



*“Closing the Circle”: Lawney Reyes and John Verigin at Sinixt Memorial Stone.*

### ***Closing of the Circle: Descendants of Alex Christian—the White Grizzly***

The following article, written by Muriel Walton with assistance from Myler Wilkinson, traces the life and cultural importance of Alex Christian and his family as the last Sinixt First Nations to live at the confluence of the Kootenay and Columbia Rivers. On October 1st and 2nd, 2009, an event of historic importance occurred when Lawney Reyes—Alex Christian’s grandson and a writer and artist himself—returned to the Kootenays. Mr. Reyes spoke to students, and to the public at the Mir Centre for Peace, where he embodied the idea of the “closing of the circle”, speaking of the suffering of his people, the need for people to reach out beyond their suffering, and his willingness to accept apology from the Doukhobor people for past wrongs against his family. This apology was given by John Verigin Jr during the afternoon of October 2nd at the unveiling of a memorial stone near the site of Alex Christian’s last home, not far from the confluence of the Kootenay and Columbia rivers.



*Alex Christian, Pic Ah Kelowna, The White Grizzly Bear.*

*Kp’itl’els, Brilliant.*



### ***Remembering White Grizzly Bear***

Alex Christian was the last of the Sin Aikst First Nations Tribe to live at the confluence of the powerful Columbia and Kootenay Rivers at Castlegar, British Columbia. His family knew him as “Pic Ah Kelowna” meaning “White Grizzly Bear.” It is believed that his ancestors had lived on the beautiful meadow above the rivers, below present day Brilliant, for centuries. Although they kept a herd of horses for hunting, Alex traveled mainly by a white pine, sturgeon nosed canoe. Each fall the Christian family pitched a tent at Red Mountain where they joined natives

of other tribes to pick huckleberries for about a month. Dancing and singing, trading and socializing were important there. Alex's youngest child, Mary, was born in their tent one August day in 1913. Every June, the family traveled to Kettle Falls where tribes assembled to fish. Alex's brother-in-law James Bernard, the elected Salmon Chief, made sure that each family went home with their fair share of dried salmon.

The Sin Aikst, now called "Lakes", were a peaceful tribe. Alex's family always welcomed visitors to their large wooden home.

In 1884 the Christian family saw their land staked as an Indian Reserve but the Indian agent failed to register it. The land was acquired as a Crown Land grant by Mr. Haynes, Justice of the Peace at Okanagan Mission and customs officer at Osoyoos during the Gold Rush years. The Christian family continued to live on their land undisturbed until the Doukhobors came to the area looking for good agricultural land.

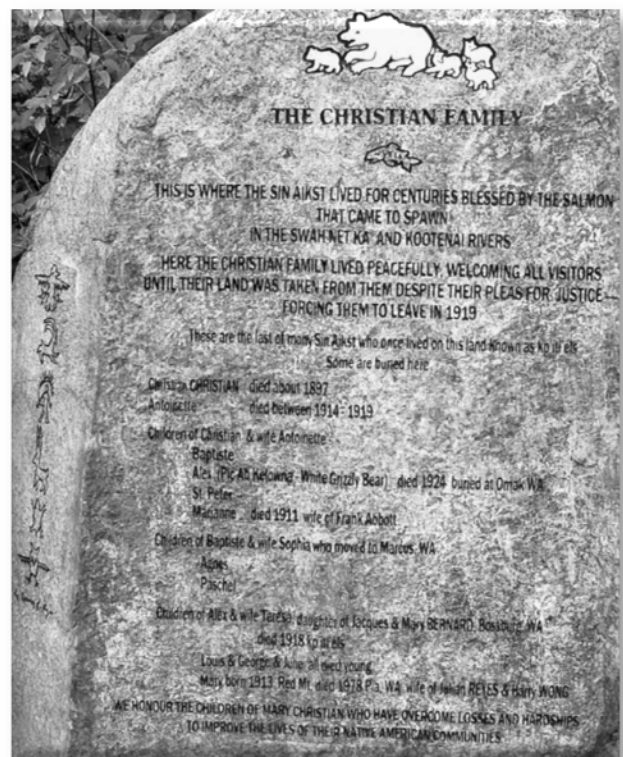
Alex began writing letters to the government to ask for a deed to the land he lived on. He wanted to preserve the ancient sacred burial grounds. He wanted to continue to live in their paradise on earth. Repeated pleas for justice fell on deaf ears. His letters may still be read in government files. One letter begs for just ten acres. Imagine his heartache when he was told that the Haynes estate had sold every inch of their land to new Russian immigrants.

