

“FROM OUR SIDE  
WE WILL BE GOOD  
NEIGHBOUR[S] TO THEM”:

*Doukhobor–Sinixt Relations at the  
Confluence of the Kootenay and Columbia  
Rivers in the Early Twentieth Century*

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IN THE EARLY TWENTIETH CENTURY, Doukhobor newcomers to the West Kootenay region of British Columbia displaced the last indigenous peoples to live on the fertile lands at the confluence of the Kootenay and Columbia rivers – the Sinixt Christian family.<sup>1</sup> This process enabled the Doukhobors, a Christian utopian sect originating in Russia, to take control of valuable lands that became the focus of their extensive community operations in the region and beyond.<sup>2</sup> But it also led to the dispossession of the indigenous Christian family and its exile from its home, kp’itl’els. For the Doukhobors, the beautiful lands at the confluence of the rivers became known as Brilliant and were an enduring source of hope and consolation for their persecution and suffering elsewhere. For the Christian family, neglected by federal and provincial officials, the experience was one of being fenced in on a small part of its land and having its burial grounds ploughed over as fields and orchards by Doukhobor farmers. In 1919, the remaining family members, Alexander Christian and his daughter Mary, abandoned their home as a result of the Christian utopian “invasion” – a bitter experience

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<sup>1</sup> Rather than “dispossession,” Jean Barman uses the term “unsettling” to describe how a similar process unfolded in the expanding city of Vancouver during the same period covered in this article. See Jean Barman, “Erasing Indigenous Indigeneity in Vancouver,” *BC Studies* 155 (2007): 3–30.

<sup>2</sup> By 1912, just four years after first viewing the West-Kootenay Boundary region as a possible home for his spiritual community, the Doukhobor leader Peter “the Lordly” Verigin purchased 5,665 hectares (fourteen thousand acres) of agricultural and timber land.

never to be forgotten by the family and its descendants.<sup>3</sup> Only in the twenty-first century did the first tentative steps towards reconciliation and historical recognition begin to occur between these groups on the kp'itl'els/Brilliant lands.

Set within the broader context of an unfolding Euro-Canadian settlement frontier in the West Kootenay, we explore government and settler failures to recognize “Native space” in the region,<sup>4</sup> and we document evolving Doukhobor attitudes towards land and indigenous peoples first encountered in the Prairies. We also examine recent efforts at recognition and reconciliation by the Doukhobor Union of Spiritual Communities of Christ with the descendants of the Christian family – a process that may have some significance and offer possibilities for future relations between settler and indigenous cultures throughout the province.

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The Doukhobors, or spirit wrestlers, emigrated from Russia to Canada beginning in 1899 with the support of the Society of Friends (Quakers) and of Leo Tolstoy, who admired their communal, pacifist life concepts. From earliest times of settlement, first on the Canadian Prairies in what is now Saskatchewan and later in the Kootenay region of British Columbia, a continuous thread of contact has joined Doukhobors – who wished to impose their own utopian design upon the landscape – to indigenous peoples, who for millennia occupied a prior cultural space upon the land. This early historical record contains vividly remembered vignettes of Doukhobor relations with First Nations people but does not make clear how much these early prairie settlers understood the indigenous peoples and their world.<sup>5</sup>

<sup>3</sup> Lawney Reyes uses the term “invasion” with regard to the Doukhobor settlement of kp'itl'els, or the Brilliant terrace lands, in his book about the fate of his grandfather Alexander Christian and other Sinixt family members. See Lawney Reyes, *White Grizzly Bear's Legacy: Learning to Be Indian* (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 2002), 35.

<sup>4</sup> Cole Harris, *Making Native Space: Colonialism, Resistance, and Reserves in British Columbia* (Vancouver: UBC Press, 2002). Harris's thinking about displacement of “Native” culture and Native geography – first displacement from the land and then, inevitably, displacement from memory and tradition – by mercantile settler cultures in colonial British Columbia is central to our thinking about Sinixt peoples and Doukhobors in the Kootenays. In essence, the loss of lands through physical removal and enclosure, and the loss of a mental geography that the reserve system entails, becomes a “primal line on the land” (xviii) that defines the history of British Columbia and separates European culture from the Native “other.”

<sup>5</sup> This narrative of contact between utopian Russian settlers and indigenous Plains peoples in what is now Saskatchewan is – from the Doukhobor perspective – a mythic retelling of exodus and homecoming. It is outlined in several accounts and images made over the years, which

Doukhobor migration to the West Kootenay region effectively began in April 1908, when Peter “the Lordly” Verigin, Simeon Reibin, and Nikola Zibarov arrived in Nelson, British Columbia.<sup>6</sup> As is well known, Verigin and his associates were looking for land on which to settle the Doukhobor community after the federal government had seized substantial amounts of the community’s homestead lands on the Prairies. Historians Woodcock and Avakumovic note that Verigin was also concerned about the defection of community members on the Prairies, and the land ownership system in British Columbia appeared to offer the Doukhobor leader a solution to his community’s problems.<sup>7</sup> In British Columbia, Verigin and the Christian Community of Universal Brotherhood could securely own the land, which would give the leadership greater control over the community. Verigin also found it appealing that the province’s landholding system did not require his followers to compromise their beliefs by swearing an oath of earthly allegiance to the government. Finally, as Doukhobor historian Eli Popoff points out, this exodus and loss of thousands of hectares of rich prairie growing lands became part of the people’s ongoing search, in Russia and now in Canada, for a new utopian home, a physical space where the “Kingdom of God” might be made manifest, the millenarian dream of spiritual truth given physical form on earth.<sup>8</sup> With this goal – perhaps equal parts spiritual vision and material desire for fertile land – these people of exile headed west once more, this time to the narrow mountain valleys of the Kootenay and Columbia rivers.

By the end of the 1908 trip, Verigin had purchased 1,133 hectares (twenty-eight hundred acres) on the east bank of the Columbia River across from present-day Castlegar and another 1,092 hectares across the mountains on the outskirts of Grand Forks.<sup>9</sup> Verigin reported to his followers that the isolated mountainous region was “an ideal place to build a brotherhood.”<sup>10</sup> As time went on, Verigin and the Christian Community of Universal Brotherhood continued to purchase land in the region so that by the time of his death, in 1924, the Doukhobors owned over 8,498 hectares of land in the West Kootenay and Boundary

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reveal Doukhobor newcomers engaging in a rich variety of interaction and relationship with indigenous Plains people themselves adapting to an expanding European settlement frontier.

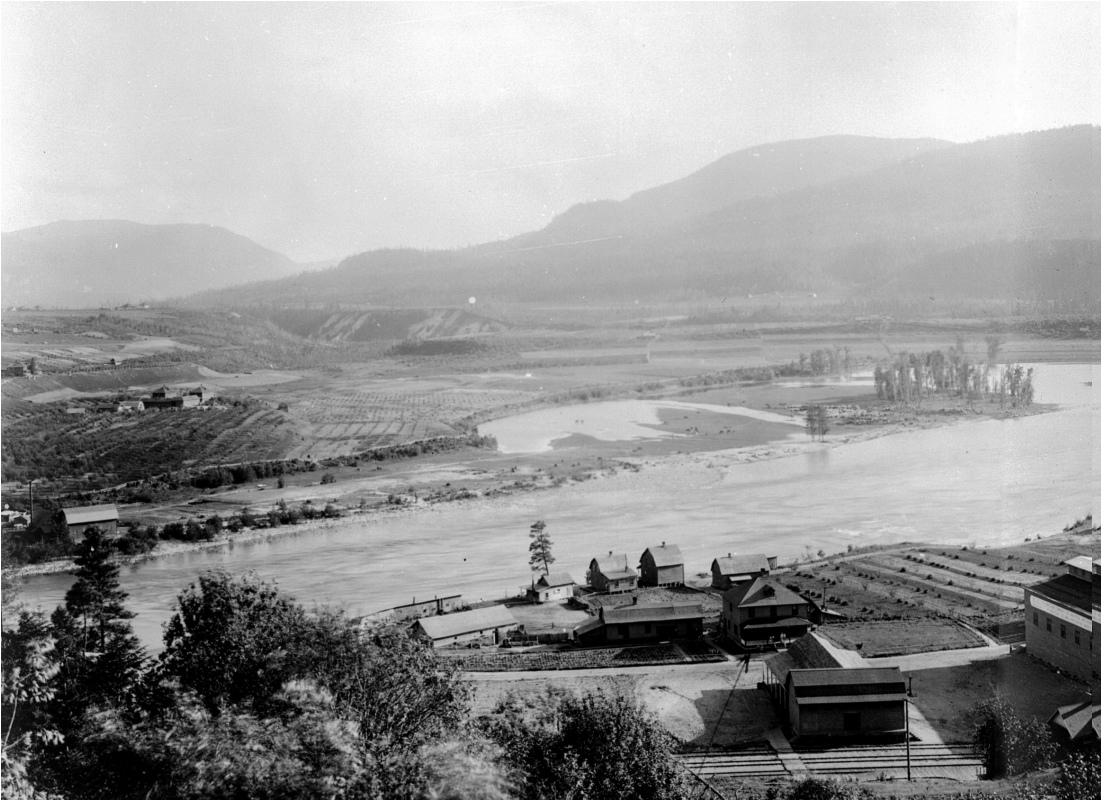
<sup>6</sup> Koozma J. Tarasoff, *Plakun Trava: The Doukhobors* (Grand Forks, BC: Mir Publication Society, 1982), 99.

