

THE MYSTERIOUS ORIGIN OF THE NAME SHAWNIGAN

By Daniel Marshall

Some years ago, an out-of-town friend was surprised to see that there existed a **Shawnigan Lake**. "What a coincidence," she said. "Your lake has the same name as Jean Chretien's riding." Of course, as a good Vancouver Islander, I pointed out her mistake immediately. "No, actually it is pronounced Shawn-i- gan, not Sha-win-i-gan, and it is a name of ancient and mysterious origins," or some such words which effectively demanded further discussion.

There are countless explanations of how Shawnigan Lake received its name. Some have suggested that in the distant past there occurred a significant and bloody battle between warring First Nations. Shawnigan is supposed to translate as *the lake that does not give up its dead* or the *abode of evil spirits*. Others, such as local historian Alice Gibson in *Green Leaves and Fallen Branches* (1967), recorded many other meanings: *the lake of many shadows; a shady gulch; or something is happening that I don't understand*. Native origins appear to be the most predominant, with the exception of a story that claimed that Shawnigan. was actually composed from the names Shaw and Finnegan, two early white settlers who lived near Mason's Beach. There appears little evidence for this story, particularly as Shawnigan first appeared on a British War Office map in 1859, well before any white settlement had occurred.

In fact, a better explanation for the lake's name is to be found in R. I. Dougan's *Cowichan, My Valley* (1973). The author's father, pioneer Nathan Dougan, interviewed Canute and Josephine Leemo of the Cowichan Tribes. "What," he asked, "is the meaning of the name Shawnigan?"

"It means," said Canute, 'as near as I can explain it,'— and a mystical expression crossed his countenance — There is something down there, something I cannot understand.' Continuing my queries, I now requested Canute to utter the old Indian word, Shawnigan. At this, he again turned to Josephine — she evidently having a deeper knowledge of the ancient mythologies than he — and once again they had a long, serious discussion ... before Josephine essayed an answer, but after making several ineffectual attempts to enunciate the word, with a delighted chuckle, she desisted. 'Neither of the intelligent old people could enunciate the word. The deduction is obvious: the word Shawnigan is — and very probably similar to many Indian place-names — of great antiquity."

This story corresponds with Jack Fleetwood's information obtained from August Paul of the Cowichan Reserve: Shawnigan means *a place where something took place that I do not understand*.

If Shawnigan is an ancient mystical word from the Hul'qumi'num language, then what exactly was the mystery of the lake? A few years ago, I was most privileged to work with the well-known Native historian and Elder, Abner Thorne, in translating, some of the oldest oral histories known to the Cowichan Tribes. One such story, confirming both Dougan and Fleetwood, tells of Syalutsa and Stutson, the first two Sky-men of Cowichan tradition who, it is said, fell to earth

from the heavens. Stutson apparently embarked upon a spirit-quest throughout the Cowichan Valley, to such places as Mount Prevost, Cowichan Lake, and ultimately to Shawnigan Lake or sha-weluqun as it was to be known. In each of these locations, Stutson encountered supernatural beings such as the two-headed flying snake, also known as the lightning snake. Upon his return, Stutson told his older brother of the mysterious things that he had experienced during his travels, all of which were familiar to Syalutsa, with the exception of a strange occurrence at Shawnigan. Here, while bathing in the pristine waters of the lake, Stutson encountered a large, fierce creature of a blue-green colour.

"I was bathing in the lake when I saw the water begin to ripple excitedly," stated Stutson. "The calm of the lake continued to be churned back and forth, back and forth, until finally the surface broke with a fleeting appearance only to have the mysterious being re submerged just as fast. I decided to back out of the lake slowly, leaving only my feet in the water. It then followed a little closer while continuing its zigzag-like dance. Back and forth, back and forth, was the endless motion of this wild beast gliding below the surface. It seemed as if it was trying to entice me further, but I stood motionless, neither entirely in nor out of the cool lake, and finally it disappeared back into the depths from which it came. All of a sudden, a brisk wind roared across the lake, just as it had done at Lake Cowichan."

For the first time in their conversation, Syalutsa appeared mystified. "Like you, I do not know its name," Syalutsa confessed, "and so it will be up to you whatever it is." Hence, the mysterious origin of the name sha'weluqun, or Shawnigan, is neither associated with a battle between First Nations nor associated with white settlers' names, but indicative of an unknown supernatural force present within the lake and beyond the immediate understanding of human comprehension. It should also be noted that though Hul'qumi'num-speaking peoples, such as the Cowichan, would hunt and gather in the vicinity of the lake, there have never been any permanent Native settlements along its shores.

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