

The Lynching of Louie Sam

Rina Fraticelli

THE ONLY DOCUMENTED CASE OF LYNCHING
IN BRITISH COLUMBIA OCCURRED IN LATE FEBRUARY 1884.

Louie Sam, a fourteen year-old from the Stó:lō First Nation of BC's lower Fraser Valley, was wrenched from the custody of Provincial Police officers by a mob of over 100 American men. Louie Sam was being held in Canadian custody at the request of American authorities in connection with the murder of an American shopkeeper just across the border in Washington State.

After dragging Louie behind their horses for a few kilometers, the vigilantes tied the boy's feet together, flipped him sidesaddle onto one of the horses, slung one end of a rope around his neck and the other end over a giant cedar. Then the mob taunted the boy who, in the words of one of his assassins, remained "dumb as a brute" until he managed to see past the disguise of one of his tormentors.

"Me get out of this, me fix you, Bill Moultray," the boy was reported to have said in broken English. Shocked at having been recognized, Moultray slapped Louie Sam's horse, causing the rope around the boy's neck to pull taut. After several long minutes of struggling, Louie died.

Adding a powerful layer of the grotesque and of cultural mockery to the murder, the American men had painted their faces with black charcoal and red ochre, the sacred paint of Stó:lō spirit dancers, and dressed themselves in women's clothes.

In the weeks and months that followed, first a coroner's inquest, then a haphazard string of public and private investigations and inquiries began to shed light on the events leading up to the lynching. Ultimately, however, a cover-up stretching from Olympia Washington to Victoria B.C. and ultimately, to the office of Prime Minister John A. McDonald in Ottawa, rendered justice for a Canadian Native boy expendable.



Photo by Stefan Fraticelli

This is the story I was told, though in much greater detail, one rainy Friday evening in a roadside café across the street from the offices of Stó:lō Nation outside Chilliwack, British Columbia by a brilliant young historian working for the Aboriginal Rights and Title Department of Stó:lō Nation. It had begun as an “oh, by the way” moment. I had just completed production on the second of two documentary films with the Stó:lō, and had a little time before the drive to Vancouver and flight home to Toronto. Over coffee, Keith Thor Carlson asked whether I had my next project in mind, and whether I might be interested in a project he and his colleagues had been working on. A couple of hours later, he saw me off to the airport with a copy of the article he’d published about Louie Sam in a history quarterly some years earlier.

From the first, the macabre lynching of a Native youth and its subsequent cover-up over a hundred years ago seemed to me to be more current than the day’s headlines, and before the plane had landed in Toronto I had no doubt that this would be my next project.

As dramatic and compelling as the story of the framing and murder of Louie Sam was, it was clear that its significance extended far beyond the personal tragedy of a single boy and his time. For the Stó:lō, the betrayal of Louie Sam by federal authorities in 1884, which coincided with Ottawa’s banning of the potlatch, had become an apt metaphor for their continuing struggles with governments who failed to understand the living spirituality of a culture where the cedar is a gift from the Creator for a life well led, and where sacred boulders are inhabited by spirits whose singing continues to be heard by the pure of heart.

Ironically, though, Louie Sam’s murder was also, in a very real way, a reflection of the high esteem in which the British justice system was held by the Stó:lō at the time. In the years leading up to 1884, Stó:lō elders had come to see British justice as a positive alternative to their tradition of escalating raids and counter raids. This meant that an Indian falsely accused of murder and arrested by Canadian authorities could have a reasonable expectation of being vindicated. And that meant that the real murder-

er could have a reasonable expectation of being exposed. For the true perpetrators of the crime, Louie had to be silenced before he got to trial.

As word of Louie Sam's murder spread, the Stó:lō came together from across their territories to mourn their child and seek justice. After days of discussion, they agreed to allow local authorities to act on their behalf. The Stó:lō trust in the British justice system was not entirely misplaced. Two Provincial Police officers, posing as itinerant labourers, conducted an extensive undercover investigation across the border. They boarded with local families, gained their trust, and documented in their extensive notes the details of the lynching and the depth of the racism which motivated the mob. "I'd kill a Chinaman as quick as I would an Indian. And I'd kill an Indian as quick as I would a dog," they reported one of the lynchers to have said.