Alex's wife died of pneumonia. She was buried beside three of her four small children. His brother's family moved to Marcus, WA. Alex and his little daughter, Mary, climbed into their canoe and paddled off down the Columbia.

### ***Erecting a Monument to Honour the Christian Family***

The West Kootenay Family Historians Society, a group of local genealogists who help each other research their family histories, recently celebrated their 20th Anniversary. They decided to mark the ancient Sin Aikst burial grounds with a monument.

Muriel Walton volunteered to coordinate the project. She located descendants of Alex Christian in Western Washington and began to correspond with Lawney Reyes, grandson of Alex Christian. He had published his first book, "White Grizzly Bear's Legacy: Learning to Be Indian", and she read it. His book and his encouragement gave energy to the project. As a designer, artist and author, he offered his beautiful designs and helped word text for the memorial stone. With the help of volunteers and historians from the community and a Heritage Grant from the Columbia Basin Trust, a very large granite field stone was erected at the sacred site. Inscribed by Nelson Monumental Stone Works of Nelson, the monument was unveiled by Lawney Reyes on October 2nd.



***Memorial Stone, Brilliant.***

## ***Lawney Reyes Visits Castlegar***

Muriel Walton, Monument Coordinator for the West Kootenay Family Historians Society and Dr. Myler Wilkinson of Selkirk College's Mir Centre for Peace welcomed Lawney Reyes from Kirkland, Washington to Castlegar and to Selkirk College on October 1st. He was accompanied by his friend and editor, Therese Johns, who has supported his writing and helped organize his very busy life. Three of Mary Christian's other children, Laura, Theresa, and Harry Wong came from Seattle to join in the unveiling ceremony. Dianna Mitzner, from California brought her camera equipment to add footage to a film that she is creating about the remarkable Christian family.



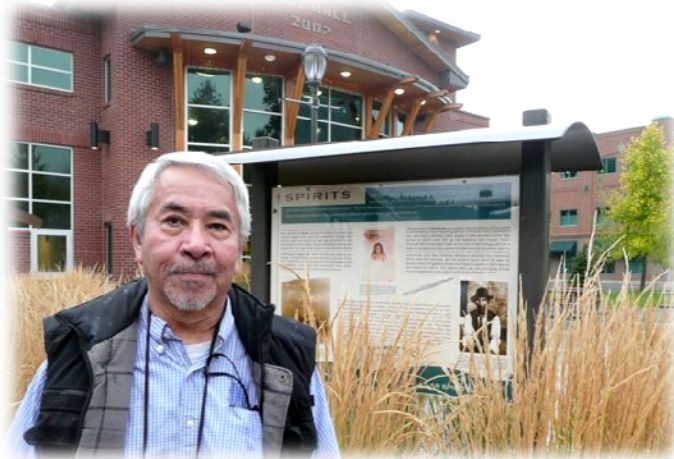
***Lawney Reyes and family members – Laura, Theresa, and Harry Wong. In background Taress Alexis, John Verigin, Marilyn James.***

## ***Selkirk College Aboriginal History Class***

The history class of local historian Takaia Larson had the privilege of hearing Lawney teach her class at Selkirk. Students sat entranced by his stories. Told in his distinctive, quiet voice, he used personal and family history to explore the larger forces that have confronted all Native Americans: displacement, acculturation and the potent force of self-renewal.

Quoting his high school history teacher, Doug Greene, Reyes said: "We learn from history that we don't learn from history"; he went on to tell how Hollywood movies made villains of Indians and how Indians have been short changed in early history texts. In fact history books have not often told the truth of stolen lands, injustices and hardships suffered by First Nations. He expressed his pride in the fact that a high percentage of Native Americas joined in fighting World War II.

