

## Chinook Wawa Day celebrates B.C. trade language

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The word Cultus, as in Cultus Lake, is a Chinook Wawa word.

“Yeah, it means a crummy lake,” said MLA Sam Sullivan whose organization the Global Civic Policy Society is hosting an event called Chinook Wawa Day, June 27.

Former UBC professor Jay Powell will speak about the trade language that was composed of roughly 30 per cent English, 30 per cent French and “bits and pieces” of Coast Salish First Nations languages at Chinook Wawa Day.

“When I came to the Northwest Coast in 1970, there were still a few people left, native elders, loggers, just interested people, that still could communicate in jargon,” the 77-year-old anthropological linguist said. “Frankly, I may be the last person that learned it from speakers of the language. Most people now that know some Chinook jargon learned it from dictionaries.”

Chinook Wawa arose as a trade language with the Chinook people who lived along the southern stretch of the Columbia River. It began after John Jacob Astor set up a trading post in Astoria in the early 1800s, and it became a full-blown language around 1850.

“Missionaries, traders, settlers, government officials that were coming to the Pacific Northwest... before they came, the first thing would be to get a hold of a Chinook dictionary and within a week, they would know how to communicate,” Powell said.

The pidgin language consists of about 500 words and little, if any, grammar.

“I often have seen estimates of a quarter of a million people, 250,000 speakers of Chinook jargon, on the Northwest Coast in 1900,” Powell said.

Chinook Wawa was the working language of the Hastings Sawmill that operated on Burrard Inlet from the 1860s through the 1920s, the largest employer in the city. Chinese and Japanese new immigrants who worked at the mill apparently learned Chinook Wawa before they learned English.

“Stephen Hume, the journalist, he said when his father went to work for the Province in the 1930s, he was given a Chinook dictionary,” Sullivan said.

Contracts, songbooks and even an opera were written in Chinook, according to Powell.

“If I could give some sense of the enjoyment of encountering old-timers back in the 1960s that told stories in jargon, and jokes, and sang songs and used phrases in order to label themselves linguistically as old-timers, it’s a wonderful thing,” Powell said. “As British Columbians we’d be poorer if we weren’t aware of what we were doing when we use jargon words.”

The Chinook Wawa word for strong is skookum and chuck means water, thus the name for Skookumchuck Narrows on the Sunshine Coast, which sees reversing tides, rapids and sometimes up to nine foot high drops from one side of the rapids to the other.

Potlatch means to give. Muckamuck means food and high muckamuck means a rich person, or a person who has more food.

Siwash, as in Siwash Rock off the Stanley Park seawall, stems from the French word sauvage, which was applied to First Nations people.

Few know the origins of these words today because Chinook Wawa fell out of use once it was no longer needed.

“Starting in the 1890s, all over British Columbia, schoolhouses started to appear, including the awfulness that was the residential schools, and the native people learned English, so they no longer needed Chinook jargon as a common language,” Powell said.

He taught a course on Chinook Wawa to First Nations students in 1973 at Langara College.

“UBC wasn’t even slightly interested in having a course in a language that wouldn’t fulfill a language requirement for them, so First Nations students at Langara thought that it was a really interesting way to get credit for something that actually meant something to them,” Powell said.

Sullivan contacted him two years ago, keen to spread the word about Chinook Wawa.

“One of the problems is that no one owns Chinook Wawa. It’s not a first language of anybody. It’s a second language of everybody,” Sullivan said.

“We’re hoping to put together a group, mostly of young people, who will know enough about jargon as a result of the Chinook Wawa Day camp, that they will become ones that remember and know something about jargon for the next generation,” Powell said.

Chinook Wawa Day runs from 10 a.m. to 4 p.m. Participants will also learn about aboriginal arts and crafts, architecture and canoeing. As of Thursday afternoon, 15 spots remained. To register, see [globalcivic.org](http://globalcivic.org).

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