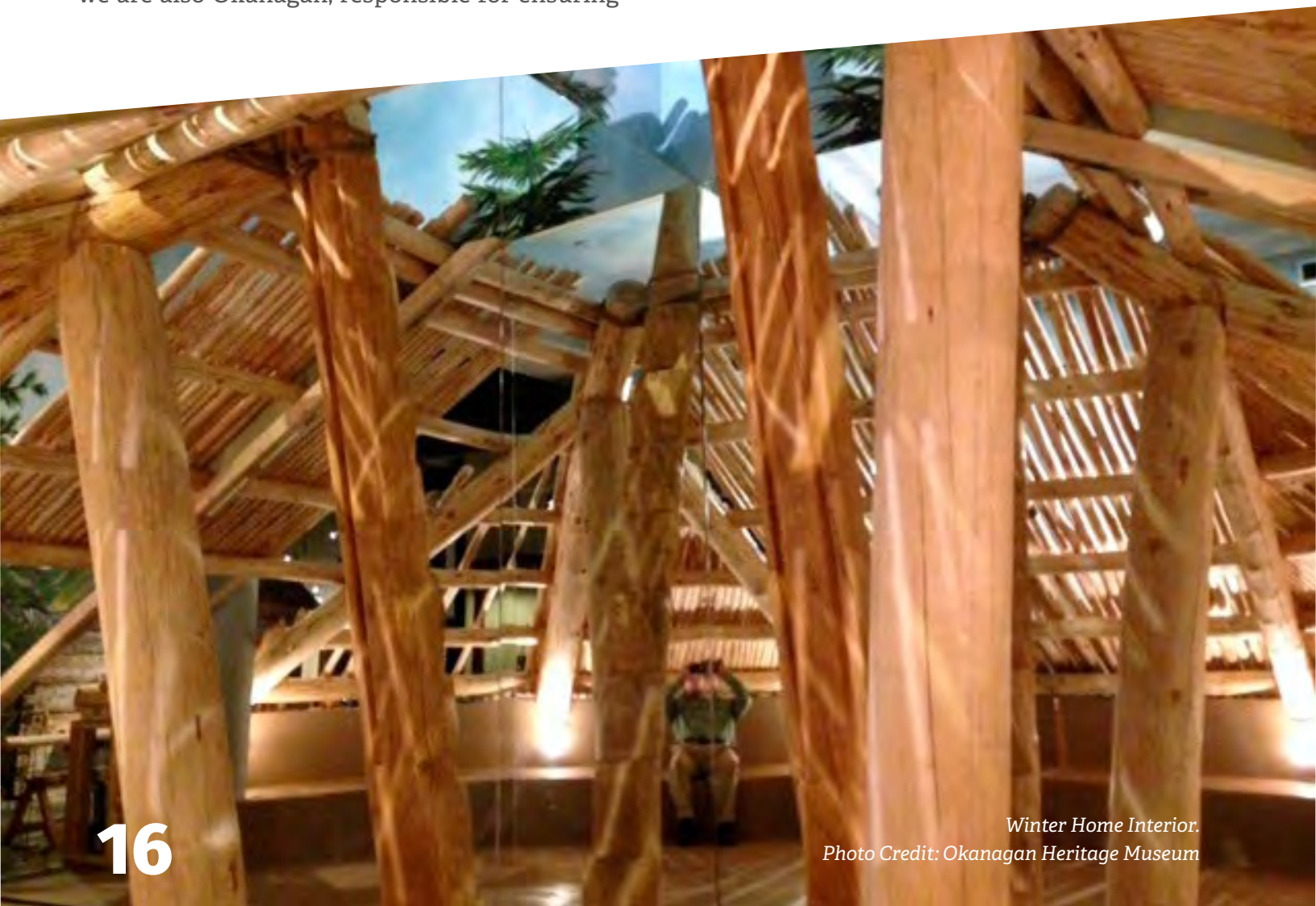
We are beginning to see what we can all agree on moving forward.

Respect and inclusiveness are the new foundations for the pit-house that is the Okanagan valley. There is a new sense of positive energy as our homes have been cleansed and the missing pieces of knowledge from our ancestors are being gathered and put to good use. There are still a number of issues we continue to face as colonization and assimilation efforts are still a reality. But, we are beginning to appreciate one another and collaboration has been a huge aspect in our growth together.

We give thanks to the q^wačí? for sheltering us from the winter storm that we have faced for over 100 years. It is our home, it provides our sense of place, literally buried in the warmth of Mother Earth. We are syilx, interwoven with the strands of life, but we are also Okanagan, responsible for ensuring

our message, our story and our ways of being are passed on to future generations. We are the beautiful people and will continue to be as long as the land around is kept beautiful.

Jordan Coble is the Curatorial and Heritage Researcher with the Westbank First Nation Sncəwips Heritage Museum. Coble was raised in the heart of the Okanagan and is dedicated to working for his community and people through his work at the Sncəwips Heritage Museum. Although new to his role and position, Coble has been able to establish Sncəwips as one of the more important spaces to access Okanagan history, culture and heritage.



Winter Home Interior.

Photo Credit: Okanagan Heritage Museum