

Lillooet Lake Roadblock, 1975

when DFO officers raided the Elders' fishing spot

**and cut their nets
to protect a commercial
Chinook hatchery
that supplied
Birkenhead stock
to fish farms
around the world.**

**Alvin Nelson, Wenemqen of
Tilalus, spoke to AQ about his
memories of the 1975 roadblock.**

Alvin – Yanna, La, and Pilasi were fishing at the lake. By that time, MaMa was already staying home, she was older – in her 80s, she's Yanna's mother. I think Kween and Victor Frank's wife were there too.

The DFO just showed up. They came up one day to have a look around, went back to Squamish, and then they came back. They didn't even bring their own boats, they used our fishing boats to go out on the lake and drag those ladies' nets in to shore. They had police dogs with them, and the ladies were scared of them because they look vicious and they act like they're going to bite, so that's how they kept the ladies from interfering to get their nets back.

The fisheries guys cut up their nets right there in front of them.



The scene on Lillooet Lake Road at Grandmother Slough, July 1975. Photo from a flyer made at the time to promote the causes raised by the blockade, archived online at the [riseupfeministarchive](http://riseupfeministarchive.com).

At that same time, there was a spiritual gathering happening in Mt. Currie. Quite a few of our spiritual leaders were meeting. Thomas Banyaka from Hopi was here, he wanted to talk to our people about staying peaceful.

Us young guys were working for them, we had been awake for how many days already – we had built an arbor for the gathering: cut the trees, peeled them, dug them in and put them up, everything – and this is what was going on when we

got the news about what the fisheries did to those ladies.

The ladies sent a message back to Mt. Currie, and that's where we were when we heard the news, at that spiritual gathering, half way between Mt. Currie and the Lake.

They all talked about what to do. I remember they were saying, *enough is enough*. They were saying, "We have to do something about that, that's not right, what they're doing to the old people."

So people were discussing it, *what should we do?* And they figured, *let's block the road: they'll feel that, because they get so much money from taking our logs out.*

I think we actually blocked it right then and there where we were, because later we had to move the blockade down the road towards Mt. Currie, to John Williams' place, and we put it up there. That way, the Rancherie Street would still be open for our people to get down to the lake. So we moved the blockade over to Grandmother Slough.

We knew that we were going to have a backlash. There were more people logging then.

I was quite young, sixteen years old, but old enough to know what I was doing. I went over to see what I could do to help, and they told me and Darryl that we could be on patrol – check out everything between the blockade all the way down to the lake, see who was on the move.

We were on bikes, on foot, and sometimes on horseback.

We just had some tourists who were trying to throw their weight around. We were there to let them know they should turn around and go back to Lillooet, because they wouldn't be able to get through the blockade. Some guys wanted to threaten us.

This one guy got pretty aggressive. He was camped right on the reserve, on the side of the road, so we went and told him he would have to get moving. He was swearing at us, threatening me.

That was the only one who gave us trouble, everyone else just got up and left when we told them what was going on.

For a while I was stationed at the bridge at Joffre Creek, and it was my job to stop anybody coming through, but let all the people from Skookumchuck go through.

When we first set up the road-block, these two strangers came around. They were from the States, they were trying to give us guns,

DFO officers used the Elders' own boats to retrieve their nets, haul them back to shore, and cut them in half. They brought police dogs to protect themselves from the elderly ladies fishing there. Photo: Michael Smith Sr.



and big guns: M-16s and 81mm mortars, all these weapons.

Kenny sent me to John William's house to tell him about these guys who said they wanted to "help us on the blockade."

I went to John's house. John was having a coffee there, smoking a cigarette. He looked at me really seriously and he said, "So they really want to help us? Tell them we don't need any guns. We don't need any weapons. Tell them, if they want to help us, they can stand on the road just like anybody else."

So I went back and I told Kenny and Arnold what John said. So they turned to those guys and told them, they could stand on the road and get arrested like anyone else, and when they heard that they took off.

John was clear that we were not going to be violent about what we were doing.

