



Irene Bryson and Jane Stelkia were two of the children who attended the Inkameep Day School during the mid-1930s to early 1940s. They returned to the site recently and shared old memories.



Wendy Johnson/Oliver Chronicle

# Inkameep Day School remembered

BY WENDY JOHNSON

The site where the Inkameep Day School once stood is now awash in echoes and sunlight. The patch of gravelly ground chatters underfoot and nothing much remains of those remarkable years except for struggling clumps of carragana and a few accommodating pines that once loaned their branches for children's swings and sporadic youthful challenges.

But perspective changes the viewpoint when eyes and minds remember and give the past a present, even if just for a little while. The decades disappeared for two former students one Friday morning when they walked up the slight rise from the road and set foot on the ground that witnessed so many extraordinary events more than 50 years ago.

"Here's where they had the exercise rings and the rope swing," exclaimed Jane Stelkia as she pointed to the pines. "And there are the bushes Mr. Walsh planted right by the school. Those things

used to climb the walls."

"And this is where we had the porch entrance to the school," finished Irene Bryson.

Bryson (née Baptiste George) and Stelkia along with other students like Francis Batiste, Johnny Stelkia, Frank Stelkia, Raymond Baptiste, Edith Kruger and Bertha Baptiste thrived culturally under the tutelage of Anthony Walsh, an Irishman who taught at the little schoolhouse on the reserve from 1931 until the war effort claimed his energies in 1942. Encouraged to express themselves through native art, song and legend during that period, Bryson and Stelkia and several others entertained numerous BC audiences with dramatizations that explored their traditions; many of the students also gave vibrant linear voice to those stories with a body of artwork that will be on display at the Vancouver Art Gallery until September 28.

Bryson and Stelkia were among the principal players in the original group known as the Can-oos-sez skay-loo Players (Animal People Players) and

therefore worked with Walsh the longest. They are now the only surviving members of that initial group and as such they are the living repositories of the recollections of an unforgettable island in time, one defined by the determination of a chief to educate his own; a teacher who saw magic in the children's movements; and the students who responded to his urgings and brought their world to others with pen and throat and gesture.

As they walked the empty site that morning—the school itself was used for practice by the Band's fire department some 20 years ago—Stelkia and Bryson were alternately thoughtful and vocal as their memories rebounded through the woody stillness.

They found the spot where the flagpole had stood and reminded one another about Walsh's heavy brogue and the daily traditions involving the raising and lowering of the British flag that had once hung there. They pointed out where the

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garden they had tended had been and where they had lined up for their daily doses of cod liver oil. And the two women located the approximate place in the now dried-up streambed south of the schoolhouse that had sheltered a statue of the Virgin Mary, one of the symbols of his faith.

"Mr. Walsh was so religious. He put a statue in the water near the little falls and we had our prayers there and then in May we had to crown the statue with flowers," said Bryson. "He always told me to have faith, hope and charity and I'd never go wrong. I've tried to live by that."

There were other memories too, ones that still have the power to delight. Hal- loweens on the hill, where months of preparation gathering twigs and poles would culminate in a party on the nearby hill's summit.

"It would be rainy and wet then and sometimes a little snow would be coming down," recalled Stelkia, "but we'd have our bonfire, games, songs and Indian dances and then we would put our potatoes on the hot coals."

But of course it was the cultural exploration that really characterized those years at the one-room school and endeared the self-effacing teacher to his students. They had already proved they could act in a little Nativity play he had had them perform for Christmas one year, but it wasn't until Walsh had seen Johnny Stelkia transform himself into a bear in a traditional dance, that the teacher made the mental leap from his customs to theirs.

"After that he told us to tell him our stories and legends, so we started telling him about owl and chipmunk," chuckled Bryson. "He wrote it all down and went

to the chief to ask permission to act it out and the chief said, 'yes, that's very good.'

"Then he came to us and told us we had to learn our lines. One day we acted it out and he told us we had it all wrong—he told us to go and watch the owls and the chipmunks and get their movements right."

It was a lesson well learned by all of his rapt pupils. As Walsh wrote in his memoirs regarding a butterfly dance some of them had been practicing and he had been called to witness one Saturday, "...Then an unseen signal must have been given and suddenly there appeared two white butterflies. They had clumsily used the blossoms of blackthorn as wings. With such scant disguise they lost their human form and with delicate posturing emerged as butterflies, while the beat of the drum was subdued. I was transfixed by such a sight. There before me, created by children of four, five and six was a true art form. When the dance ended, they disappeared and then came

out just ordinary little Indian girls, but with eyes alight and eager to hear my comments. I was embarrassed for I could not find the words to express my feelings..."

For Stelkia her best memories revolve around the plays she and the others performed and she pointed out the place where they used to practice—bringing to life different stories that were later portrayed in front of audiences laced with Oliver's who's who.

"Our first play had a big audience right here. There was Mr. Walsh, Mr. and Mrs. Albert Millar brought a group, Elizabeth Renyi, Judge Jim Mitchell, Mrs. Louis Thompson and Val Haynes. You know I was never afraid to face anything after that.

"Looking around here brings back memories, all good ones out in the wild and open," she murmured, recalling how she picked up Frank Venables with a horse and sleigh one Christmas, when he had agreed to be Santa Claus.

But it was destined to end. After

## Inkameep

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Walsh departed his replacement destroyed the masks used in the plays as well as some of the artwork and classroom was devoted entirely to lessons. Gone were the walks into the woods to see what the imagination could bring to paper and pencil, gone was the communion with nature that brought rhythm to the children's moves and gone was the opportunity to share a culture through art, song and the spoken word.

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