<sup>7</sup> George Woodcock and Ivan Avakumovic, *The Doukhobors* (Toronto: Oxford, 1968), 227.

<sup>8</sup> *Ibid.*, 17–34. See also Eli A. Popoff, *Historical Exposition on Doukhobor Beliefs*, 2nd enlarged ed. (Grand Forks, BC: Pop Press, 1982), pt. 3.

<sup>9</sup> Woodcock and Avakumovic, *Doukhobors*, 228.

<sup>10</sup> Tarasoff, *Plakun Trava*, 102.



Figures 1 and 2. Composite image of kp'itl'els/Brilliant confluence lands, circa 1924. Doukhobor communal homes and last First Nations Sinixt village are located nearest the confluence of the Kootenay and Columbia rivers in distance. A site of human habitation into deep historic time – a combination of abundant water, southern exposure, and rich grassland attracted first indigenous peoples and then the Doukhobor community in search of its own dream of utopian consolation.

districts. In the meantime, five thousand Doukhobor settlers arrived on the lands to begin the intensive cultivation of fruits and vegetables and to work in other industries that would support themselves and the broader community, which now stretched from Saskatchewan to the Boundary District of British Columbia.<sup>11</sup> As many commentators have pointed out, these years that saw the Christian utopian community “blossom” in British Columbia under Peter Verigin’s leadership were also fraught with back-breaking labour, austerity, concern over debt, and continuing hostility from the established Euro-Canadian settler community and the provincial government. The ongoing struggle and strategies for

<sup>11</sup> Woodcock and Avakumovic, *Doukhobors*, 228-29.



Taken together the two linked images give a panoramic view of Brilliant/kp'itl'els at the height of Doukhobor communal operations. Alexander Christian and his daughter had left the region several years earlier. *Source:* Composite of BC Archives Images No. A-08737 and A-08913. Courtesy of Royal British Columbia Museum, BC Archives.

survival had an impact on the nature of the developing Doukhobor community. They also may have influenced the community response to the indigenous peoples who occupied the lands it had purchased.

By 1912, as part of the ongoing effort to build the economic base of the community, Peter Verigin had purchased almost 68 hectares at the confluence of the Kootenay and Columbia rivers from the estate of John Carmichael Haynes.<sup>12</sup> These lands, which Verigin named “Brilliant”

<sup>12</sup> A. Megraw, Inspector of Indian Agencies, Vernon, BC, to J.D. McLean, Assistant Deputy and Secretary, Department of Indian Affairs, Ottawa, 24 July 1915, Library and Archives Canada (hereafter LAC), RG 10, vol. 4047. Megraw's investigation found that John Carmichael Haynes had received a Crown grant of 80 hectares in December 1884 on the north bank of the mouth of the Kootenay River as part of Lot 9, Group 1, of the Kaslo Assessment District.

after the sparkling waters of the Kootenay River, became the heart of the Christian Community of Universal Brotherhood business operations in the West Kootenay District. They were also lands that had been continuously used by indigenous peoples for fishing, farming, pasturing horses, burial grounds, and as a home base to engage in wide-ranging hunting and gathering activities throughout the region.<sup>13</sup> In 1912, the Sinixt Christian family had lived on the lands at the confluence of the Kootenay and Columbia rivers for at least several generations. In 1914, Alexander Christian stated to the Royal Commission on Indian Affairs in the Province of British Columbia (the McKenna-McBride Commission) about his land at the confluence of these rivers: “I was born there, and have made that place my head quarters during my entire life. Also my ancestors have belonged to there as far back as I can trace. Both my parents were born there and three of my grandparents.”<sup>14</sup>

The Christians are the best known Sinixt family in the West Kootenay region. We know something of them because they attracted attention as one of the last Sinixt families to live in the region before the federal government declared the Arrow Lakes Band extinct in 1956. One of the family leaders, Alexander Christian, was also an outspoken defender of his family’s rights. Well known to early Euro-Canadian settlers, he was often referred to as “Indian Alex” and “Alex the Indian.”<sup>15</sup> Christian also attracted the attention and support of the early anthropologist James Teit, who visited the family at kp’it’el’s at least twice, wrote about it, and intervened on its behalf with the federal government. Finally, Alexander Christian’s grandson, Lawney Reyes, became an important artist and writer in Washington State and recorded and commemorated the lives of his mother and grandfather at the confluence of the Kootenay and Columbia rivers.<sup>16</sup>

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In 1912, the Doukhobors purchased just over 67 hectares of the lot from the Haynes estate. The remainder of the land was part of the right-of-way of the Columbia and Kootenay Railway. See also Randy Bouchard and Dorothy Kennedy, *First Nations Ethnography and Ethnohistory in British Columbia’s Lower Kootenay/Columbia Hydropower Region* (Castlegar: Columbia Power Corporation, 2000), 127.

<sup>13</sup> R.L.T. Galbraith, Indian Agent, Fort Steele, BC, to A.W. Vowell, Indian Superintendent, Victoria, BC, 25 January 1910; Bouchard and Kennedy, *First Nations Ethnography*, 108–22.

<sup>14</sup> “Statement of Alexander Christie to the Royal Commission on Indian Affairs in the Province of British Columbia”, 25 June 1914, LAC, RG 10, vol. 4047; Bouchard and Kennedy, *First Nations Ethnography*, 116.

<sup>15</sup> Reyes, *White Grizzly Bear’s Legacy*, 35–37.

<sup>16</sup> See Reyes, *White Grizzly Bear’s Legacy*; Lawney Reyes, *Bernie Whitebear: An Urban Indian’s Quest for Justice* (Tucson: University of Arizona Press, 2006); Lawney Reyes, *B Street: A Gathering of Saints and Sinners* (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 2008).

