



## The story of the Coast Salish knitters



May and Josie Sam of the Tsartlip Band wash wool in preparation for making a Cowichan sweater. (Sylvia Olsen photo)

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 theirs — 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 yet retains the natural lanolin 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.

**"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 one-hour documentary about the search for her Métis grandmothers; "Keepers of the Fire," an award-winning tribute to the little known and courageous role Aboriginal women played in the conflicts at Oka, Lyell Island and elsewhere during the 1970s and '80s; "Kuper Island: Return to the Healing Circle," 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.

### ON THE EDGE OF YOUR SEAT

**"Aesthetic Appreciation of Nature & the Relevance of Stories"**  
Dr. Thomas Heyd, UVic Centre for Studies in Religion & Society  
August 23, 4:00 p.m., David Strong Building (formerly Classroom Building) Room C130  
Dr. Heyd will speak on the relevance of a diversity of approaches to the appreciation of nature, including the stories of Indigenous peoples. Info: 721-6325.

**"The Development of Structure in the Universe"** an illustrated lecture  
Dr. Jeremiah Ostriker, Princeton University  
August 25, 7:30 p.m. University Centre, Farquhar Auditorium.  
Dr. Ostriker is Provost of Princeton University and former director of the Princeton Observatory. He is considered one of the world's leading theoretical astrophysicists and co-authored the first study to advance the theory of "dark matter," now a major topic in cosmology. Free, but limited seating. Info: 721-7700.

## EDGE/WISE Film born of UVic master's thesis

"I originally came to the story of the Coast Salish knitters because of the research of Sylvia Olsen," explains Christine Welsh. The two had worked together on Welsh's previous film, "Kuper Island: Return to the Healing Circle" [see film list in sidebar].

"I married into the Tsartlip Band 28 years ago," says Olsen, "and I owned and operated a small sweater business for 15 years. Then I quit to go to UVic."

When it came time to choose her thesis topic for her UVic master's degree in history, she decided to write about the Coast Salish knitters, to bring their story to light. "It's a story that was hidden away in

the deep recesses of B.C. history," she explains.

"Although my thesis contains a bit more information about the tradition of blanket weaving and the history than the film does, the story I wrote in my thesis and the flow of the film are very much the same," she says

Olsen's research forms the basis of "The Story of the Coast Salish Knitters." She is currently working in management and community development for the Tsartlip Band.

Christine Welsh

(Cathie Ferguson/INFOCUS Photographic)

