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IN MEMORIAM

Chief Joseph (Joe) William Mathias
November 12, 1943 — March 10, 2000

NORTH SHORE NEWS | March 13, 2000

Squamish chief dies suddenly | Joe Mathias lauded as great leader

by Deana Lancaster

JOE Mathias, hereditary chief of the Squamish Nation, was not a tall man.

But when it came to strength, persistence and passion for what he believed in, Mathias towered over most people.

"Chief Joe Mathias was one of the greatest leaders the Squamish Nation ever had," said Chief Bill Williams on Friday afternoon. "He had a great vision to help all aboriginal people in Canada, not just the Squamish Nation."

His unexpected death at St. Paul's Hospital early Friday morning from an illness which no one thought was serious, has left those who worked with him, fought alongside him, and loved him, reeling.

"All the Squamish Nation is in mourning," said Williams. Mathias is survived by his wife and daughter -- and by the rest of the band, which has more than 2,700 members living on and off reserves between the North Shore and Whistler.

Mathias, who grew up on the Capilano Reserve on the border of North and West Vancouver, was known for his passionate belief that the aboriginal people of Canada have inherent rights to self-government, rights to the land they've always lived on and its resources, and that they deserve compensation for what has been taken from them.

And he spent most of his 56 years fighting unwaveringly for those rights on behalf of his people.

"He was a negotiator," said Williams. "He was one of the strongest supporters of the treaty process."

In fact, Mathias had an influential role in setting up the B.C. Treaty Commission to facilitate treaty negotiations, and was serving as one of the chief negotiators for the Squamish Nation as it began its own negotiations. The nation is currently at stage three of a six-stage process, and is negotiating a framework agreement with the provincial and federal governments.

Mathias also held elected office with the Task Group of the First Nations Summit.

Friday was to be the final day of a three-day meeting of the summit held at the Squamish Nation Recreation Centre. A scheduled meeting with Premier Ujjal Dosanjh and Dale Lovick, B.C.'s Aboriginal Affairs Minister, was cancelled because of Mathias' death.

Instead, about 200 people -- including native leaders from across Canada, government officials and members of the Squamish nation -- gathered to pay him tribute.

"He will be profoundly missed and never forgotten," band councillor Gibby Jacob told the assembled crowd.

Mathias travelled across Canada to speak up for aboriginal people. He never pulled punches, but said what he thought. His dispatches were often described as eloquent, fiery and emotional, and rarely failed to move people. He was a founding member of the Union of B.C. Indian Chiefs, co-chair of the Constitutional Working Group to the Assembly of First Nations, and participated in the Continuing Committee on the Constitution which includes representatives from four Aboriginal organizations and from federal, provincial and territorial governments.

Jacob noted that several of the visiting First Nations members had thanked the Squamish Nation for sharing their chief. Jacob said it was self-interest on the part of the band.

"His victories were brought home to our people as well."

Williams said announcements regarding services and internment for Mathias would be made on Monday.

Before they broke for lunch, Squamish Nation elder Audrey Rivers thanked those in attendance at the summit for their words of respect and tribute.

"Our hearts are heavy today," she said. "We wish Joe a happy journey to the other side."

Then members of the band helped speed him on his way by singing The Journey Song



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