From Teit and others, we know that the members of the extended Christian family at kp'itl'els adapted as best as they could to the changes brought by rapidly expanding European settlement in the Kootenay District in the early twentieth century.<sup>17</sup> Like many European settlers, including the Doukhobors, the Christians had cleared land, laid out fruit trees, kept horses, and maintained a small fenced garden at kp'itl'els. They built two houses and two or three sheds out of lumber. The Christians earned money through the sale of meat, berries, fish, and birds to local settlers and merchants.<sup>18</sup> In 1912, on Teit's second visit to kp'itl'els, he noted that, in addition to selling goods to settlers, members of the family also earned money by working for wages in the woods and in railway construction.<sup>19</sup> The Christians also followed their traditional round of fishing, hunting, and gathering, although this was becoming more difficult as European settlers took increasing control of the land and resources of the region. Alexander Christian was especially known as a hunter in the region. Among the Sinixt, Christian was known and respected as White Grizzly Bear – *Pic Ah Kelowna* – due to his skill as a bear hunter and his affinity with the rare white grizzly bear.<sup>20</sup> Frank Webster, a Robson pioneer who knew Alexander Christian well, remembered him hunting Canada geese on a sandbar, just above where the Hugh Keenleyside Dam is today, and fishing with a hand line from

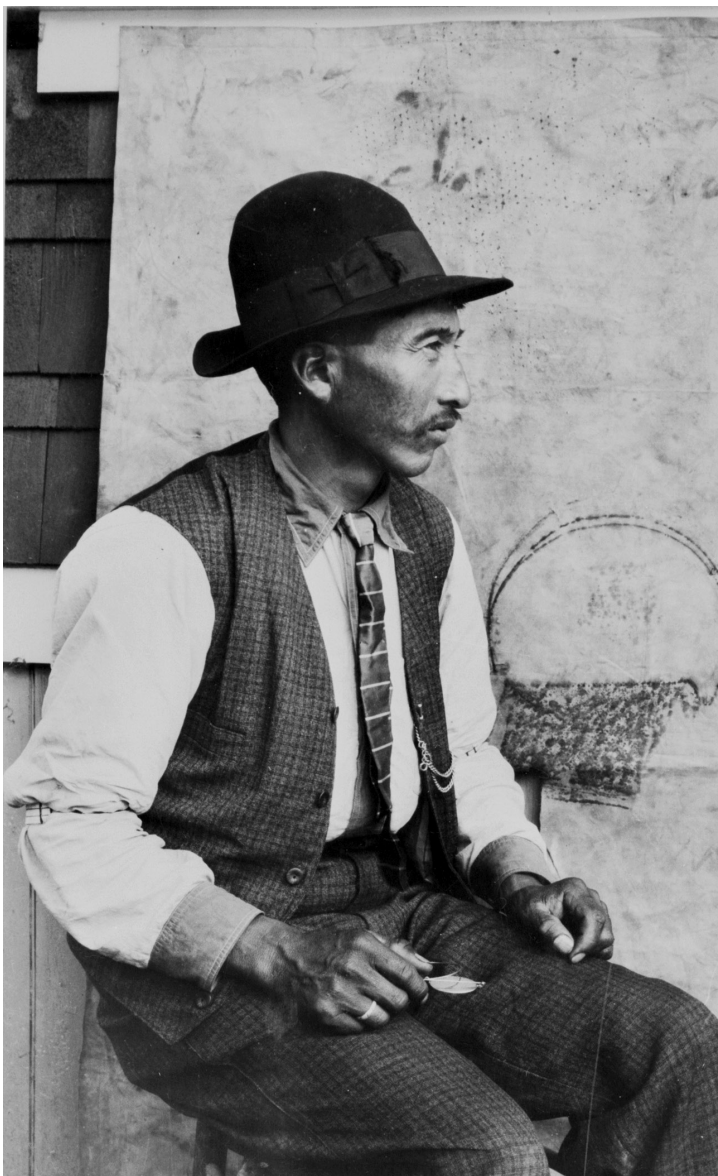
<sup>17</sup> Beginning in the 1880s, a hard-rock mining frontier had led to a rapid influx of miners and other settlers to the West Kootenay, along with large numbers of migrant labourers who worked on the construction of railway lines. In the 1890s, after the completion of the Canadian Pacific Railway's Crownst Pass line from Lethbridge through the Rockies into southern British Columbia, the region's population expanded further as promoters marketed Kootenay lands for fruit growing. The migration of the Doukhobors to the West Kootenay was part of this wave of fruit-growing settlers. In 1891, the West Kootenay's population was 2,185; by 1911, it had risen dramatically to 28,373. See Jean Barman, *The West beyond the West: A History of British Columbia* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1991), Table 14. For the broader history of the West Kootenay region during this era, see Cole Harris, "Industry and the Good Life around Idaho Peak," in *The Resettlement of British Columbia* (Vancouver: UBC Press, 1997), 194–218; Jeremy Mouat, *Roaring Days: Rossland's Mines and the History of British Columbia* (Vancouver: UBC Press, 1995); Paul Phillips, *No Power Greater: A Century of Labour in British Columbia* (Vancouver: BC Federation of Labour, 1967), chap. 3; Joan Lang, *Lost Orchards: Vanishing Fruit Farms of the West Kootenays* (Nelson: Joan Lang, 2003).

The impact of the rapid growth of the settler population on First Nations peoples and their land in British Columbia after the 1880s has been written about extensively. Along with the works of Cole Harris, for the southern interior, see Duane Thomson, "The Response of Okanagan Indians to European Settlement," *BC Studies* 101 (1994): 96–117; a recent example is Patricia Roy, "McBride of McKenna-McBride: Premier Richard McBride and the Indian Question in British Columbia," *BC Studies* 172 (2011–12): 35–76.

<sup>18</sup> Bouchard and Kennedy, *First Nations Ethnography*, 115–19.

<sup>19</sup> *Ibid.*, 118. For the broader history of the wage labour of indigenous peoples in British Columbia during this period, see John Sutton Lutz, *Makúk: A New History of Aboriginal-White Relations* (Vancouver: UBC Press, 2008), chap. 6.

<sup>20</sup> Reyes, *White Grizzly Bear's Legacy*, 32–33.



Figures 3 and 4. Alexander Christian (*Pic Ab Kelowna*, or White Grizzly), 1914. His family was the last Sinixt group to live at *kp'itl'els* – now Brilliant – up to the time of Doukhobor settlement in 1912. These photographs are part of a remarkable series taken by anthropologist James Teit, which reveals both the researcher's ethnographic intent and the unique humanity of Alexander Christian himself. Note placement of spectacles (Christian was reportedly blind in one eye), his personal jewellery, period clothing – including felt hat – as well as what appears to be a tanned hide photographic





background attached to a shingled house. *Source:* Alexander Christian (S.naitcEkstEx), a member of the Emux tribe, Okanagan Culture, British Columbia, Canadian Museum of Civilization, James Teit, 26617 and 26619. (Teit's cultural identification of the Sinixt set in train a debate that continues to this day. Scholars have discussed the identification of the Sinixt as part of the Okanagan Culture. For example, see Pryce, 'Keeping the Lakes' Way,' 29-30; Bouchard and Kennedy, *First Nations Ethnography*, 6-9.)

a sturgeon-nosed canoe.<sup>21</sup> In all the accounts, Alexander Christian is described as friendly and generous with whatever he caught or killed.

Yet adaptation to the settler regime posed massive problems for the Christian family. From the eighteenth century on, the Europeans brought new diseases, increased violence, and a strong desire for Aboriginal land in the region.<sup>22</sup> Anthropologist Mark Mealing speculates that the large burial grounds at Brilliant/kp'it'l'els had their origins in early European-introduced epidemics.<sup>23</sup> Into the twentieth century the Christian family at the confluence of the Kootenay and Columbia rivers suffered from poverty and disease as European settlement expanded.<sup>24</sup> Alexander Christian's wife, Teresa, died young of pneumonia. And only one of Alexander and Teresa's four children, Mary, survived into adulthood.<sup>25</sup> Finally, Alexander Christian's sister, Marianne, also died tragically. In March 1911, Alexander found Marianne dead in a snow bank near the Christian family home in kp'it'l'els. Alexander suspected that his sister had been murdered, but the police and coroner concluded that she had died from exposure after falling down the bank while suffering from a high fever.<sup>26</sup> Lawney Reyes, Alexander Christian's

<sup>21</sup> Bouchard and Kennedy, *First Nations Ethnography*, 107-8.

<sup>22</sup> Paula Pryce, 'Keeping the Lakes' Way: Reburial and the Re-Creation of a Moral World among an Invisible People (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1999), 40-41. See also Cole Harris, "Voices of Smallpox around the Straight of Georgia," in his *Resettlement of British Columbia: Essays on Colonization and Geographical Change* (Vancouver: UBC Press, 1997), 3-30.

<sup>23</sup> Mark Mealing, personal communication, Selkirk College, April 2007. Dr. Mealing taught anthropology for many years at Selkirk College.

