

## PHOTO VIGNETTE

*T'łisalagi'lakw School, 'Yalis (Alert Bay), BC,  
early days*



School Photograph, 1977–78. Photo by Dan Gillis, reprinted with permission.

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When a group of Kwakwaka'wakw parents withdrew their children from the public education system in 1975 and opened an independent school on 'Namgis First Nation territory in 'Yalis (Alert Bay), British Columbia, they asked the first students to propose a name for their new school. Keith Larkin suggested T'łisalagi'lakw, a mink who lives with/in a Kwakwaka'wakw universe. Stories about T'łisalagi'lakw describe a clever character who likes to joke and play tricks on people, is sometimes naughty but always dearly loved, and gets away with more than a little mischief-making. "Like our kids," one of the mothers joked at the "name-the-school" community dinner. Everyone laughed. And T'łisalagi'lakw School was born.<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> During the 1970s when T'łisalagi'lakw School began, I was a member of the community by marriage, the mother of two school-age children, and part of the group who initially organized the independent school.

The 1970s were years of intense political negotiation between governments and Indigenous peoples in Canada. Given Kwakwaka'wakw peoples' long history of political mobilization and resistance to colonial policies, it is not surprising that 'Yalis was a hub of political activity. Many local leaders were active in emerging provincial and national Indigenous organizations. Young militants blockaded bridges, occupied Department of Indian Affairs offices, read *Akwesasne Notes* and *The Black Panther*, published their own newsletters, held community gatherings, and filled band council positions. Kwakwaka'wakw and non-Indigenous filmmakers co-created a film, *Potlatch: A Strict Law Bids Us Dance*, that documented the legal repression of, and community resistance to, the ban on potlatching from 1884 to 1952 under the *Indian Act*. The Salmonistas, a collective of women videographers, recorded the "Old People" – as Elders were called then – recounting oral histories and telling stories about other times and ways of being.

Indigenous parents and community leaders in 'Yalis and elsewhere in the 1970s were concerned about continuing high rates of school refusal among Indigenous students attending public schools and about the absence of curriculum that addressed Indigenous histories and cultures. Of course, education had long been the lynchpin of assimilationist government policies that promulgated the residential school system, now acknowledged by the Truth and Reconciliation Commission as having constituted a program of "cultural genocide." When, in 1972, the National Indian Brotherhood announced the policy of "Indian Control of Indian Education," many communities took up the challenge by establishing independent schools and developing and implementing locally relevant and culturally appropriate curriculum.

T'isalagi'lakw School opened under the direction of a community-based board consisting of members of the 'Namgis Band Council, parents, and Elders. Organizers gathered a sufficient number of children together to qualify for funds to hire a certified teacher, Miki Maeba, who shared their commitments.

St. Michael's Residential School in 'Yalis closed in 1975, and T'isalagi'lakw School took over two old dormitory rooms and scrounged used furniture and school supplies. Elders taught Kwa'kwa'la language, Kwakwaka'wakw cosmology, oral traditions, and "good ways of living." Fishers took students out on their boats and taught them how to harvest, smoke, and preserve foods. Community members taught dancing, singing, carving, painting, history, and politics. Students put on plays, hosted a local radio show, and published a newsletter. Other

people shared their skills by teaching photography, legal rights, sailing, carpentry, and self-defence.

A new T'łisalagi'lakw School building opened in January 1996: a bright, impressive new structure that incorporates Big House architecture and is equipped with a gymnasium, soccer field, playground, performance area, arts and crafts rooms, and a library complete with computers. Some Indigenous community members have become certified teachers, and T'łisalagi'lakw School has struggled, grown, evolved, and persisted for forty-plus years, making it one of the longest running independent Indigenous schools in British Columbia. Visions of carrying the dreams of ancestors and the struggles of generations now passed into the present, and of working hard to create just futures was the spirit that infused T'łisalagi'lakw School's founding and that sustains it. This too continues.