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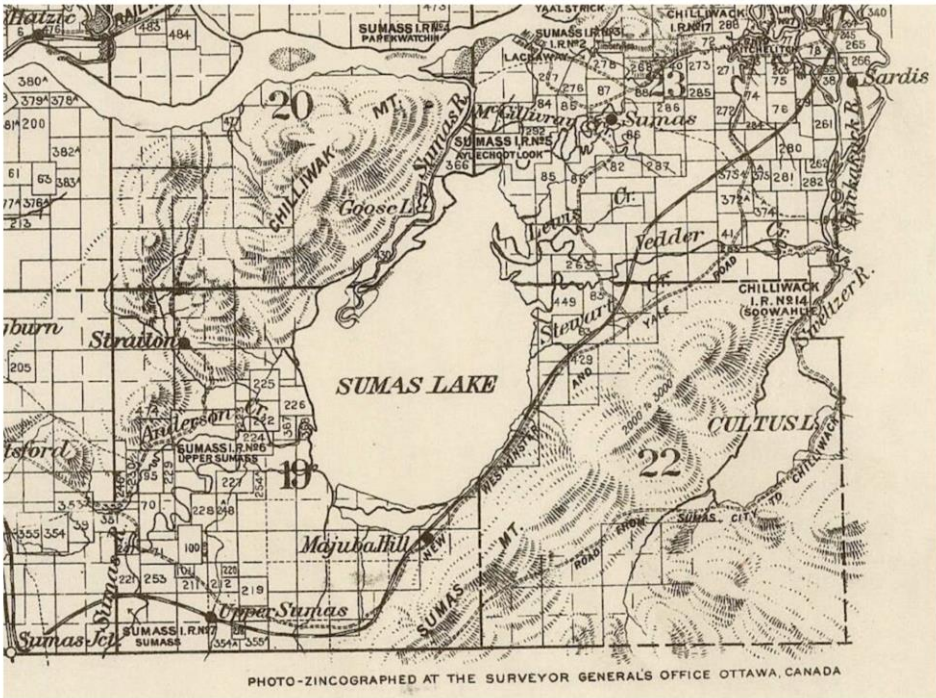
This Ground, These Feet

My name is Stephanie Beresh, and I am an uninvited guest on the traditional territory of the T'kemlups te Secwepmec. I have a passion for photography and music (listening, not playing). I am a mother and a wife. For many years I was unaware of the oppression, racism, and disrespect that First Nations people experience daily from their neighbours, town folk and even government. This not only angered me, but it broke my heart. Now, as I continue to be educated and learn the history that was kept from me and the majority of Canadians, I will actively work to be a better ally and to decolonize my mind. I will listen to the stories that were once ignored, I will continue with compassion and understanding while acknowledging their history, not as stories but as facts. I am learning to be better, so that I can do better. So that future generations do not have to fight as hard to be heard.

I was born in the territory of the Coast Salish to Joan and Albert Meerdink. My mother was born in Haudenosaunee, and my father was born in A, lenenec lte (Wsáneć). They met, lived, and married in the Territory of the Coast Salish. They raised me and my siblings, Dominique,

(Michael †) Danielle, and Matthew in the S'ólh Téméxw (Sto: lo) Nation. The land I was raised on was stolen from the Sto: lo nation, A lake was drained for my family to one day settle and farm the land for our own personal gain. Although I was always aware that were we lived was once a thriving lake full of wildlife and beauty, I was unaware of the pain and suffering that occurred at the hands of the settlers for that land to have become available for my family to one day 'own.'

Sumas Lake:



Map of the Sumas Lake area. (City of Vancouver Archives)



Sumas Lake, early 1900s. (The Reach Gallery)



Sumas Lake after drainage and reclamation, 1920s. (The Reach Gallery)



Our old family farm is outlined in red



My husband and I were married in Nte?kepmx Tmixw Territory and moved to Dënéndeh Territory until our daughter was born in Tk'emlups te Secwépemc Territory. Living in Dënéndeh we really became aware of Indigenous issues and struggles. It is during that stay I began to learn the truth of the history of British Columbia, the one that was kept from my educational experience. We moved to where our Son was born in the territory of the Coast Salish. Although we had many friends of different ethnicities, we ignorantly were unaware of the hardships that they faced daily. We decided to move away from the chaos of the Fraser Valley and are now grateful to live, love learn and grow in the territory of the Tk'emlups te Secwépemc.