<sup>24</sup> These difficult conditions likely affected all First Nations peoples in the region during this period of expanding Euro-Canadian settlement. In his testimony to the McKenna-McBride Commission on Indian Affairs in British Columbia, Indian Agent R.L.T. Galbraith reported that the first time he became aware of the First Nations group at the mouth of the Kootenay River was when the provincial police notified him of "a body of an old Indian on the railway track near Castlegar." Without elaborating, the commission added that "this Indian [had] evidently died through destitution." During the course of his investigation of the death, Galbraith discovered the Christian family living across the Columbia River from Castlegar. See "Examination of Agent R.L.T. Galbraith," LAC, RG 10, vol. 4047, file 356.

<sup>25</sup> Reyes, *White Grizzly Bear's Legacy*, 36.

<sup>26</sup> *Nelson Daily News*, 3 and 4 March 1911; *Trail News*, 4 March 1911. Alexander Christian's suspicions came from his discovery of the footprints of a man's rubber boots along with Marianne's footprints at the top of the bank, where he found her partially dressed body in the snow. According to Christian, the man's footprints came as far as the top of the bank and then headed back towards Castlegar. Provincial police officer J.D. Wrightman, who investigated Marianne's death, followed her tracks from Castlegar and reported that he found no sign of tracks other than those of Alexander and Marianne. Subsequently, Alexander Christian was not able to find the tracks that he had seen earlier. John T. Peck, the chief provincial constable; Constable Wrightman; and the coroner, Dr. Gilbert Hartin, agreed that Marianne likely fell backwards down the bank as a result of her fevered condition. The government officials concluded that she had taken off some of her clothes as a result of the fever. They noted that her clothes were not torn, and Dr. Harkin found no "mark or blood [on her body] which would lead to a theory that death was a result of foul play." For a current Sinixt view

grandson, reports that Marianne Christian, Teresa Bernard Christian, and Teresa's three children – Louis, George, and Julia (who died young) – were all buried in the Christian family burial ground at kp'itl'els.<sup>27</sup>

As Euro-Canadian settlement expanded, a fundamental problem for the Christian family involved securing legal protection for its home at kp'itl'els. A distressing multi-generational series of mistakes and miscommunications prevented this from happening. In 1861, W.G. Cox, the magistrate and gold commissioner for the region, had set aside the land at the north point of the mouth of the Kootenay River as an Indian reserve. He posted notices on the ground declaring it was Indian land but never legally registered the site with the provincial government.<sup>28</sup> As a result, in 1865 Edgar Dewdney, who was travelling through the region examining possible routes for a pack trail to the goldfields at Wild Horse Creek, designated the same land as a townsite. In the early 1880s, another government official and rancher, John Carmichael Haynes, was able to purchase District Lot 9, Group 1, of the Kootenay Land District, which included kp'itl'els. Haynes intended to create the town of "Haynesville" on the site, but he died in 1888 before any development took place.<sup>29</sup> In the meantime, the Christian family continued to live at

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of the death of Marianne Christian, see Marilyn James, "Being on the Land: Afterthoughts," in *Being on the Land: Histories at the Confluence*, ed. Myler Wilkinson and Duff Sutherland (Castlegar: Mir Centre for Peace, 2007), 24-26.

<sup>27</sup> Reyes, *White Grizzly Bear's Legacy*, 36. Reyes reports that Alexander Christian's parents, Antoinette and Christian, along with one of their sons, St. Peter Christian, were also buried in the Christian family plot at Brilliant.

<sup>28</sup> Bouchard and Kennedy, *First Nations Ethnography*, 122-23. For the broader history of Cox's efforts to establish reserves in the interior of British Columbia, see Harris, *Making Native Space*, chaps. 2-3; see also Duane Thomson, "Opportunity Lost: A History of Okanagan Indian Reserves in the Colonial Period," *Okanagan Historical Society Report* 42 (1978): 43-52.

<sup>29</sup> Haynes was an important settler and powerful government official in the southern interior of British Columbia in the generation after the gold rushes of the 1850s and 1860s. He left Ireland for British Columbia in 1858. By 1860, he was serving as a deputy to W.G. Cox at Rock Creek and went on to serve as justice of the peace and assistant gold commissioner at Wild Horse Creek during the gold rush of the early 1860s in the Kootenay District. In 1865, he spent the winter at Fort Shepherd on the Columbia, apparently as a customs collector. Fort Shepherd was located very near the present city of Trail. Here, he likely met Edgar Dewdney and became aware of the land about twenty kilometres upriver at the mouth of the Kootenay River. In later years, "Paddy" Haynes returned to the Okanagan, where he resumed the duties of justice of the peace and his employment in the federal customs department. He also acquired over 8,093 hectares for cattle ranching and became known as "the Cattle-King of the South Okanagan." As a government official in the Okanagan, Haynes strongly supported the expansion of the European settlement frontier and famously used his considerable powers to reduce reserves in favour of settlers. See Margaret Ormsby, "John Carmichael Haynes," in *Dictionary of Canadian Biography*, vol. 11 (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1982), 394-95. For Haynes's reduction of reserves in the Okanagan, see Thomson, "Lost Opportunities."

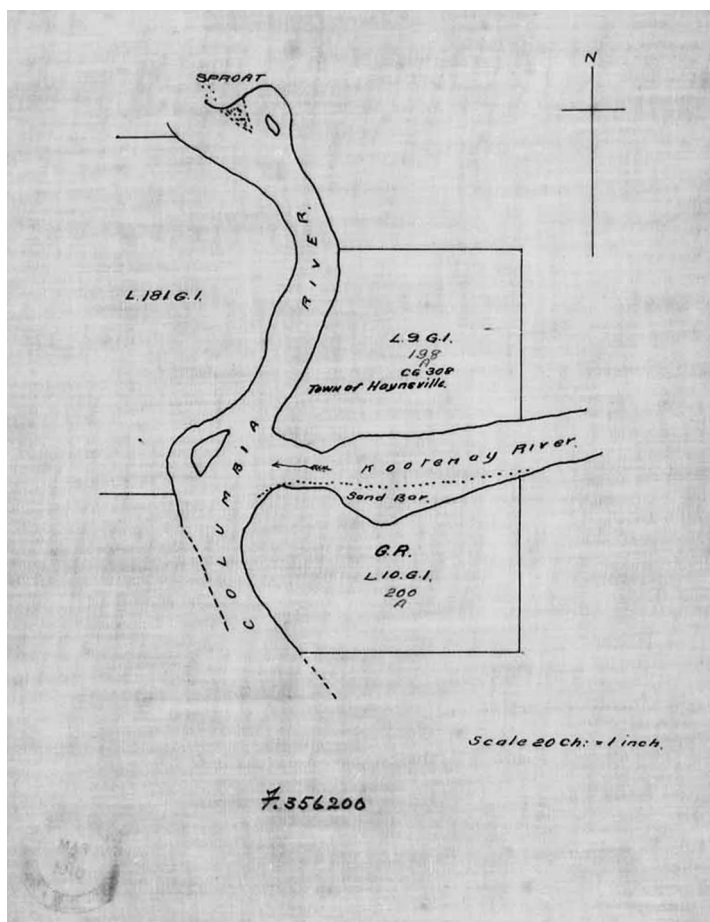


Figure 5. Map of the mouth of the Kootenay River, showing Lot 9, Group 1, including the proposed location of “Haynesville” in the 1880s. This was the location of kp’itl’els, home to the Sinixt Christian family. Peter “the Lordly” Verigin purchased the lot on behalf of the Doukhobors in 1912 from the estate of John Carmichael Haynes. *Source:* Library and Archives Canada, RG 10, vol. 4047, file 356.

kp’itl’els and began a long struggle to have the land officially designated as an Indian reserve.<sup>30</sup>

In 1902, a reserve was finally established at Oatscott on the Arrow Lakes across from the small town of Burton, south of Nakusp. The local Indian agent, R.L.T. Galbraith, knew Baptiste Christian – a respected elder of the family – and expected him to move the family from kp’itl’els

<sup>30</sup> Bouchard and Kennedy, *First Nations Ethnography*, 122–23.

