The story of the Coast Salish knitters

by Robie Liscomb

Long before outdoor wear made of Gore-Tex or polar fleece there were Cowichan sweaters — warm, waterproof and long-lasting. For nearly a century, the Coast Salish women of southern Vancouver Island have produced these distinctively patterned, hand-knit sweaters. Prime ministers, presidents and royalty have worn them, but until now little has been told about the extraordinary Aboriginal women who make them.

Their story is now the subject of a one-hour film by Métis writer/director and UVic women’s studies professor Christine Welsh and her company, Prairie Girl Films.

“The Story of the Coast Salish Knitters” weaves together rare archival footage and interviews with three generations of Cowichan, Penelakut and Tsartlip women, telling an inspiring tale of artistry, courage, and cultural transformation.

Long before the arrival of Europeans, Coast Salish people had a strong tradition of weaving. The women wove blankets using the hair of small dogs mixed with mountain goat wool traded from the mainland. These blankets represented cultural esteem and were the main form of currency in the Coast Salish economy, used for trade and ceremonial purposes.

With the arrival of European settlers, Coast Salish women learned knitting and adapted this skill to create something distinctively their own — the Cowichan sweater.

They created their knit patterns without the use of dyes, using natural black, brown and white wool from sheep brought by the Europeans.

Each Cowichan sweater is unique, incorporating designs — animals, birds, sea creatures and geometric shapes — that have been passed down from mother to daughter.

Making the sweaters by hand involves much difficult work before knitting even begins. First, the women wash the wool by hand in boiling water so that it is clean which makes the wool water-resistant. Then they clean and tease the wool and card it, combing it in one direction to ready it for the next step — spinning into yarn.

Like the blankets before them, the sweaters these women knit have had great economic importance for the Coast Salish. In the film, women speak of staying up all night knitting a sweater so they would have money to buy groceries the next day.

“There’s a common perception that the people of the West Coast lived by logging and fishing in the first half of the twentieth century. That was certainly my perception,” says Welsh. “I had no idea of this hidden economy... that the Coast Salish women knit to put food on the table, to keep their families alive.”

Over the decades, Coast Salish knitters have struggled with unscrupulous buyers offering low prices, with fluctuating supply and demand, and with increasing competition from imitations and the use of new high-tech fabrics. However, throughout the past century, Coast Salish women have continued producing these useful and beautiful garments — a symbol of their extraordinary resourcefulness, creativity and adaptability.

Film born of UVic master’s thesis

“I tell these stories because I think Aboriginal women in their public and private lives do so many extraordinary things that are largely unrecognized. As people, we need these stories. They show us the way, they inspire us, they feed us.”

— UVic film maker Christine Welsh

FACTS FROM THE EDGE

Christine Welsh makes films about Aboriginal women. In addition to “The Story of the Coast Salish Knitters,” her films include:

- “Women in the Shadows,” an award-winning documentary about the search for her Métis grandmother.
- “Keepers of the Fire,” an award-winning tribute to the little known and courageous Aboriginal women played in the conflicts at Oka, Léyi Island and elsewhere during the 1970s and 1980s.
- “Kuper Island: Return to the Survivors” is the story of the survivors of the Kuper Island Indian Residential School.
- “The Story of the Coast Salish Knitters” was produced by Prairie Girl Films Inc. in co-production with the National Film Board of Canada (NFB), which distributes the film. It is available for home video use. Further information is available at the NFB Web site http://www.nfb.ca.

A version of Welsh’s documentary about the knitters of the Cowichan sweaters has been produced in the Coast Salish language Hulqumi’num’, with English subtitles. It is believed to be the first full-length film in that language.