

## VISUAL ARTS

# Gifts of friendship make valuable heirlooms

Exhibition includes gifts given to aboriginal activist Maisie Hurley by the Squamish

BY KEVIN GRIFFIN

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In the late 1940s, when the Squamish Nation was in negotiations over the land that would become present-day Park Royal Shopping Centre, a woman by the name of Maisie Hurley made an important phone call. On the other end of the line was Josephine Charlie, mother of Barbara Charlie.

At the time, the pressure was on the Squamish to sell. But Hurley had another idea.

"Maisie phoned my mother," Charlie recalled, "and said: 'No, No. That will be worth a lot.'"

At first, the chiefs and Squamish Nation council balked at the idea. But in the end, they agreed. The land should be leased. Talk about a smart business deal.

Still generating annual income for the Squamish First Nation, the Park Royal lease is one of 70 the Squamish have on reserve land that, in total, represents less than half of one per cent of its traditional territory. The role Hurley played in the Park Royal negotiations along with numerous other examples of support for aboriginal rights and title didn't go unnoticed by the Squamish or other First Nations groups throughout B.C. They remembered Hurley's activism by giving her gifts — about 190 items that included baskets, moccasins, prints, blankets, wood carvings and masks.

And now, for the first time, items from her collection are in an exhibition at the North Vancouver Museum at Presentation House in North Vancouver.

*Entwined Histories: Gifts from the Maisie Hurley Collection*, focuses on the gifts given to Hurley by the Squamish. The exhibition has opened with a preview that includes several pastel prints that Hurley made in the 1940s of prominent Squamish leaders including Chief August Khat-sahlano (known as Xats'alanexw Siyam) and Madeleine Deighton Williams (whose Squamish name is Kw'exiliya), the widow of Gassy Jack, the unofficial mayor of the community of Granville, which predated Vancouver.

When the exhibition opens fully to the public on Jan. 25, 2011, one of the rare items on display will be a swewkw'elh or chief's blanket. Traditionally worn by high-ranking people among the



The North Vancouver Museum is exhibiting gifts given to the late aboriginal activist Maisie Hurley (right).

Squamish, the blanket was woven from mountain goat and dog hair sometime around 1860. Not only is it rare for Northwest Coast fabrics from the 19th century to have survived into the 21st century, the chief's blanket in the collection is made from the hair of a Salish wool dog, which went extinct around 1880. Immortalized in a painting *A Woman Weaving a Blanket* by Paul Kane, the cute little white dog was bred by the Salish for its fur and kept on islands

or in gated caves.

At a conference marking the opening of the preview, Charlie welcomed everyone to traditional Squamish territory. As an elder, she recalled Hurley's importance, as well as that of her husband Tom, to the Squamish people.

"Maisie Hurley was a really good friend," Charlie said. "We're very appreciative of the advocacy that she and Tom did."

Born in Swansea, Wales, in 1887, Maisie Hurley came to Canada with

her family when she was three. Her father was a mining engineer, and her mother an amateur ethnologist who had an interest in the province's indigenous people. Together, they collected native artifacts, some of which became part of the founding collection at the Museum of Vancouver.

Exposed to the culture of the original inhabitants of B.C., Hurley became an aboriginal activist when First Nations had few allies and were up against a legal

system stacked against them. Up until 1951, for example, the Indian Act made it a crime for any first nations person to hire a lawyer to try to establish aboriginal title.

So Hurley filled the void. In 1944, she became the first woman admitted to the Native Brotherhood, the first broadly based membership organization dedicated to improving the lives of aboriginal people; two years later, she started the *Native Voice*, the country's first native newspaper.

Hurley played an influential role in helping to educate a young lawyer by the name of Tom Berger about aboriginal title. He was also at the conference and talked about Hurley, who died in 1964, and Tom, one of the city's leading criminal lawyers whose office was down the hall from Berger's.

"She was always dressed in black," he said. "She had black beads, black horn-rimmed glasses and a black cane. She was a formidable lady."

After forming a close relationship with the couple, Berger went on to a legal career that specialized in defending the rights of the country's aboriginal people. A retired Supreme Court of B.C. judge, Berger is probably best known for recommending to the federal government to reject the Arctic gas pipeline proposal as Commissioner of the Mackenzie Valley Pipeline Inquiry in 1974.

Berger said Hurley played an important role in educating the public about aboriginal title.

"Don't get me wrong," he said. "First nations people understood that they had aboriginal title. It was a concept that the general public had to be educated about and entrenched in law. First nations needed friends — and Maisie Hurley was one of their best."

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## At a glance

### ENTWINED HISTORIES: GIFTS FROM THE MAISIE HURLEY COLLECTION

**When:** Preview open now; full exhibition opens on Jan. 25, 2011; Tuesday to Sunday, 12 noon to 5 p.m.

**Where:** North Vancouver Museum, 209 West Fourth St.

**Cost:** Free