to the newly formed government reserve at Oatscott. Baptiste Christian refused to go to Oatscott because the land was poor and he had no strong personal connections there. In the long run, Baptiste Christian moved with his wife and children to Marcus, Washington, where his wife, a “Colville Indian,” had come from and where his family could obtain some land.<sup>31</sup>

Alexander Christian stayed on with the rest of his family and continued the struggle to gain legal recognition for his home at kp’itl’els. Galbraith told the McKenna-McBride Commission that he tried to get the Haynes estate to sell 4 hectares for an Indian reserve. However, before he was able to complete the deal, he found that the provincial government had allowed the Haynes estate to sell the land to the leader of the Doukhobors, Peter Verigin, in 1912. Lawney Reyes noted that the Christian family members were shocked when they learned that this had happened. As Reyes puts it, “the Christian family could not understand how the land they had occupied for generations could be bought from under them without their knowledge or consent.”<sup>32</sup>

This leads us to the difficult relationship between the Christian family and the Doukhobors. In 1912, Alexander Christian contacted James Teit to seek his help because John W. Sherbinin, the agent for the Doukhobors, had told the Christian family that it had three weeks to move off the land.<sup>33</sup>

Teit wrote to the Department of Indian Affairs (DIA) in Ottawa on behalf of the Christians, stating: “this sacred ground . . . should be made secure [for the Christian family].”<sup>34</sup> In response, the DIA instructed Galbraith to ensure that the Christian family was not disturbed on its land and to approach the Doukhobors to purchase land from them for a small Indian reserve.<sup>35</sup> In September 1912, Sherbinin responded:

<sup>31</sup> Ibid., 121, 124. For background on the Oatscott Reserve, see “Examination of Agent R.L.T. Galbraith,” LAC, RG 10, vol. 4047, file 356. Galbraith testified that he had recommended that the government create the Oatscott Reserve after he found a “small Band under an Indian by the name of Joseph – he having originally come from the Shuswap country,” living in two or three houses near Burton on the Arrow Lakes. Galbraith reported that he had trouble finding land for the reserve, which was eventually located across the lake from Burton. Galbraith added that the 103 hectares eventually included in the reserve “[were] of very indifferent quality.” At the time, he was also aware that the Christian family constituted a separate group living on the Kootenay River near West Robson.

<sup>32</sup> Reyes, *White Grizzly Bear’s Legacy*, 35.

<sup>33</sup> Bouchard and Kennedy, *First Nations Ethnography*, 127.

<sup>34</sup> For more information on Teit’s “activist anthropology” during this period in British Columbia, see Wendy Wickwire, “We Shall Drink from the Stream and So Shall You: James A. Teit and the Native Resistance in British Columbia, 1908–22,” *Canadian Historical Review* 79 (1998): 199–236.

<sup>35</sup> Bouchard and Kennedy, *First Nations Ethnography*, 128–29.



Figure 6. Walter O. Miller (foreground), CPR Divisional Superintendent based in Nelson, with John Sherbinin and Peter “Lordly” Vasilyevich Verigin, circa 1914. As the Christian Community of Universal Brotherhood grew in British Columbia, Sherbinin acted as a business agent and worked closely with the spiritual leader Peter Verigin. It was Sherbinin who wrote the controversial 1912 letter on behalf of the Doukhobor community, refusing to sell any lands for a reserve at the confluence of the Kootenay and Columbia rivers but saying that the Sinixt might stay if they would “be have” themselves. *Source:* BC Archives Image No. D-01928. Courtesy of Royal British Columbia Museum, BC Archives.

I have took this matter [up] with Mr. Verigin and Society, and they do not wish to sell 5 or 10 acres to the Government for Indians. But they are willing so as Indians can stay on the same spot, where they have been staing [sic] for years, we will not mind if they will have garden two or three acres, as they wish, longer [sic] as they will be have himself, and from our side we will be good neighbour to them.<sup>36</sup>

Despite this assurance, the Christians came to feel that the Doukhobors were harassing them so that they would leave. Alexander Christian informed Teit that the Doukhobors told him to leave, took his possessions when he was away, and ploughed up his cleared land and the land over gravesites.<sup>37</sup> Christian's 1914 statement to the McKenna-McBride Commission also expresses his anger at what he saw as harassment by the Doukhobors and their ploughing up of burial grounds. He noted that several graveyards near the family houses had wooden sticks and crosses, as well as stones, to mark the graves. He alleged that some of these graveyards had been ploughed over by the Doukhobors. He stated:

A woman who is a native of the mouth of the Kootenay River came up from Eastern Washington two years ago [and] erected new sticks and laid new stones around one of the graveyards and some of the graves. These and the other graves are now plowed over and no trace of the sticks and stones remain. Billy Hughes, an Englishman from Trail, BC, who comes up the Kootenay river to fish and whom I have known for eighteen years was very sorry when he saw the graves of my people plowed over. He said this is a bad business. There is a law against the despoiling of graves – the Doukhobors ought to be prosecuted.<sup>38</sup>

Galbraith himself noted that, by 1914, the Doukhobors had fenced in the Christians on about .8 hectares of land. The fencing around the Christian plot was so tight that the family could only gain access to its home from the water.<sup>39</sup> Lawney Reyes reports that the fencing took place in August 1913, when the family was away picking huckleberries on Red Mountain.<sup>40</sup> In his 1914 statement, Alexander Christian expressed his disappointment at all that had happened to his family:

<sup>36</sup> J.W. Sherbinin to R.L.T. Galbraith, 7 September, 1912, LAC, RG 10, vol. 4047, file 356.

<sup>37</sup> Bouchard and Kennedy, *First Nations Ethnography*, 130-31.

<sup>38</sup> "Statement of Alexander Christie to the Royal Commission on Indian Affairs in the Province of British Columbia," 25 June 1914, LAC, RG 10, vol. 4047, file 356, 200-1. See also Pryce, *Keeping the Lakes' Way*, 67.

<sup>39</sup> Bouchard and Kennedy, *First Nations Ethnography*, 130-31.

<sup>40</sup> Reyes, *White Grizzly Bear's Legacy*, 34.

[The Doukhobors] offered to pay me small sums for our houses and improvements but I refused to sell. Our Indian Agent ... advised me to settle with the Doukhobors and leave the place. He said I should go to Burton City and settle there ... I refused ... I want to stay in the home that I have always been and want ... a piece of land made secure for me there.<sup>41</sup>

Rather than memories of positive relations with indigenous peoples on the Prairies and the Caucasus, the difficult reality of rebuilding a Christian utopian community in the narrow valley bottoms of the Kootenay District appears to have affected the response of the Doukhobors and their leaders to the Christian family. Woodcock and Avakumovic point out that, by 1912, Peter Verigin was responsible for the survival of a community of five thousand followers in the Kootenay and Boundary districts.<sup>42</sup> His plan was to create successful commercial enterprises to support the community, which eventually included orchards, sawmills, a brickworks, a jam factory, and a substantial honey-making operation. Verigin financed these operations (as well as purchasing land, equipment, and machinery, and moving people to the Kootenay District) through heavy borrowing – debts that were to be paid off by Doukhobor men and boys working for wages outside the community and through savings generated through austere living in the community villages.<sup>43</sup> One of the outcomes of this financial strategy was the emergence of a managerial group within the community that included a general manager and a secretary-treasurer in Brilliant and branch managers in the outlying areas, including managers who were responsible for the largest commercial enterprises.<sup>44</sup> We can speculate that these men, among them John Sherbinin, were under pressure to have their operations succeed in an often hostile environment and were reluctant to allow the Christian family to use valuable Doukhobor community farmland at Brilliant. They must also have remembered their recent loss of lands on the Prairies, which had threatened the viability of the Doukhobor community there and had led directly to their move to the Kootenays.

At the same time, community development and expansion meant hardship for Doukhobors in the villages. Men and boys were expected to return all wages that they earned to the community, and villages

<sup>41</sup> "Statement of Alexander Christie."

<sup>42</sup> Woodcock and Avakumovic, *Doukhobors*, 229.

<sup>43</sup> *Ibid.*, 229–32.