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The officers reported back with substantial evidence of the identity of the lynchers and implicating one of them in the crime which Louie Sam had been accused of committing. What followed was a protracted tug of war between the local officials in New Westminster seeking Ottawa's support in the extradition of the accused and American politicians anxious to keep Ottawa from letting a "small" local Indian matter tarnish good relations between the two countries.

In the end, despite mountains of evidence and promises to Stó:lō people that justice would be applied, British honour was compromised and a Native boy sacrificed to the geopolitical interests.

To us, director David McIlwraith and me, producer and co-writer, the story embodied important questions about the construction of reality, about the power of history on the one hand and the limits of the historical record on the other. It also provided a significant lens on the contemporary Stó:lo struggle to reconstitute their culture and language.

I suspected that it would be a struggle to get this film financed and I was more than right. The story was too complex, too layered to fit easily into one of the precise niches broadcasters carve out for their documentary strands. Each of the many programmers I approached responded very warmly and respectfully, agreeing that this was an important story, though not quite right for their slot. Way too historical for one; not nearly historical enough for another. Not personal enough for one; too personal for another. Too much drama for

a documentary; too political for a drama. I was not surprised and did not entirely disagree.

We knew that to do justice to our subject, we would need to depart from the traditions of conventional documentary, incorporating a range of perspectives within the cinematic approach of the film. We needed to move, on the one hand, towards a heightened subjectivity and, on the other, towards a more formal, self-conscious objectivity. But how?

As non-Native filmmakers we also grappled with the challenge of weaving the Stó:lō's fluid sense of time and memory through our distinctly urban, linear European lens. This would also mean respecting as objective, reliable and truthful, elements which were entirely outside our realm of experience: communications with

spirits transmitted through a shaman, for example, as a source for details of current and past events. In an important sense, questions about the nature, limits and ownership of “truth” were threaded through every level of this story.

In March of 1991, Chief Justice McEachern of the Supreme Court of BC had issued a controversial ruling rejecting the validity of oral history as evidence, effectively depriving First Nations of their most substantial and authoritative historical source. How else were First Nations to argue their land claims on the basis of centuries of occupation? The McEachern decision, in part, led to strategies like the hiring of archaeologists, anthropologists and historians, like Keith Carlson, to bring the techniques of the European knowledge systems to the service of traditional First Nations history.

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To begin, though, we needed the permission not only of the Stó:lō leaders, but also of the descendants of Louie Sam’s family. While the unresolved 1884 murder of one of their children continued to be viewed by the Stó:lō as a defining moment in their history, it was virtually unknown outside their community. The decision to assign Carlson to research the story was motivated by a desire to remedy that, but there was also another, more urgent, motivation. The nation had been grappling with number of suicides of young people from Louie Sam’s community on the Sumas reserve and it was felt that perhaps there was a link of some sort between the legacy of this injustice and the crises of these adolescents.

With the support of Grand Chief Kat Pennier, and the head of the Aboriginal Rights and Title Department, Sonny McHalsie, Carlson’s supervisor and the person who had first assigned Carlson to the Louie Sam story, we embarked on a series of community meetings to explain our intentions and ask for the community’s permission.



Photo by Stefan Fraticelli

There was good reason to expect that a film on the subject would be welcome, and it was, but we were soon faced with a significant hurdle in the form of the traditional taboo against invoking the departed. In this case, because Louie Sam had been a young man, the elders felt that it was too risky for the community’s youth. We thought we had reached an impasse and came close to abandoning the project. Finally, though, the elders suggested we hold a “burning” to ask permission from Louie Sam himself.

A small group of us gathered before dawn at a small community centre on an empty industrial lot on the edge of the Sumas reserve. There was nothing in the least charming or traditional about this spot alongside the Trans-Canada Highway. We had been advised to bring gifts for the boy, anything we thought a fourteen-year-old boy would appreciate. We brought



Photo by Stefan Fraticelli

jeans and shirts and running shoes and several blankets. Sonny and Keith and Chief Pennier also brought blankets and food. Lots of food. We stood around, a little self-consciously and expectantly in the cold morning air, and after a while a pick up truck pulled up with three men. The men prepared themselves quickly. A large fire was built, our offerings were spread out on the ground in front of it and the three men, now a shaman and his two helpers, took their places at the front.