***In front of Castlegar City Hall, Interpretive Sign to Sinixt People.***



"Learning about our past will give us a clearer picture of what we can contribute to the future", Lawney told the class, as he discussed the four books he has written and others he plans to write. Certainly, hearing Lawney's truths about "growing up Indian" could not help but make students think more clearly about what they must do to erase racial prejudice.

When the hour had flown by, he accepted a gift from a thoughtful student, a container of homemade, fragrant "Balm of Gilead". The Queen of Sheba is said to have presented a "balsam" tree as a gift to Solomon so that he could make this

lotion but when Lawney's sisters and Muriel Walton begged the recipe they found that local cottonwood and American poplar buds can also provide the resin, containing an aspirin-like compound, that is said to relieve joint and muscle pain.

## *Lawney Reyes Explores “Cultural Conflict” at MIR Centre for Peace Lecture Series*

Chaired by Dr. Myler Wilkinson who organized the evening lecture, a large audience from the community came to enjoy Lawney Reyes tell of his life, his books, and of his family’s considerable contribution to Native American society.



*Lecture at Mir Centre for Peace.*

Reyes’ talk focused not only on cultural conflict—“the clash of cultures”—but also on the First Nations concept of being on the land in both spiritual and physical harmony, of honouring the life force, and life-giving forces, of the rivers. He said that he did not know what other people might believe, but for himself as a Sinixt First Nations man, he knew that what we have right here—the land, the sky, the rivers—is the only true heaven he knows, not somewhere else that one cannot see or touch, but the land, and life, right here—and we are responsible to it.

Reyes’ first book “White Grizzly Bear’s Legacy: Learning to be Indian” was published by the University of Washington where Lawney had graduated in 1959. It includes stories told to him by his mother about his grandfather’s prowess as a hunter, trapper and fisherman near Castlegar. Lawney related her story of Alex Christian using a 25 caliber survival rifle to kill grizzlies for spring food. She remembered her father’s relating his feelings of being unwelcome in his own clap board home and of their leaving their way of life and their ancestor’s burial grounds behind in 1919.



He wrote of his childhood, growing up on the Colville Reserve with his beautiful Sin Aikst mother, Mary Christian and his Phillipino father, Julian Reyes, learning very early to catch trout in a nearby stream and to hunt grouse and deer for his family to eat. Life was made difficult by the lack of work on the reserve for his parents.

Word spread that a dam would flood his home. Grand Coulee Dam did flood over 21,000 acres of prime bottom land where Native Americans had been living and hunting for thousands of years, forcing the relocation of their settlements and graveyards. Kettle Falls, a primary Native American fishing grounds, where Lawney’s great uncle, Chief James Bernard, had presided over the annual salmon fishing, was inundated. The catch went from an average of over 600,000 salmon a year to nothing. Habitat ranges for species such as whitetail and mule deer, pygmy rabbits and burrowing owls was destroyed. The environmental impact of the dam ended the Reyes traditional way of life.

Courageous and strong, Mary decided that she and her husband should open a Chinese restaurant in Coulee City. Lawney laughed as he said his father was one of the worst cooks in America and that his mother knew nothing of Chinese food. However, they were soon able to hire a fine Chinese cook. Lawney and his small sister

Luana<sup>1</sup> were free to explore the shops, restaurants, bars and meet the “pretty ladies” of the brothels where Coulee Dam workmen spent their wages. His memories give us his third book, “B Street: The Notorious Playground of Coulee Dam” published in 2008.

*Left to Right – Muriel Walton, Lawney Reyes, Therese Johns, Myler Wilkinson.*



His second book, published in 2006, “Bernie Whitebear An Urban Indian’s Quest for Justice” relates his brother’s amazing life as a child cared for by his older sister and brother, Lawney, and when they were sent off to an Indian boarding school far away, by their dog. As an adult he launched the Seattle Indian Health Board in 1970. He was responsible for the creation of the Daybreak Star Indian Cultural Center . A friendly, outgoing gentleman, Bernie worked hard to bring the various tribes together to work for the good of all. He won the hearts of Mayors and Senators and became CEO of United Indians All Tribes

Foundation in Seattle from 1970 until his death in 2000.