<sup>44</sup> *Ibid.*, 232.



were expected to survive as much as possible on the products of their lands, with all surpluses being returned to the community for sale. Koozma Tarasoff records that during this period, which included the First World War, “people went hungry, children became bloated, and bread was rationed.”<sup>45</sup> Six villages with perhaps three to four hundred Doukhobor villagers occupied the relatively small terrace where kp’itl’els was also situated. One village – commonly known by the family name “Trubestskoff” – was situated within a few metres of the Christian family buildings. The six villages on the tiny Brilliant terrace – kp’itl’els – provided all the incentive the Doukhobors needed to take control of, and intensively cultivate, the Christian lands. As in other parts of British Columbia, where there was limited agricultural land, settler cultures allowed little room for Aboriginal peoples.

In 1915, the McKenna-McBride Commission, which commentators have pointed out favoured the expansion of Euro-Canadian settlement in British Columbia and a final settlement to the province’s “Indian Land Question,” decided that it had no power over the land that had been legally sold to the Doukhobors.<sup>46</sup> The commission did believe that the Christian family had been wronged and sent information to the federal government for action. Federal officials considered legal action based on a prior Aboriginal claim to the land to force the Doukhobors to sell some of it for the Christian family. However, the Indian agency inspector, A. Megraw, who investigated the issue, was not sympathetic to the Christian family. He thought that the Christians were American interlopers looking for money and told Alexander Christian to go and live at Oatscott. At the same time, Megraw disputed Christian’s allegations that the Doukhobors had despoiled burial grounds and recommended that the DIA take no further action to obtain land for an



Figure 7. Formal portrait of Peter V. Verigin at the height of his leadership of the Doukhobor community in the Kootenay region of British Columbia, circa 1920. Photographer E.J. Campbell. Source: Patent and Copyright Office, Library and Archives Canada, C-052247.

<sup>45</sup> Tarasoff, *Plakun Trava*, 112.

<sup>46</sup> On the McKenna-McBride Commission, see Harris, *Making Native Space*, chap. 8; Roy, “McBride of McKenna-McBride.”

Indian reserve at the mouth of the Kootenay River. The DIA agreed that the Christian family should continue to use the land with the permission of the Doukhobors and that the Christians should be good neighbours to them. What happened at kp'itl'els resembles what happened in many other parts of British Columbia in the early years of Euro-Canadian settlement. Cole Harris, reflecting generally on this period of settlement and reserve-making in BC history, concludes that “this was an imposed geography, a product of a colonial encounter, one that Native people had resisted ... but had not be able to stop.”<sup>47</sup>

Lawney Reyes notes that there was little the Christian family members could do about their land after this decision by the DIA. The evidence suggests that Alexander Christian and his family stayed on at kp'itl'els until 1919. During this period, Christian's wife, Teresa, died of pneumonia, and the family buried her with her children in the graveyard at the confluence. Alexander brought up Mary, his surviving daughter, largely away from kp'itl'els after 1919,<sup>48</sup> and the two of them moved back and forth between Washington State and Christian's hunting cabins in the West Kootenay area. Lawney Reyes reports that Mary, his mother, remembered these close years with her father fondly, although he notes that his grandfather had a lonely life. It was during this period that he was commonly known in the area as “Indian Alex” or “Alex the Indian,” a man who had by this time acquired a noted reputation as a skilled hunter, fisher, and guide. According to Reyes, Alexander Christian died of tuberculosis in 1924 and was buried at the St. Mary's mission near Omak Lake on the Colville Reservation in Washington State.<sup>49</sup> Lawney Reyes's remarkable memoir, *White Grizzly Bear's Legacy*, examines the lives of the descendants of Alexander Christian's family after their exile from kp'itl'els and is well worth reading for its themes of eviction, resilience, and survival. As part of this, Reyes records the long-standing bitterness that the Christian family felt towards the Doukhobor “invasion.”

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<sup>47</sup> Harris, *Making Native Space*, 261; Bouchard and Kennedy, *First Nations Ethnography*, 131-36. For another example of an “imposed geography” on Native space in the BC interior, see J. Michael Thoms, “A Place Called Pennask: Fly-Fishing and Colonialism at a British Columbia Lake,” *BC Studies* 133 (2002): 69-98.

<sup>48</sup> Bouchard and Kennedy, *First Nations Ethnography*, 136.

<sup>49</sup> Reyes, *White Grizzly Bear's Legacy*, 35-7.

It would be easy to see Alexander Christian, the White Grizzly, and his family through a romanticized European lens as the “last Indian” in the Kootenays, the “vanishing red man” driven away by colonial ignorance and ill-will.<sup>50</sup> But as Cole Harris’s research shows, no cultural expression is ever entirely erased within the landscape of memory – perhaps only our ability to recognize its marks upon the land remains obscured. The Doukhobors and the Sinixt at the confluence of the Kootenay and Columbia rivers were both in their ways actors within an ages-long process of displacement, where, as Harris notes, “one human geography [is] superseded by another, both on the ground and in the imagination.”<sup>51</sup> But the process was not complete. The Christian family did not disappear from history; instead, it moved to traditional lands in the United States, and Mary grew into a beautiful and talented woman. At least three of her offspring – grandchildren to Alexander Christian – grew up to play major roles within American culture.<sup>52</sup> One grandchild in particular, Lawney Reyes, concerns us here. In addition to a distinguished career with Seafirst Corporation in Seattle as a designer and later as an art collector, Reyes became a noted artist, particularly in sculptural forms, and later in his life wrote a series of highly regarded books on the cultural history of the Inland Northwest and his people – the Lakes, or Sinixt. Perhaps his most important book, *White Grizzly Bear’s Legacy* (2002), is an in-depth portrait of his grandfather, the Christian family, and the Sinixt people.

Through reading this book and conducting their own research in preparation for a symposium planned for summer 2007, the authors became aware of Lawney Reyes’s deep attachment to the site at the confluence of the Kootenay and Columbia rivers. They initiated a dialogue with the Sinixt author. At first, when asked if he would consider coming to a symposium on Sinixt/Doukhobor questions in order to meet the

<sup>50</sup> These terms are intended to reflect an essentialist mode of thinking too often placed upon indigenous peoples, a narrative of emotional and cultural control, which has had an ongoing detrimental effect on both colonial, European-Canadian settlers and on indigenous peoples themselves. For an extended discussion of the politics of the “Vanishing Indian,” see Daniel Francis, *The Imaginary Indian: The Image of the Indian in Canadian Culture* (Vancouver: Arsenal Pulp Press, 1992).

<sup>51</sup> Harris, *Making Native Space*, xvii. This important book opens a path for all those attempting to further explore colonialism and cultural displacement in what is now British Columbia.

<sup>52</sup> Lawney Reyes’s younger brother Bernie Whitebear, based in Seattle, became a major activist for Native American rights in the United States; Reyes’s sister, Luana, trained in health sciences and served with increasing administrative responsibility within the National Indian Health Service based in Maryland from 1982 until her death in 2001. See Reyes, *Bernie Whitebear*.