As the first rays of the sun came up, the spirit of Louie Sam was summoned with singing and drumming. After several minutes, the shaman began to direct himself to a particular point. He addressed then listen to the spirit, as he gestured and nodded. He pointed to a large tree off to his right standing alone in the middle of this empty lot and curved his arms up, as if carrying something. We were invited to bring forward the gifts and watched as these presents, bought the night before at the local mall, were burned in offering. There were more songs. More rituals. The shaman called one of his helpers forward, repeating Louie Sam's words on to

this witness, to ensure they would be accurately remembered and shared. And then it was over.

Inside the community centre, someone had prepared breakfast for us. And after a time, the shaman joined us, an ordinary man once more. Yes, Louie Sam gave his permission. It was time to speak of these things. And his name could be spoken. We asked about the tree, the arm gesture. Louie Sam having died in winter could not be buried, the shaman told us, so his body was wrapped and placed in the crook that tree, high off the ground, until the spring thaw. That information was new to the group and welcome, another piece of the puzzle to be integrated into the community's reservoir of knowledge.

The burning ceremony became a touchstone for us, a critical point of reference and inspiration as we worked to create a narrative structure that would allow us to move among multiple levels of meaning and truth.

This freed us, for example, to conclude one of the pivotal drama scenes of Louie Sam's capture with Dakota James, the 14 year-old Stó:lō actor stepping out of character to engage

with the film's director about the experience of portraying Louie Sam. In another scene, after the families and tribes of the Stó:lō Nation have traveled from across their territory to come together to determine their response to the murder, the camera discovers a group of contemporary young people in modern dress among the 1880s crowds.

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In June 2005, as our film was making the rounds of the film festival circuit, the United States Senate adopted a resolution apologizing to the descendants of the 4,743 people lynched in the U.S. between the 1880s and the 1960s. The Senate resolution did not include Louie Sam.

A few months later, Terry Glavin, a journalist with the Vancouver weekly *The Georgia Straight*, was inspired by the film to bring it, and with it the story of Louie Sam, to the attention of Iona Campagnolo, then Lieutenant-Governor of British Columbia. The Lieutenant-Governor was widely known as a great admirer and defender of West Coast First Nations. She carries the Tsimshian name Notz-whe-Neah (Mother of the Big Fin), and the Haida know her as Saan-naag-Kaawaass (Person who Sits High). Campagnolo screened the film, then requested a meeting with us.

She quickly recognized layers of irony in the ways the successes and failures of British justice colluded to create the tragic results. What's more, she acknowledged that remedying this miscarriage of justice could legitimately be seen to fall under the Office of the Lieutenant-Governor of British Columbia. On Sept. 8, at a reception for a delegation of senior Washington State legislators, with great subtlety and grace, she raised the century-old "cold case" with her counterpart in Washington State and invited him to join her in acknowledging a historic wrong.

In March of 2006, at a ceremony in the ornate rotunda of Washington State's capital, in

the presence of a Stó:lō delegation, state lawmakers passed a resolution acknowledging the 122 year-old crime and expressing the deepest sympathy to the descendants of Louie Sam's family and nation. Several months later, British Columbia officially recognized the bravery and service of the two provincial police officers who, more than 120 years earlier, had risked their lives to tell the true story of the lynching of Louie Sam.

In October 2007, Iona Campagnola was succeeded by BC's first aboriginal Lieutenant-Governor, Steven Point, a Provincial Court justice, head of the BC Treat Commission and Grand Chief of the Stó:lō Nation.

The truth, the facts, the real story, evidence, expert witnesses, these are the traditional tools and raw materials of the documentarian's craft and it continues to surprise me the extent to which we continue to act as if the stories we tell, if we are diligent and able, are complete. But the study of nature has long since shown us the extent to which the act of observation alters the events observed setting up an unstoppable cycle of change.

Not even Keith Carlson's exhaustive, detailed study can sum up the events of 1884, much less a 51 minute film. Our desire to believe that knowledge and truth can be gathered up and stored like cedar or stones, while perfectly understandable, ignores the dynamic, uncontrollable nature of life.

Rina Fraticelli is a freelance writer and Genie award-winning film producer. She is a founding partner in Wild Zone Films. She is currently executive director of Kickstart Disability Arts and Culture; and of Women in View 2010, an international festival and symposium exploring the alarming marginalization of women in media.

The Lynching of Louie Sam is available from Moving Images Distribution.

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