

The Songhees Population

Songhees and Esquimalt First Nations peoples have lived for thousands of years in the area that became Victoria. There were important food resources such as fish, shellfish, birds, berries, roots, and bulbs in the area.

Once numbering in the thousands, many Songhees people died of smallpox introduced by contact with the Europeans. By 1845 the Songhees population had been reduced to about 700. The arrival of Europeans in Victoria also brought more diseases, such as measles and influenza. Songhees and Esquimalt peoples lost many of their children, friends, and relatives to European diseases.

Land

The Songhees people lived around Victoria Harbour long before the Hudson's Bay Company built Fort Victoria. After the fort was built in 1843, the Songhees built a village near the fort. In 1844, the Hudson's Bay Company forced them to move to the opposite side of the harbour. In 1850, this village became the Songhees Indian Reserve.

After gold was discovered in BC in 1858, Victoria began to expand and more land was needed. Many Victoria businessmen and politicians wanted to move the Songhees people away from the harbour to another site. This would allow factories and docks to be built on the reserve land. In 1911, the Songhees people were moved to a reserve on Esquimalt Harbour.

Family

Households usually consisted of a male leader, his brothers, his sons, and all their wives and children. It was also common to include unmarried sisters, widows, orphans, and perhaps nephews in the household. A wife usually lived with her husband's family.

Culture

Traditional Songhees spiritual beliefs include the presence of animal spirits that have human and animal form. Winter ceremonies were times for dances, songs, and stories related to these spirits and other cultural beliefs.

People gathered to attend potlatch ceremonies to celebrate events such as marriage, the death of an important person, or to publicly acknowledge a new chief or leader.

Beginning in the 1840s, Catholic priests began working among the Songhees people. Many First Nations people began to attend church. While many Songhees people became Roman Catholics, some kept their traditional beliefs.

Occupations

Songhees men hunted and fished mainly for salmon, cod, and herring. The women gathered shellfish and berries, and tended beds of camas. Families owned beds of camas, and the bulbs were dug and stored for food.

After Fort Victoria was built, the Songhees' way of life changed rapidly. For example, the Hudson's Bay Company took over the camas beds for potato farms and cattle grazing. Songhees men still hunted, but gradually they began to work for wages for the Hudson's Bay Company. They performed duties such as unloading supplies for the fort, clearing land, tilling the soil, building fences, and looking after sheep.

Some Songhees men, women, and even children worked in wealthy white people's home as gardeners, cooks, and servants.

Songhees men in cedar dugout canoes provided the first mail delivery system between Victoria and New Westminster on BC's mainland. Women gathered foods, often selling shellfish, berries, and potatoes door-to-door in Victoria.

Housing

Traditional Songhees houses were called lodges or big houses. They were made of cedar poles set upright into the ground. Cedar planks were lashed to form the roof and sides.

Separate lodges were used for community meals and preparation, and for meetings and events. One lodge would be used to store hunting and fishing gear, and separate lodges would be used for housing. All members of an extended family lived in one house. There were fires in the middle of the dirt floors for heating and cooking. Smoke curled upwards and left through smoke holes in the roof.

Leisure

Sports similar to modern-day lacrosse and rugby were played. Also, sports contests were popular.