Figure 8. “Being on the Land: Histories at the Confluence,” a symposium on the people of the Kootenay and Columbia rivers hosted by the Mir Centre for Peace, Selkirk College, 19 June 2007. Marilyn James, Sinixt spokesperson, speaks to Regional Area Director John Voykin (foreground), while community members walk very near the site of Alexander Christian’s final home at kp’itl’els. Photograph courtesy of Myler Wilkinson.

authors and perhaps the Doukhobor community, Reyes was absolutely clear:

It would be improper for me to extend my pardon to a people who have taken the Christian family land in what is today called the Brilliant area ... As a result of losing their property, and the only home they had, my grandmother, Teresa Bernard Christian was heartbroken and died at a very early age. She was buried along the Kootenay River. When the river rose, her gravesite was washed away, and her bones were lost in the depths of the water.<sup>53</sup>

The authors did, however, keep in touch with Reyes over the next year and a half; and then, in spring 2009, they, along with others in Castlegar, proposed placing a large memorial stone dedicated to the Sinixt/Christian family on a bluff above the Kootenay River very near the location of its last wooden home. Muriel Walton, a community member acting on behalf of the West Kootenay Family Historians’ Society, led all efforts to create and place this stone in an appropriate

<sup>53</sup> E-mail to authors, 13 April 2007. The symposium held later that summer, June 2007, at Selkirk College, was entitled “Being on the Land: Histories at the Confluence.” Papers focused on questions of archaeology, history, and current relations between the Doukhobors and First Nations Sinixt people. Proceedings are available at the Mir Centre for Peace website under the heading “Writing and Research for Peace” ([selkirk.ca/research/mir-centre-for-peace/](http://selkirk.ca/research/mir-centre-for-peace/)).

place and in a proper way. In the process she developed a level of trust with Lawney Reyes.<sup>54</sup>

This time, when the authors asked Lawney Reyes to be part of the ceremony, they also called on his professional background, requesting that he give a lecture on the history of the Sinixt people, his own family, and his writing about the cultures of the region. Reyes agreed to speak at the Mir Centre for Peace, a renovated Doukhobor communal home on the grounds of Selkirk College just across the river from the original Christian home. During the course of the evening (1 October 2009),

<sup>54</sup> Muriel Walton has written a historically important account of Reyes's two days in the Kootenays. See Muriel Walton, assisted by Myler Wilkinson, "Closing the Circle: The Descendants of Alex Christian – The White Grizzly" (2009) currently on the *Writing and Research* section of the Mir Centre for Peace website at Selkirk College ([selkirk.ca/research/mir-centre-for-peace/](http://selkirk.ca/research/mir-centre-for-peace/)). The memorial stone itself has become a site of cultural pilgrimage. The words on it read as follows:

THE CHRISTIAN FAMILY

THIS IS WHERE THE SIN AIKST LIVED FOR CENTURIES BLESSED BY THE SALMON  
 THAT CAME TO SPAWN  
 IN THE SWAH NET KA AND KOOTENAI RIVERS  
 HERE THE CHRISTIAN FAMILY LIVED PEACEFULLY, WELCOMING ALL VISITORS,  
 UNTIL THEIR LAND WAS TAKEN FROM THEM DESPITE THEIR PLEAS FOR JUSTICE—  
 FORCING THEM TO LEAVE IN 1919

These are the last of many Sin Aikst who once lived on this land known as kp'it'l'els.  
 Some are buried here

Christian CHRISTIAN died about 1897  
 Antoinette died between 1914 – 1919

Children of Christian and & wife Antoinette  
 Baptiste  
 Alex (Pic Ah Kelowna - White Grizzly Bear) died 1924 buried at Omak WA  
 St. Peter  
 Marianne died 1911 wife of Frank Abbott

Children of Baptiste & wife Sophia who moved to Marcus, WA  
 Agnes  
 Paschel

Children of Alex & wife Teresa, daughter of Jacques & Mary BERNARD, Bossburg, WA  
 died 1918 kp'it'l'els  
 Louis & George & Julie all died young  
 Mary born 1913 Red Mt. died 1978 Pia, WA wife of Julian REYES & Harry WONG

WE HONOUR THE CHILDREN OF MARY CHRISTIAN WHO HAVE  
 OVERCOME LOSSES AND HARDSHIPS  
 TO IMPROVE THE LIVES OF THEIR NATIVE AMERICAN COMMUNITIES.

which itself was not without cultural controversy,<sup>55</sup> Reyes met many community members, including John J. Verigin, executive director of the Union of Spiritual Communities of Christ Doukhobor community and effectively the leader of the largest Doukhobor group in Canada.

This meeting, and the land upon which it took place, is rich with historic importance and dark irony. After displacing the Sinixt from their traditional lands beginning in 1912, the Doukhobor community itself fell into receivership and then bankruptcy beginning in the late 1930s. Because the kp'itl'els/Brilliant terrace was a flood plain of the Kootenay River, the government did not allow resettlement on the lands. After the Second World War, however, many Doukhobor families repurchased lands above the Brilliant flood plain in order to be near their old community villages.<sup>56</sup> As a result, the historic lands of the Sinixt people are now situated just below the bench on which the current Union of Spiritual Communities of Christ meeting hall, or Dom, is situated. The land remains remarkably beautiful to this day and largely untouched by human development, except for vestiges of Doukhobor communal orchards and abandoned brick and stone foundations. A great deal of history is written in the ground.

\* \* \* \* \*

On the early afternoon of 2 October 2009, some fifty to sixty people gathered for the unveiling of the memorial stone and also to witness one other historic moment – John Verigin's public apology to Lawney Reyes and his family for any harm the Doukhobors had caused to the Sinixt people. But the apology took a form that no one at the gathering could have expected, and for that reason it is written in memory as indelibly as letters inscribed in stone.

Standing on either side of the monument, the Doukhobor leader and Sinixt elder faced one another. Gifts were given: the Doukhobor leader gave hand-carved salt cellars, with salt replaced by tobacco, and

<sup>55</sup> Reyes spoke of the death of First Nations cultures in the Americas and of the bodies of his ancestors floating down on the currents of the Kootenay and Columbia rivers, especially following the construction of major dam sites.

<sup>56</sup> One of the signal achievements of the Doukhobor community during the postwar years was to enter into negotiations with the provincial government for the eventual return of many traditional lands, both to individuals and to the community. John Verigin Sr. – leader of the Christian Community of Universal Brotherhood, which was later to evolve into the current Union of Spiritual Communities of Christ – was a central figure in these successful negotiations.



Figure 9. J.J. Verigin, Doukhobor leader (right), facing Lawney Reyes (author, artist, and grandson of Alex Christian) at placement of memorial stone, *kp'itl'els*, in partial fulfilment of an old promise from the Doukhobors to the Sinixt people: “from our side we will be good neighbour[s] to them.” The stone was placed on 2 October 2009 in honour of the Christian family and the Sinixt people. Photograph courtesy of Myler Wilkinson.

homemade loaves of bread, while, in turn, Sinixt spokesperson Marilyn James gave traditional First Nations foods and ceremonial tobacco.<sup>57</sup>

Mr. Verigin asked if he might apologize to Lawney Reyes and his family in the traditional way of the Doukhobor people. Mr. Reyes nodded his assent. Verigin then came close to Reyes and knelt on the ground; he touched his forehead and arms to the earth. Though he did not say it, all sixty people who saw this gesture understood that, within the Doukhobor culture, this was the deepest form of respect one human soul can pay to another.

Reyes stood in silence for a moment. Then, a short while later, he answered: “I am not an emotional man, but what you have given our people today has moved me; I accept your apology.” These words were received in silence, but as the afternoon grew late the people stayed behind to talk and share images of the land, recognizing the people who

<sup>57</sup> Marilyn James has been Aboriginal advisor at Selkirk College, Castlegar, for the past decade and spokesperson for the Sinixt Nation Society – effectively the Sinixt people and their supporters who live within the Kootenay region of Canada. Based very near the Sinixt burial ground at Vallican in the Slocan Valley, for over three decades James has worked as educator and activist on behalf of her people – the Sinixt – whom the Canadian government declared extinct in the Kootenays in 1956, and who yet remain very much alive in 2012.

walk upon kp'itl'els ground now and honouring the names of those who lie beneath it.<sup>58</sup> Later, Verigin made it clear that beyond apology and acceptance, and beyond the symbols of reconciliation, come practical questions of how “relations may be made right” – questions that are finally political, cultural, and perhaps even spiritual.<sup>59</sup>

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This space – one of reconciliation and understanding – might seem a convenient place to conclude the current narrative, but the story of settler culture and indigenous history is seldom so simple.<sup>60</sup> The Sinixt still struggle to recover their place on the land; most obviously the rights of an “extinct people” – who remain very much alive – are being measured against the land claims of other First Nations groups in the region, such as the Kootenai (Ktunaxa Nation), the Shuswap Nation (Secwepemc), and the Okanagan First Peoples (Sylix). And perhaps even more painful is an ongoing struggle for recognition that is currently shaping up between the small group of Sinixt in Canada (perhaps ten to fifteen people in all – who, with their non-Aboriginal supporters, comprise the Sinixt Nation Society)<sup>61</sup> and the Lakes people, their close relatives, on the Confederated Tribes of the Colville Reservation near Spokane, Washington. The story of the Sinixt at kp'itl'els – of Alexander Christian seeking a voice for his ancestors or Lawney Reyes accepting a public apology for his people – carries within it elements

<sup>58</sup> John J. Verigin, who prefers to be known by the initials J.J., is in the process of becoming a new kind of leader within the Doukhobor community. Mentored by his father John Sr., who led the Doukhobors through some of the most difficult times in their historical existence – the loss of all their lands and communal social structures in British Columbia and the gradual re-entry into Canadian society – J.J. has turned his gaze and his attention outward to larger worlds to which a unique Doukhobor philosophy of peace and utopian culture may contribute. Whether in his early commitment to UN peacekeeping or his more recent leadership in the creation of the Mir Centre for Peace at Selkirk College, Verigin has engaged Doukhobor social idealism in practise with a modern world.

