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**IN MEMORIAM**

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

**CANADIAN PRESS | March 15, 2000**

## **Chief Joe Mathias remembered as champion of aboriginal rights**

**CAMILLE BAINS /**

**VANCOUVER (CP)** - A capacity crowd of 2,000 people listened to stories, poetry, and songs during an emotional memorial service to honour Chief Joe Mathias, a relentless negotiator for aboriginal land claims widely respected for his patience and wit.

About 100 drummers and singers dressed in traditional outfits and head-dresses drummed and sang during the moving ceremony at the Squamish Nation Recreation Centre.

Wendy Grant-John, former chief of British Columbia's Musqueam nation called Mathias a loving and dedicated husband during her eulogy.

"He was a great Squamish warrior who fought for the rights of his people and for aboriginals across this country."

Provincial and native politicians, aboriginal RCMP officers and natives from across British Columbia came to pay their respects to a man they called a champion for aboriginal rights.

Premier Ujjal Dosanjh, former premier Glen Clark, federal Environment

Minister David Anderson, and Ovide Mercredi, former grand chief of the Assembly of First Nations, attended the service.

Mercredi was also one of 17 pall bearers.

Mathias, the hereditary chief of the 3,000-member Squamish Nation in North Vancouver, died last Friday from diabetes-related causes.

He was 56.

Grant John said Mathias was an avid reader of the classics and studied the history of leaders like Mahatma Gandhi.

Mathias had a painful start to his education.

He and his sister Judy were the first aboriginal children to attend a West Vancouver public school where they encountered inequality and racism, Grant-John said.

That experience, and the prompting of his elders who groomed him to be a statesman and hereditary chief, fuelled his steadfast determination to fight for his people, she said.

Mathias became involved in the struggle to gain aboriginal title in 1967 when he became councillor of the Squamish Nation Council.

Mathias's lifelong efforts to resolve land claims, which cover over 100 per cent of the province, often placed him at the centre of B.C. natives' battle to attain equality with non-aboriginals.

He was a founding member of the First Nations Summit, established in 1991 to negotiate talks with governments to resolve land claims in B.C.

Unlike most other provinces, B.C. does not have colonial treaties.

Mathias was also a guiding light in the formation of the B.C. Treaty Commission.

In the 1980s, Mathias's quest for recognition of aboriginal rights took him to Ottawa, where along with other chiefs, he fought to have the federal government recognize aboriginal rights in the Constitution.

Prime Minister Jean Chretien joined aboriginals in paying tribute to Mathias.

"The Squamish people - and all Canadians - have lost a truly remarkable leader," Chretien said in a statement from Ottawa.

"Chief Mathias was a person of tremendous insight, modesty and forbearance. He counselled a practical and solutions-oriented approach to the treaty process for his own and all aboriginal people of British Columbia."

Chief Rod Robinson of the Nisga'a Nation said Mathias was also instrumental in the Nisga'a Nation's struggle to sign the first modern-day treaty in 1998.

"Some day when the history of the First Nations' struggles for equality will be written, his name will be very prominent," said Robinson.

Grant-John said Mathias was a unique and multi-talented individual who was a great orator.

"There will never be another Joe Mathias. His shoes will never be filled."

She said that despite his accomplishments, Mathias never forgot his roots or the poverty he grew up in.

"For all his strengths, he described himself as a bow-legged Indian from the other side of the tracks."

Mathias is survived by his mother, his wife, a daughter, three brothers and nine sisters.

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