Lawney Reyes, although 77 years of age, continues to write and publish. Terese, his editor is busy with his fourth book, “Clashing Cultures” telling of the fight between Indians and Whites over fishing rights in Washington State between 1940 and 1960s.

The title of his fifth book “Cashmere St. Paul: Last Sin Aikst “sparked discussion because Castlegar residents usually think of Alex Christian as the last Sin Aikst . Cashmere was an elderly Sin Aikst who disappeared from the Colville Reserve, after a shot was heard on the beach. Cashmere was never seen again after the water had risen to cover Inchelium.

“Warrior Society” Lawney’s sixth book, currently being developed, will tell of the contribution of the North American Indians to World War II.

An audience member who had read a number of Reyes’ works said: “That’s what I like about Lawney’s books. They tell the truth. He tells the story as it happened.” He has gained recognition throughout the Pacific Northwest for his writing.

Finally, Reyes has a book planned that will involve help from his four grandchildren who live in California, and will be titled: “Coming of Grampa”.

Following Lawney’s talk, Ken Wyllie was able to tell Lawney and his audience of the kindness and hospitality paid to his own grandfather, O. B. Ballard, by Lawney’s grandfather. Born in 1860 in Oxford, young Ballard was untrained for the life in a wilderness when he arrived in Robson in 1908 to man the CPR lighthouse. Alex Christian taught him to hunt and care for himself while he lived in Christian’s cabin at Syringa. Ken expressed his sincere respect for Alex Christian and his profound gratitude to the Christian family for “keeping his grandfather alive”.

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<sup>1</sup> Luana Reyes herself grew up to have a significant impact on First Nations people, and on American society generally. Trained in the health sciences, and in healing, for many years she worked to focus national attention on the health-care needs of Indians in urban areas. She served the Maryland-based national Indian Health Service from 1982 until she died in 2001.

*Muriel Walton begins Ceremony at Memorial Stone.*



### ***Peace and Reconciliation at the Unveiling of the Christian family Monument***

On the afternoon of October 2<sup>nd</sup> local historians, volunteers, friends, members of the West Kootenay Family Historians Society, and news media staff gathered at the monument site near the river below Brilliant to welcome the Christian Family descendants who unveiled the granite field stone inscribed with designs and text relating to the last Sin Aikst family to live on the meadow at the confluence.

The sun came out and as the Canada geese flew overhead, Muriel welcomed the visitors on behalf of the Society and the community of Castlegar. She spoke of the injustice to the First Nations people by the Canadian government for taking no notice of Alex Christian's letters asking that he might own the land his ancestors had lived on for generations and where they were buried. She told of their feelings of being unwelcome in their own home when the Doukhobor community bought their land from the Haynes estate, plowed the ancient burial grounds, and built brick houses beside their wooden houses. "We cannot expect your family to forget your losses and mistreatment, but we can assure you that you are very welcome here today, and we can ask for your forgiveness" she said.



*Muriel and Lawney at Memorial Stone Unveiling.*



***Marilyn James, Sinixt spokesperson,  
welcoming descendants of Alex Christian back to Sinixt land.***

She called on Marilyn James, Aboriginal Advisor at Selkirk College, to welcome the family on behalf of the local Sinixt. Marilyn spoke to the family of the importance of working together with community to recognize the Sinixt who were declared extinct by Canada in 1956. The Arrow Lakes Band ceased to exist as a band for the purpose of the Indian Act . . . but the Sinixt do not cease to exist as a tribal group.

Marilyn presented each family member with gifts of traditional Sinixt foods and a copy of “The Geography of Memory - Recovering Stories of a Landscape’s First People” by Nelson author, Eileen Delehanty Pearkes. Lawney was grateful and found a 1914 photo of his grandfather gracing the back cover. He had been taken by Dr. John Walton to see this photo by Teit on the sign in front of Castlegar City Hall; the interpretive sign was created by Walter Volovsek. Reyes knew that his grandfather was blind in one eye and wondered why. He did not know that Alex wore glasses until he saw the photo. Lawney accepted an invitation by Marilyn to visit the Sinixt burial grounds at Vallican in the Slocan Valley.

Muriel called upon the Rev. Ann Pollock of Castlegar United Church to lead in prayer. The United Church of Canada’s has had a long journey of seeking reconciliation between aboriginal and non-aboriginal members.