<sup>59</sup> Personal communication with authors, January 2012.

<sup>60</sup> A sober view of the politics of settler culture – “the colonizer who lurks within” (11) – is offered by Paulette Regan, *Unsettling the Settler Within: Indian Residential Schools, Truth Telling, and Reconciliation in Canada* (Vancouver: UBC Press, 2010). Regan, who is the director of research for the Truth and Reconciliation Commission of Canada, argues that Canadians need to go beyond the national “peacemaker myth” to examine how colonial violence of the past has often transformed itself into a violence that is “discursive and symbolic,” where “despite talk of healing and reconciliation,” indigenous people’s search for redress and justice “remain[s] rooted in patterns of colonial violence” (14). She argues for a “truth telling” that is truly “unsettling,” a kind of hearing offered with generosity, “humility,” and “respect” (17).

<sup>61</sup> Though small in total numbers, members of the Sinixt Nation Society have lived on, and acted as caretakers of, historic Sinixt lands at Vallican in the Slokan Valley for over a generation.



of a much larger story: the displacement of First Nations peoples from “Native space” throughout British Columbia and across the Americas in general and, in time, their gradual recovery of voice, justice, and a small part of their traditional lands. This is a narrative of trauma, of history that is decreed to be “extinct” along with its peoples, and then, only painfully, and only partially, recovered in recent time. A similar narrative is inscribed in the lands at the confluence of the Kootenay and Columbia rivers: a narrative embedded in the earth and underscored by living determinations of justice and history; by apology given (from the Doukhobor community) and apology received (from direct descendants of the Sinixt family whose lands these were and are).<sup>62</sup> For both settlers and indigenous peoples in British Columbia, this is a story of beginnings, not conclusions; of departures, not arrivals.

#### AFTERWORD

In February 2011, two significant events took place in the narrative of Sinixt history at the confluence of the rivers: one was a court decision over who has the right to speak on behalf of Sinixt First Nations people. On 23 February at a public meeting in Castlegar, Marilyn James, a Sinixt activist, intellectual, and spokesperson, announced the details of a Supreme Court of British Columbia decision regarding the legal right of the northern Sinixt (Sinixt Nation Society) to speak on behalf of other Sinixt and for Sinixt claims in British Columbia on a range of issues, including Perry Ridge logging operations within traditional Sinixt territory in the Slocan Valley. “The decision was negative. We have lost,” James said, “and I am not surprised. My people have been on the side of ‘losers’ for centuries. I am proud to be a loser of this kind.”

According to James, Judge Peter M. Willcock adopted a rigid, formal reading of the law, while the northern Sinixt (composed of Sinixt Nation Society members who live permanently north of the forty-ninth parallel largely in the Slocan Valley near the Vallican burial grounds, and non-Aboriginal members of the Sinixt Nation Society) urged a more flexible and historically rooted decision. The court ruling appears to have been based on the fact that, in 1956, the Sinixt were officially

<sup>62</sup> The “angel of history”, as Walter Benjamin calls it, gazes with blind eyes towards the past at the same time as its body is driven “irresistibly” into a future created by the storm of history. See Walter Benjamin, “Theses on the Philosophy of History,” in *Illuminations: Essays and Reflections*, trans. Harry Zohn, ed. and intro. Hannah Arendt (New York: Schocken Books, 1969), 258-59. Until recently, much of First Nations history in British Columbia has unfolded within that storm.

declared extinct within Canada's borders and that, consequently, the current group of Sinixt in Canada could not speak legally on behalf of other Sinixt. Justice Willcock noted that the Sinixt "are not a group capable of a sufficiently precise definition with respect to their group membership."<sup>63</sup>

James took the decision with seeming calm and told the small gathering that she, her people, and their supporters were living proof that the Sinixt were not extinct and would not be giving up.<sup>64</sup>

The second event was an overnight visit to Castlegar on the part of Lawney Reyes and his editor Therese Johns on 2 February 2011. The authors spoke with Reyes about his views concerning the Sinixt and Lakes peoples. His response was succinct: "I have received something most important concerning the lands. Mr. Verigin has met with me and given an honest apology for what his people did to us ... Now, I want to listen; in my opinion they [the northern Sinixt group – or Sinixt Nation Society – and the Lakes people of the Colville Reservation] are going to have to get together, meet, talk about issues or it won't come to anything."

Reyes's hopes have not yet clearly materialized, and history moves into the future, as it must. At the opening ceremony of the aboriginal Gathering Place at Selkirk College in Castlegar on 24 May 2012, the authors witnessed the ongoing struggle of the northern Sinixt (Sinixt Nation Society) to gain recognition within their traditional territory. Marilyn James, long-time spokesperson for the Sinixt Nation Society, was included on the speakers' list as a member of a "community group" representing First Nations people. As well, representatives of the "sovereign" First Nations who had made claims to the land within the College catchment area were invited to offer words, song, and dance in a general mood of shared cultural purpose. When her time came, however, rather than speaking, James stood with Dennis Zarelli, a supporter of the Sinixt in the Slocan Valley, who read a statement "in support of Sinixt." Mr. Zarelli's statement asserted that "the Sinixt are most definitely not extinct" and criticized the Colville Confederated Tribes for undermining "the efforts of the appointed Sinixt representatives to uphold their responsibilities under the whuplak'n, the traditional law

<sup>63</sup> See Timothy Schafer, "Sinixt Application on Perry Ridge 'Dismissed' in BC Supreme Court." *Nelson Daily*, 26 February 2011. Available at <http://thenelsondaily.com/news/issues/sinixt-application-perry-ridge-dismissed-bc-supreme-court-9988>.

<sup>64</sup> David Aaron, lawyer for the Sinixt Society, confirmed that a notice of appeal of Justice Willcock's ruling would be filed in BC Supreme Court as of mid-March 2011 – which in fact did occur.

of this territory.” He also criticized the Okanagan Nation Alliance for claiming Sinixt traditional territory and asserting their claim through events such as the “Spirit of Sylix Unity Run.”<sup>65</sup>

Finally, and adding to the complexity of tenure, a park proposal has emerged as a possible solution to the fate of the lands at the confluence of the rivers. In February 2011, the authors learned from the Kootenay West MLA’s office that treaty negotiators had removed “the lower Brilliant flats” from treaty reserves, opening the way for alternate land-use applications.<sup>66</sup> One option often discussed in recent years by community groups including the Doukhobors, the Sinixt Nation Society, and local and regional governments has been the creation of a regional park to recognize the rich aboriginal and settlement histories of these lands. Community discussions appear now to be coalescing as a political will to action. As recently as May 2012, the Castlegar and District Recreation Commission made formal recommendation to the Regional District of Central Kootenay that application for a license of occupation be made on the upper and lower Brilliant terraces – with the intent of establishing a regional park.

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<sup>65</sup> See Dennis Zarelli, “Statement in Support of Sinixt at Opening of Selkirk College’s Aboriginal Gathering Place,” 24 May 2012. Copy in possession of authors. On the Okanagan Nation Alliance run, see “Castlegar to Revelstoke run meant to unify,” *Castlegar News*, 31 May, 2012.

<sup>66</sup> E-mail to authors, February 2011.