

ORIGIN OF THE GATHERING

The following 3 segments are background pages from the 25th Annual Elders Gathering in 2001 in Sto:Lo Nation – where the first event took place in 1977.

WHY AN ELDER'S GATHERING?

The purpose for an Elder's Gathering is so the Elders can come together and take their rightful place as advisors, teachers and leaders. Many Elders are involved and work at the community level throughout the year. They participate at meetings, workshops and various events to support the youth, education committees, Band Councils and so on.

The Gatherings are a time to socialize and celebrate their accomplishments as well as regenerate themselves for future work. It provides opportunity for Elders to share traditional ways with visiting cultural and linguistic groups. This is done through food, songs, dances and ceremonies.

Some cultural activities witnessed at the Gatherings were, a name giving ceremony, totem pole raising ceremony, revival of the Bumble Bee dance not publicly demonstrated for over one hundred years, a traditional wedding, a give-away of hereditary chief's belongings and name/title and role were handed down and many singing and dance groups.

This event is to honour and give thanks to our Elders. The first Annual Provincial Elder's Gathering was hosted by the Coqualeetza Elder's Group in October 1977.

ROLE OF KING AND QUEEN

At the sixth Annual Provincial Elder's Gathering in 1982, the Prince George group hosted and introduced the position of King and Queen. These positions were for two individuals who actively participated and/or had outgoing personalities. Elders were nominated and a vote was taken. The first King was Gus Raphael from Stoney Creek and the first Queen was Dolly Felix from Chehalis.

They were presented with a headdress, sash and a button blanket. These gifts were to be in the possession of the reigning King and Queen then turned over to the next King and Queen at the next Gathering.

These positions were not intended to determine who would host the next gathering. It was to recognize two outstanding individuals only. They do not have to be married or a couple, they do not have to be from the same band/nation, they only have to be a male and female who thoroughly enjoy at the Gathering. This is the way that the Prince George group wanted to show their appreciation to individual elders.

We all know that over time things change. Many started to think the position of King and Queen should be from the hosing community. This became an accepted practice. Unfortunately, this started to take precedence over the passing of the Totem pole, the official symbol of the Gatherings.

At the 1998 Gathering, in Prince George, I met one of the last remaining Elders who was involved in introducing the role of King and Queen. She asked me to announce the proper procedure on bidding for the Totem pole to host the next gathering and explain the intended role of the King and Queen. Unfortunately, we did not meet earlier at the Gathering because by the time she asked me

to do this, the Master of Ceremonies announced the newly elected King and Queen (determined by number of votes) at the same time the Kamloops group (host of the 1999 Gathering) was introducing their chosen King and Queen.

I did go to the M.C. and requested permission to speak on behalf of this lady and the Coqualeetza Elders to inform and correct the procedure for passing the Totem pole and the positions of King and Queen. I was heard and understood.

It was good that this was corrected at the same place the role of King and Queen was introduced and corrected by one of the original Elders who knew the history of these positions and by the Coqualeetza Elders who know the history of the Totem pole.

BIDDING FOR THE TOTEM POLE

Bidding for the Totem pole is the highlight of the Gathering. Everyone is so happy and anxious to find out where they will be traveling to next year. Each year, attendance is growing. Any group/nation planning on hosting next year's Gathering must come fully prepared to bid for the Totem pole.

Planning and executing an event of this magnitude involves the cooperation, support and commitment of all community members. Therefore, anyone interested in bidding to host the Gathering must have full authorization and permission from their community members to bid for the pole.

You then come to the Gathering and announce your intention of hosting the next Gathering. There are usually three or four locations bidding for the pole each year. You must be prepared to convince everyone that your community is the best location. Many groups come in full regalia and have a singing/dance group to back the speaker. You explain that you do have the support of your community then entice them by stating you have ideal facilities to accommodate all of the anticipated guests, best accommodations, tourist attractions, best Bingo halls and/or casinos within one hundred miles. You may exaggerate, however you must be able to produce if you are successful in the getting the bid.

Each group wishing to host the next Gathering tries to out do the other groups. Names of hopeful hosts are written on papers. The papers are circulated to everyone in attendance. After marking one location, all papers are collected and counted. Then the successful bidder is announced.

The hosting community then formally passes the totem to the next hosting community. Because the King and Queen have been from the hosting community gifts are then given to the past King and Queen. Financial donations and words of congratulations and encouragement are extended to the next hosting nation.