My children Kait and Ethan with our two dogs, Scout and Hudson.



Our family.



Our cat Ragnar.

I grew up in a small 3-bedroom home, on 27-acres in the Fraser Valley. We ran a small hobby farm and Dad was a truck driver. We were not wealthy and but knew the meaning of hard work. While my parents were very open-minded and taught us that we are all equal and deserving of love as no one is superior or inferior to another, that was not the case at school or church. What I was being taught in church or school among strong religious opinions, was that only those that follow Christ are worthy, despite the love thy neighbour teachings, which were obviously ignored, I was taught that those who did not worship like we did, were evil. Although dressed in

their Sunday best, standing in 'The Lord's house,' their tongues spat venomous words of hate and disgust about other races and religions. I attended a private Christian school from grades k-8. I was taught that the settlers won the war against the "Indians" and that residential schools were a positive institution where Indigenous children were able to learn and grow with Christ. A small paragraph and an even smaller image in our textbooks, was the first time I had heard of residential schools, that was two years after the last one in Canada closed, I was in grade 8.

After that year, our family decided to leave the Christian school and we began public school. I began to hear the Indigenous kids talk about unfairness, inequality, and racism but I did not understand what they were talking about; I did not hate anyone, neither did anyone in my family. I did not send their families away, why are they so angry at me? I could not comprehend why they were so mad. At school they got their own Indigenous studies class, and they got to take fun field trips and go canoeing and we had to study French or social studies in class, it felt as though we were being conditioned to stay separate, to be jealous of each other's academic paths. Even from an early age, we were not taught to celebrate each other's differences, we were set up to question each other and be jealous of each other's path. We learned about the settler version of Canadian history, totem poles and how Indigenous lived-in teepees, and hunted, - that was the extent. The way the education system made it look, Indigenous people were a drain on society as they relied on the government for everything. That is why they got special school classes and trips. I was under the impression that reservations were land that the Indigenous refused to give up. Then I *really* learned, but not until my late twenties' early thirties, when I attended university. I was then able to understand why my fellow students had the reactions and feelings they had. While I saw the struggle among the people I lived alongside, I never understood. I never learned until recently that the government made it so Indigenous people had to rely on assistance, that reservations are a giant pen that the Indigenous were forced to be confined in. As I grew up and my depth of understanding grew, I was able to see

what I was not able to see before, and it broke my heart. My heart did not break in the conventional boo-hoo that makes me so sad kind of way, I mean it did, but it also angered me, enraged me even. Clean drinking water, was denied to so many, we live in Canada, how is that possible? Why did our church donate so much money for clean drinking water in Africa but completely disregard the Indigenous lives here at home? I decided that I was no longer comfortable staying ignorant- sure it is more blissful when you are unaware of all the wrong doings and misleading narratives that are being told, but I knew things would not get better if I ignored it. So, I started learning. I enrolled in courses that would teach me more about Indigenous topics, I followed Indigenous creators on social media, I began to purchase from Indigenous artists, and I started to listen, really listen. The type of listening that requires no response. It is with this new knowledge and understanding that I will raise my children. I will use the information that I have learned to educate future generations as I begin my career in education. I will help amplify the Indigenous voices, not because they need me to speak for them, but because the louder we are together, the more changes happen.

I know that as a white settler, life will be less challenging for me and my children, however, I also know that there is room for growth and change in our society. I am going to help make these changes. I will teach my children to be better also, because now I know better. Because now I will be better.

References:

Photos of farm and family: Stephanie Beresh

Photographs of Sumas Lake (and aerial photo of farm)

<https://dailyhive.com/vancouver/sumas-lake-sumas-prairie-barrowtown-pump-station-abbotsford-flooding>