

The First Gwa'sala School

In the 1920s the Gwa'sala people at Takush Harbour decided they wanted their own school. There were no schools within 40 miles and the only regular official visits to the village were the monthly mail boat and occasional visits from the United Church Mission Boat, the Thomas Crosby III. The Indian Agent at Alert Bay rarely made it to Smith Inlet and constantly complained about the difficulty of reaching the village.

By 1927 and with the help of the United Church the Gwa'sala built a small building to be used as a school and for church services. Dr. J.C. Spencer of the Church Mission asked the Indian Agent at Alert Bay, William Halliday, to supply the school with twelve desks, readers and school supplies. Dr. Spencer also recommended that a "young lad" named Walkus be appointed as teacher with a salary of \$30 a month.

The young lad was Charlie George Walkus. He had attended residential school at Alert Bay for three years and was now determined to set up a school in the village. The Department of Indian Affairs refused the request for desks and the teachers salary but Charlie George Walkus persisted and a year later he began to teach the young children of the village without the assistance of the Department.

The United Church continued to appeal to the Department for assistance but the Department would only fund a school with a qualified white teacher even though the United Church continued to recommend Charlie George Walkus as a teacher. Finally, in 1928, Miss Winnifred Potter was appointed as the new teacher. She was to receive \$4 for each day the school was open. Half of her salary was paid by the Department of Indian Affairs and the other half by the United Church. Miss Potter had lived and taught in native communities and at the time was teaching in Kitimat. She had 16 years teaching experience, was "healthy and strong and liked to live alone." Twelve double desks from the Alberni Indian Residential School were shipped to Smith Inlet and in September 1928, at the end of the canning season, the Takush Day School opened with Miss Potter as teacher, missionary and medical assistant.

The school thrived with Miss Potter as teacher and even the skeptical Indian Agent had to agree that after only five months, "the progress was indeed wonderful". In May 1930 the Superintendent of Missions described Miss Potter as courageous, devoted and fearless and said "that is almost beyond belief that children who were entirely ignorant of English or any line of education should be able, with only five months of actual classroom work to show such advancement not only in the three R's but in drawing, sewing, fancy work etc." There were 11 children in the school, three of them under seven, and they were "all bright and showing great interest in the school work."



Miss Potter and Captain Scott inside Takush long-house

In 1931 and 1932, some Gwa'sala children left to go to school in Alert Bay but the school remained open with six students until 1933 when the new Agent, E.G. Newnham, and the School Inspector tried to close it down. They argued that Miss Potter's energies were misspent and that it was not worth the cost. They were concerned that the village was too isolated to

inspect and that the Gwa'sala "need far more police supervision than they have been getting". They recommended that the Gwa'sala join the Bella Coola Agency so that they would be easier to reach.

Although Ottawa decided to keep the school open, they refused to pay for repairs to the teacher's residence and noted that Miss Potter was "likely to be subjected to considerable hardship next winter." The Department was obligated to provide fuel but they asked the Church to make any necessary repairs.

The official correspondence peters out between 1933 and 1936 and we can only guess what happened to Miss Potter and the Gwa'sala School until September 1936 when another Indian Agent, M.S. Todd, reported that the Smith's Inlet Day School "is now conducted very unsatisfactorily", that no returns have been received for the last quarter and that the school should be closed entirely. By the middle of October, Miss Potter is admitted to the hospital in Bella Bella and dies a few day later of cancer. For eight years she had struggled to keep the Gwa'sala school going, against all odds, suffering physical hardship and the apparent neglect of both the Department of Indian Affairs and the United Church.

With Miss Potter gone, the Indian Agent was even more determined to close the school and to relocate the Gwa'sala. According to his report "There are few Indians in the Kwashela Band, and it is my intention to have the children admitted to the Residential School as soon as arrangements can be made. This I feel would provide for the children and in the meantime an effort will be made to have the Band located in a more suitable village on this side of the Queen Charlotte Sound."

It would be nearly 30 years before the Department was successful in relocating the Gwa'sala to the more "suitable village" of Tsulquate but the seeds of relocation were planted here. In the meantime the Gwa'sala school continued in its struggle for survival.