

## **A Brief History of the loss of water rights on Wycott's Flat.**



*Wycott's Flat, view to the south.*

Esk'etemc is an independent band whose territory is located on both sides of the Fraser River. The main community, Esk'et is situated on IR # 1, about 50 kilometers southwest of Williams Lake.

Esk'etemc have lived in harmony with Esk'etemculucw (Esk'etemc lands) since time immemorial. When the first fur traders, miners and ranchers arrived, the Esk'etemc were settled throughout their territory, and evidence for hundreds of settlements is still visible on the landscape as pithouse villages, rock carvings and paintings, spiritual areas, campsites and resource harvesting locations.

When gold miners and settlers began staking mining claims and pre-empting ranch lands in Esk'etemculucw, all of the good land was taken very quickly. One of the first pre-emptions was the Alkali Lake Ranch located beside Indian Reserve #1 (Esk'et). It was established in 1861 by Herman Otto Bowe,

whose wife Kolenik was Esk'etemc. The Alkali Lake Ranch and other ranches expanded to occupy much of the traditional Esk'etemc lands.

The arrival of non-Indigenous settlers had many impacts on the Esk'etemc and other Indigenous communities. One of the most difficult and traumatic events was the 1862-63 small pox epidemic where many Esk'etemc lost their lives.

Another aspect of colonialism was the loss of traditional lands to the non-Indigenous newcomers. By 1881, much of the good land in the Alkali Valley and along the Fraser River had been pre-empted by ranchers and miners. When Peter O'Reilly from the Indian Reserve Commission began surveying reserves in the Esk'etemc area he commented on how little land was available for reserves. In 1881, on July 14, 15 and 16, O'Reilly surveyed Wycott's Flat which became Indian Reserve #6 (known as Tsqewt to the Esk'etemc). At the time it was surveyed Chief Phillip stated that "We should be glad to have Wycott's Flat, we can bring water on it from Harper's Lake" (now called Vert Lake).

Wycott's Flat or Tsqewt is located on a series of benches that slant steeply to the Fraser River. The reserve is located on the east side of the Fraser River, about 16 kilometers southwest of Indian Reserve #1. The land on Wycott's Flat was described as "very valuable land, suitable for vegetables and fruit as well as ordinary crops". However, Wycott's Flat lacks water. To ensure that the flats could be cultivated O'Reilly visited Harper's Lake (Vert Lake) on July 14, 1881, and reserved "all of the water from Harper's Lake for the use of the Indians" to irrigate Wycott's Flat.

An irrigation ditch was surveyed to bring water from Vert Lake to the flats. O'Reilly estimated that building a dam on the lake and the irrigation ditch could be done in less than two months and would cost between \$750 and \$1,000. He went on to say "These Indian (sic) appear to be industrious and have shewn a desire to cultivate every possible acre of land. They have assured me that they will supply all the labour necessary to carry out the above undertaking, and I think it would be more desirable to assist them in this way, than by purchasing a farm for them." O'Reilly recommended that Mr. William Laing Meason should supervise the construction of the irrigation ditch and dam on Vert Lake. Meason, a Scottish aristocrat had a ranch on Little Dog Creek, just north of Indian Reserve #6. Meason became the Indian agent for the area in 1883. The next year Meason wrote to the Superintendent of Indian Affairs that they needed \$500 for a "competent man" to build the dam on Vert Lake.

In 1888, water record 142 A was established to obtain the water from Vert Lake for irrigation to Wycott's Flat. But neither the dam or the irrigation ditch were built as originally planned. Esk'etemc Chief August asked the Superintendent of Indian Affairs, Vowell to resolve the water situation with Wycott's Flat. This did not happen.

In the meantime, Meason's ranch holdings in the area of Indian Reserve # 6 expanded and his need for water increased. Vert Lake was primarily fed from Newman Creek, a stream that arose north of Vert Lake. Meason dug a channel and diverted the water from Vert Lake to Little Dog Creek where his home was located. This eliminated the main source of water feeding Vert Lake. In 1895, William Laing Meason's son, William Meason Jr. pre-empted Lot 262 along Vert Lake and the following year he recorded 100 inches of water from Vert Lake for this lot, directly infringing on Esk'etemc water record 142 A. By this time Indian Agent Bell wrote to Vowell and said there was no water available for Wycott's Flat because the water had been diverted from the lake to Meason's at Little Dog Creek.

Esk'etemc community members kept working to bring water to Wycott's Flat, and spent two years digging an irrigation ditch by hand. During this time the water level in the lake decreased to the point where Indian Agent Bell told the community members to stop work on the ditch. Without irrigation, Wycott's Flat remained winter horse pasturage, and Esk'etemc Chief Samson told the Royal Commission in 1914 that the community wintered about 100 horses on the flat. This traditional practice continues today.

By 1922 Esk'etemc reported that the water level in Vert lake was half of what it had been before Meason diverted the water from Newman Creek to his ranch at Little Dog Creek. A 1922 water report by Senior Assistant Engineer Balls reported that "Apparently the Indian Record has never been recognized by the successive owners of the Holden Ranch (Meason's ranch), although the Indians endeavoured to make use of the record by digging a ditch." In 1925, the water record 142 A for Vert Lake was abandoned by the Provincial government.

Several times over the following years there were opportunities to secure the water rights to Vert lake by the government, but this did not happen and by the mid 1970s all of the water for Vert Lake was held by the James Cattle Company.