Invited to speak on behalf of the Doukhobor community was Mr. John J. Verigin, the Executive Director of the Union of Spiritual Communities of Christ, who spoke eloquently asking the Christian family descendants for forgiveness of any hardship that the new immigrants may have caused their family. Mr. Verigin referred to something Lawney Reyes said the previous evening: “It is an odd truth of history that we can lose every battle but end by winning the war” (referring to First Nations’ struggle for self-determination). Verigin said that he understood that truth and wanted to add that “now it was time to win the peace” by acting together. He then approached Mr. Reyes and paid respect to him in the most significant way a Doukhobor can recognize another human being: he bowed completely to the ground and placed his forehead on the earth (few in the audience knew that as he did this John Verigin Jr. was recovering from a



***Lawney Reyes and John Verigin. Reconciliation and Healing – Brilliant, Kp’ it’els.***

surgery of scarcely a week earlier.)<sup>2</sup> Lawney Reyes confided in Muriel after the ceremony, “I am not an emotional man but the words and actions of John Verigin moved me”. Muriel said that hers were not the only eyes which welled with tears at this moment.

*John Verigin – “Now it is time to win the peace”.*



Mr. Verigin’s gifts to the family—hand carved salt containers with the salt replaced with tobacco, and homemade bread loaves—further moved the family to accept forgiveness. The containers traditionally contain one of the three elements necessary to spiritual and physical life from a Doukhorbor perspective: bread, salt, and water. To this was added the First Nations ceremonial tobacco. With this joining of spiritual symbols, a feeling of completeness of the circle of peace and reconciliation came over the gathering.

Muriel continued by thanking the major volunteers, Myler and Linda Wilkinson without whose help the work could not have been completed. She thanked Duff Sutherland, Selkirk College Historian, for his research, Marilyn Luscombe for her support, Columbia Basin Trust for their Heritage Grant, Tom Trubetskoff for covering an open well, Victor Villa for helping to dig the large hole; and finally Brenda Lucas of Nelson Monumental Stone Works, who inscribed the stone in the field—in the company of a huge black bear sow and cub, come to harvest the autumn fruit from the old trees in the meadow.



*Lawney Reyes reading Memorial Stone – “I will bring my grandchildren to this place”.*

Lawney unveiled the stone monument and after examining the text and designs, he thanked Muriel, the Society, Myler, and the other volunteers and speakers sincerely for their work of honouring his family with this monument. “I will bring my grandchildren in the summer to see our ancestral place and this monument,” he said.

<sup>2</sup> The authors have witnessed this sign of respect (the Doukhorbor custom of bowing to the earth before another person) at just one other gathering. This was at the Mir Centre for Peace several years ago; Sinixt elders had come to bless the land where the Mir building sits above the Columbia and Kootenay Rivers. A traditional tobacco blessing was offered to the four points of the compass and, afterwards, John Verigin Jr. asked the elders if they would allow him to show his deepest respect toward them. With a nod of their heads, they agreed. Mr. Verigin bowed to the earth then as he was later to do again before Lawney Reyes.



A feeling of completeness of the circle of peace and reconciliation came over the gathering as Dr. Myler Wilkinson closed. He said that “being on the land” meant many things: suffering and blood, reconciliation and understanding, life itself, and the truth that in history nothing is every completely lost, only our ability to see or recognize the truth which may be obscured. He referred to Lawney Reyes’ talk the evening before in which he had mentioned how the bones of many Sinixt people were floating in the rivers. Now, and for many years, said Wilkinson, the bones of First Nations burials have been emerging from the sloping gravel banks above the Kootenay and Columbia Rivers; “these bones are speaking,” he said, “telling a story of the past, which will not be obscured or concealed.”

For a long time afterward, the people gathered at the confluence of the Kootenay and Columbia Rivers stayed on and spoke to one another. Most did not know that not far away, resting in a thicket, was a bear of huge size and power—not a white grizzly but a black bear and her cub, who together wander the trails, guarding the land upon which the stone memorial to Alex Christian and his family now rests.

*Community gathers by Memorial Stone.*



*Muriel Walton  
Myler Wilkinson*