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### Chief Leschi: The Story of a True American

I can remember meeting my great grandmother for the first time. She had a long face covered with a golden complexion. Every time she smiled towards me I felt as if she was looking into my soul. She used to greet me by saying “Haw Mushkay”, which means hello little girl in the Lakota Sioux language. She is Native American, born and raised in South Dakota. Her family relocated to the Puyallup reservation when she was 19. She has passed down Native blood to my grandfather, father, and now to me. I carry her story with me every day as I walk down the street.

When my great grandmother and her family could no longer support themselves in South Dakota, they decided to pick up their lives and become migrant workers. They moved around from state to state following the seasonal crops. After a particularly hard apple picking season in Eastern Washington my great grandmother found a job as a cook in a logging camp near Enumclaw and settled in the Puyallup reservation. My great grandmother was never given the opportunity for a formal education and she fell in the trap society set for her. This is the story for too many Native Americans who were never given the chance to thrive and give back to their community. Ever since 1492 when Christopher Columbus set foot on this country, people of European descent made it their goal to line their pockets, regardless of the cost to the native population. This is clear from early U.S. government policies such as the Indian Removal Act (1) put into place during the 1830s to remove Natives from their home so white settlers could expand their communities; the Dawes Act (2) of 1887 which granted Natives citizenship if they removed themselves from their tribe, their family, and converted to a “civilized life”; the Cutris

Act (3) of 1898 that broke-up tribal governments and communal lands in Indian Territory of the “Five Civilized Tribes of Indian Territory”. And once the U.S. government had control of tribal leaders and lands they began the assimilation of Native children via boarding schools. Children were taken from their families and thrown into schools, modeled after prison programs, far away from their homes. These schools’ main objective was to strip the Native children of their culture, punishing them if they spoke their native language, and forcing them to accept European American culture into their lives by whatever means necessary. (4) These injustices did not go unnoticed; countless Native leaders have spoken out against them, one being Chief Leschi of the Nisqually Tribe.

Chief Leschi was born in 1808 in the shadow of Mt. Tahoma on the beautiful Mashel River, a tributary of the Nisqually River. (5) Today, this area is known as Eatonville, Washington. The early 1800s was filled with continuous conflict between white settlers and Natives regarding territory as American expansion moved west. (6) Leschi would have been twenty-two when the Indian Removal Act was put into place, old enough to understand that his community would certainly be moved to an area unfit to sustain his tribe and culture; unfortunately, the practice of relocating Natives onto unfruitful land was all too common.

In 1854 Leschi became a Chief of the Nisqually tribe appointed to represent his people at the signing of the Medicine Creek Treaty by Washington Territory Governor Isaac Stevens.(5) To the chagrin of Governor Stevens, Chief Leschi vocally opposed the treaty and as a result of this righteous opposition , Stevens gained legislative approval to form a militia, putting into motion the events that would directly lead to the death of Leschi and his brother.(5)(7) Leschi

had not fully understood the terms of the Medicine Creek Treaty and went into the meeting knowing that they were not going to be given the opportunity to oppose the request for their signatures. Months later, Chief Leschi denied signing his name, arguing that someone else must have forged his signature.

Regardless, the Medicine Creek Treaty was passed and the local Natives were moved to small reservations unfit for tribal life; the Nisqually tribe had been given a rocky piece of high ground which was not suitable for farming and cut off access from the local river, destroying their way of life and threatening their very existence.(8) The rest of the Native lands in the area were ceded to the United States government, (7) including parts of current day King, Pierce, Lewis and Thurston counties. These were areas located either on Puget Sound or rivers which the tribes relied on for fishing for salmon and other necessities.

Leschi recognized that moving to the reservations would mean the end of life as he and his people knew it and therefore took a stand and refused relocation. He also understood that such an action would not sit well with the territorial government and in order to try to keep the situation peaceful he went to acting governor Charles Mason in an attempt to explain his concerns and renegotiate the terms of the treaty.(9) Unfortunately Mason would not acquiesce and after almost a year of refusing to move to the designated reservation as required by the Medicine Creek Treaty, Leschi drew the ire of Washington Territorial Governor Isaac Stevens who organized a sortie of local volunteers and the US 4<sup>th</sup> infantry to detain Leschi and his brother Quiemuth and move them to the reservation.(9) Upon learning of this troop mobilization, an act of war in their minds, Leschi and Quiemuth fled, organized Native warriors,

and fought back. There were deaths on both sides of the battle lines, but as it is, the victors write the history. The Natives were outmanned and outgunned; Leschi was captured, and soon after, Queimuth peacefully surrendered. As prisoners of the US military, as a result of war actions, Leschi and Queimuth should have been accorded military trials. Instead, Leschi was tried twice as a civilian. These trials were questionable because, in retrospect, it can be seen that judges, attorneys, witnesses, and jurors were biased against Leschi.(10) The result was that Leschi was convicted, and on February 19<sup>th</sup>, 1858 Leschi was executed by hanging for murder. Leschi's brother Quiemuth never even received the chance for a trial, biased or otherwise. He was murdered by an unknown assailant while in the custody of Governor Stevens.(5)

Chief Leschi is one of many Native American heroes who fought for the rights of his people, and ultimately suffered the consequences. Throughout the history of the United States, Native Americans have been stripped of their culture, forced to leave their communities, and have been looked down upon by American society. These discriminatory biases affect the lives of Natives every day. In a study done by NPR more than a third of Native Americans have experienced racial slurs and violence, a third have faced discrimination in the work place, and Natives who live in predominantly Native areas are more likely to face discrimination.(11) These acts of bias affect the Native population greatly. According to the Census Bureau, in 2015 more than one quarter of Native Americans were living in poverty; this was the highest rate of poverty of any racial group in the nation.(11)

Clearly the battles Native Americans face did not end with Chief Leschi and as a community Washington State has a long way to go in providing equity to Native Americans.

Washington has the third highest number of recognized Native tribes in the country, with over 100,000 Natives living in the state.(11) I challenge us as a state to carry out Chief Leschi's mission and bring justice to the Native American people. This starts with recognizing Native Americans as people instead of as mascots, recognizing them as fathers instead of drunks, and recognizing their potential instead of assuming they are incapable. Our society has evolved to the point that we are well aware of the negative ramifications of racism and stereotypes, but why does it still exist? Why are we all not speaking up every time stereotypes are made? Americans have stood by for far too long while the demise of Native American culture crumbles around them, and now it is time to follow Chief Leschi's example and take action! Its time give back to the people that founded our country.

Three decades after Chief Leschi died a waterfront neighborhood located in the central district of Seattle was named after him.(8) It was not until 2004 that his wrongful conviction was overturned by a by a Historical Court of Inquiry.(12) Chief Leschi embodied what Americans hold above all: the desire for freedom and opportunity to live comfortably and peacefully, and what many modern Americans seem to be lacking, the willingness to fight for it. Through his sacrifice Chief Leschi attained additional lands suitable land for his people, fishing and hunting rights that have survived over six generations after his execution, and he set an example of sacrifice and courage for his people and for all Americans to see.(13) His actions also illustrated that merely exonerating his record is not enough. His memory should be celebrated annually, perhaps as a state holiday, and his story should be told and re-told, for his sake and for ours.

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