If we had taken those guns, the police would have squashed us. It was all a plant. They were trying to get us to be a violent operation so the police could come in with the Emergency Response Team – well, they always do anyway – but it could have been even worse, if we had those guns they could have done something really drastic. They knew we were non-violent. They were trying to set us up for violence.

It was much later when that same guy appeared again in Puyallup, when they were trying to assassinate Robert Satiahcum.

At that time, our people were acting on behalf of the Elders who were abused by the fisheries officers.

I remember Yanna talking about it later, saying that no one can interfere with our fishing.

The problem there, the reason they were cutting off our fishery, was that the federal government was extracting our Birkenhead Spring salmon.

They would harvest the salmon and take them to a hatchery they built at the old swing bridge, with water coming from a spring there.

The hatchery was just off the reserve, towards D'Arcy, just below Dave Walker's gravel pit. At that time they called it the Government gravel pit. They took all that out, the hill is completely gone.

They would hatch the fry, truck them out. Sometimes they would fly them out, and send them to Tofino where they had a net-pen fishery. They sent them to South America, quite a few places, and they were taking a lot.

It wasn't about saving the salmon, it was about their hatchery and export program.

After the blockade, they tried to set up a restriction that we could only take 25 spring salmon for the whole reserve. Everybody rejected that, my dad, everyone. So it never held its ground.

At a later date, when I was involved in the fisheries, they still tried to tell us to stop fishing. But we still told them our people won't relate to you, telling us how many fish we can catch.

We'll decide that, because we're

fishing for food.

We saw the catch charts, the west coast charts, and we could see that all the native fisheries – including Chilliwack, including all up and down the coast – our catch didn't even make up one line on the chart. Jim Pattison, who was leasing out fishing boats, his fleet's catch made up six or seven lines on the catch chart.

The private fishery made up about one line, what they call the recreational fishery now. About the same amount as all our Native food fisheries. Back then we caught a lot of fish!

The commercial fishery took up fifteen lines.

Ken Dennis joined our blockade, he had just come all the way from Arizona. There were about 50 of us there when he showed up, and it was really important because we were getting support from outside now. George Abbott and Derek Wilson came and joined the blockade; stayed for months. Jerry Jack and his group from Gold River.

When Jerry came, I happened to be at John's house and I went to go sleep in the tent. They were talking and drumming away at the fire there outside John's house. For some reason I looked out of the tent, and over at the river side I saw a stump. All of a sudden it was coming towards me. I realized the stump had no legs, but it was coming towards me. It got within 20 or 30 feet of me, and I realized it was not a stump. It was a Big Foot. I got really spooked and I ducked back into my tent.

Within a couple seconds, it came

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Front page of The Daily Colonist, June 21, 1975. This is the only image the newspaper printed in relation to the blockade.

up from the river towards their fire. Everybody there ran back, except Jerry, and he said, "Hey hey, don't worry it's not going to hurt you guys! It's probably just here to support us." He was saying that, "It's okay, be calm," and then he started that song, and then everyone joined in with that. He had good singers with him.

After they started singing I ran into John's house. I grabbed a cup of coffee and sat at the table. The woman sitting there, she looked at me and asked, "are you okay?" And I just blurted, "Yeah I think I'm okay but I just saw a Big Foot out there." John was sitting there, he just smiled at me, he didn't think anything of it. I remember him saying before, they look after us. In a sense. It was amazing that it came when we were having big trouble here.

One incident on the blockade itself was when one of the kids was shooting his pellet gun. A news reporter from way across the other side of the blockade took a picture of that.

That young guy was well behind the blockade, he was playing around.

For the news hour, they used that photo and kind of faded his face, they showed him pointing the gun, but it was just a little kid shooting a pellet gun at a target. So at that time, they were already using the news to make it look like our people were vigilantes.

But our people were passive. Probably too passive.

A lot of those older people were

standing on the road, on the side of the road, but the cops wouldn't arrest them.

