

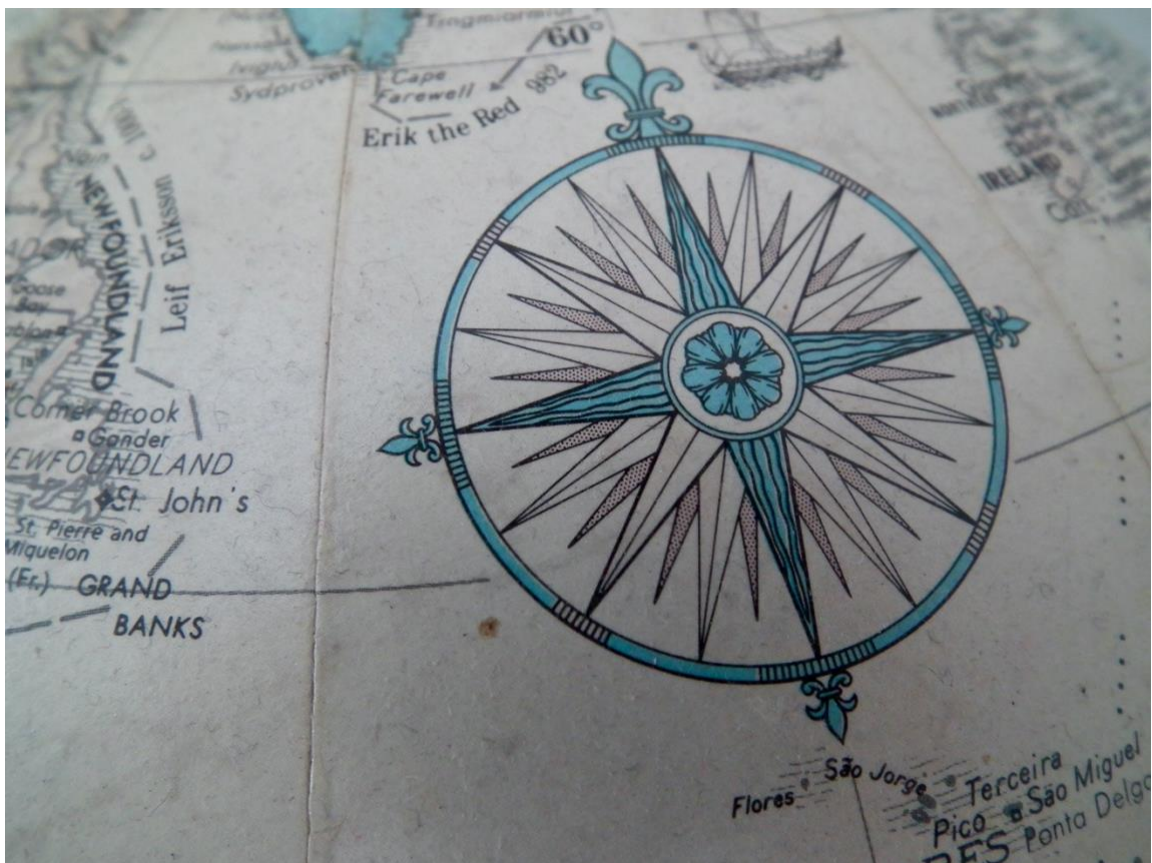
We are all Treaty People

BY DR. KEITH CARLSON

As residents of Westview, Cranberry, Townsite, and Wildwood we have something to celebrate. Unlike most of the other non-Indigenous people in British Columbia we live in a territory where a treaty has been signed. Together with our Tla'amin partners, we are treaty people.

"We Are All Treaty People, And Our Partners Have Invited Us to a Conversation"

Photo: K. Van't Schip 2021



Today, in asking us to reconsider the name of our town, the Tla'amin community is providing us an opportunity to demonstrate the sincerity we bring to our relationship with them as fellow treaty people. They are inviting us to reflect upon what retaining the name of BC's first Superintendent of Indian Affairs signifies to them. In that light it's important to remember that despite Israel Wood Powell having been more sympathetic to Indigenous people than his immediate predecessors (Frederick Seymour and Joseph Trutch earlier disavowed Aboriginal title and stripped Indigenous people of nearly all the rights they had secured under Gov James Douglas), took seriously his role as the head the government agency tasked with assimilating BC's Indigenous people. Under Powell's leadership Tees'kwat was never set aside as a Tla'amin reserve despite it having met all the criteria to have been one. Under his leadership the Indian Act was amended in 1880 making both Indigenous governance (the potlatch) and spirituality (the tamanawas dance) illegal. We mustn't allow ourselves to have a colonial amnesia about this history.



Photo: K. Van't Schip 2021

As a third-generation Powell Riverite (my grandfather moved here in 1919 as a returning Great War veteran), I can say with confidence that not many of us in this community really care about celebrating or commemorating Israel Wood Powell. Few likely even know who Powell was. However, the ongoing passionate discussions on social media suggests that many remain deeply attached to the name Powell River, not because of any affection for I.W. Powell, but because it is the name of the place people have come to think of as home. If after a mere century of settlement here we have come to feel this attachment perhaps this is an opening for us to begin to more fully appreciate the Tla'amin people's even deeper connection to these same lands – lands that they have called home since time immemorial.

There have now been seven generations of Tla'amin people who have lived with the impacts of settler colonialism. As Chief Justice Murray Sinclair said upon the release of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission's report, it is likely going to take several generations to set things right. What is needed right now are respectful conversations: listening to our neighbours with genuine compassion and empathy.

This is an opportunity to build trust and understanding. It's still too early to know what the outcome of these conversations will be. Is changing the town's name the only way to show our Tla'amin partners that we genuinely want to help wash away the lingering pain and harm they feel over I.W. Powell's actions? I don't know. But in the end, even if the residents of Cranberry, Townsite, Westview, and Wildwood decide they want to keep the name Powell River, the onus will still remain on us to find a way to work with our Tla'amin treaty partners to try and wash and cleanse the colonial legacy that is associated with Israel Wood Powell.

— Keith Thor Carlson was born and raised in Powell River. He is also the Canada Research Chair in Indigenous and Community-engaged History at the University of the Fraser Valley where he additionally serves as Director of the university's Peace and Reconciliation Centre.