I got arrested, along with everyone else, and I was thrown in the Pemberton jail, along with Lloyd and Hector Andrew, Fritz was in our cell. Ten of us to a cell, two cells. They took everyone else to Squamish, and they let the Elders and women and kids go.

Johnny was there too. He had a tiny little pocket knife on him, and when they were arresting him they found it and they roughed him up pretty good, threw him on the ground. They were trying to ask

him questions about his knife, and he just said, "Well I think almost every kid has a pocket knife." They were trying to say it was a weapon, manhandling him. He must have been about the same age as me. And he just laughed.

The police were pretty rough. I guess it hasn't changed a lot in fifty years. They're more cautious about how they do things now, they try not to get caught on camera.

They're still taking our gold and timber. The homesteaders took over all our land and now they're

building a new city right next to us, and our people are still poor. They try to keep a few of our people happy, like with jobs. It would be better if they didn't have jobs – maybe they would fight for their land more – that's what I think.

We were just at a meeting last week and my uncle came over to me, said, "I think we heard this same presentation fifty years ago."



At the head of Lillooet Lake was a deep, slow area where the returning salmon funneled into the Birkenhead River. With a long pebble beach beside it and sloping forest beyond that, it has always been home to a spring, summer and fall fish camp for the Lil'wat People. Since 1975, unregulated clear-cut logging in the headwaters has caused sediment to completely fill that spot where nets were set.



*Wenemqen,
Alvin Nelson, reporting
to the Special Rapporteur
on the Rights of
Indigenous Peoples,
October 2013, during his
official visit to Canada*



50 year old Editorial remains "evergreen" in BC

Time to grasp the nettle

THE PUBLIC'S PATIENCE both with the Indians blocking roads and with a government unwilling or unable to put a stop to this nonsense is wearing very thin. And so is the sympathy many people had with the Indians' contention that they have been victimized in various ways ever since the Hudson's Bay Company established the first British colony here.

Indian leaders are well aware, even if some of the members of their bands are not, that defiance of the law invites punishment.

Blocking of highways and the demand for tolls are bad enough, but when firearms are part of the charade, even if they are only "props" on the stage, the situation assumes ugly and menacing dimensions. The Indians apparently have taken care to let authority, as well as the general public, know that they have weapons at the site of roadblocks. The inference must be that they are prepared to use them.

Attorney-General Alex Macdonald urged everyone close to the Gold River and Pemberton scenes of crisis "to recognize their responsibilities within the framework of the law. He is warning against violence.

But although he was aware of the statement of Mary Williams, a spokesman for the Mount Currie Indians who were involved in the Pemberton incident, that some of the band had guns at the roadblock, he would make no comment upon it.

He did say, however, that people have been charged as much as \$25 to pass the barricades. "This is a criminal offence," he said. "And it has to stop."

Indeed it does. This is extortion and anyone convicted of the crime can suffer imprisonment for up to 14 years. The Criminal Code is clear on that point.

Sooner or later, unless the bands are prepared to take their grievances to the courts and seek redress and compensation by lawful process, and to abandon the use of threat and force they will precipitate a confrontation either with the police or outraged whites. Maybe that is what some of them want. Maybe they accept the old and specious argument that the end justifies the means.

Whatever may have been the wrongs suffered by the Indian population in the past, the provincial government has recently shown a disposition to make reasonable amends. But it should make clear, for the sake of the Indians themselves as much as for the peace of mind of the rest of the people, that negotiation cannot be secured by threat and mischief-making.

A firm stand now will make for better understanding in the future. It will also diminish the risk of violence at a later date. As at Pemberton and Gold River, Mr. Macdonald should grasp the nettle if illegal acts continue.

"What we're trying to do is get public support to pressure the BC government into a just land claims settlement with BC Indians.

But what has happened so far is that the public gets manipulated into believing that Indians are becoming a threat to their well-being. Then the Indians end up fighting among themselves about methods being used to fight for land claims."

- Richard Watts, Letters, "Indian 'Situation'," *Ha-SHILTH-sa*, September 1975.

There were at least seven blockades and occupations in June-July, 1975. None of the issues are resolved yet.

