

**Leschi and Quiemuth:  
Honored Leaders of the Nisqually Indians  
by Drew W. Crooks**

For millennia the Nisqually Indians have lived in the Nisqually River Valley, including the area that is now the City of DuPont. Over time they have had a number of leaders, but none remembered with more honor than Leschi and Quiemuth. These two brothers played important roles in the momentous Medicine Creek Council of 1854 and the Puget Sound Indian War that followed. Quiemuth's murder in 1856, and Leschi's execution two years later caused many to mourn in the region. Still, as indicated by several recent commemorative events, the memory of Leschi and Quiemuth survives to the present day.

Both brothers were born at Me-schal, a village located on the Mashel River a little upstream from its junction with the larger Nisqually River. While Quiemuth was born shortly before 1800, Leschi's birth occurred in 1808. Their father was Ya-nat-co, a Nisqually Indian who originally came from the Minter Creek village on the Kitsap Peninsula.

The two siblings, who had different mothers, grew up in Me-schal. It was a community that had close ties to tribes east of the Cascade Mountains who spoke the Sahaptin language. Many inhabitants of Me-schal, including the sons of Ya-nat-co, were bilingual in Sahaptin and Lushootseed (the language used by the Nisqually people).

In time Quiemuth, Leschi, and their families ranged widely along the Nisqually River on a yearly cycle of fishing, hunting, and plant gathering. They became particularly associated with Muck Creek, a tributary of the lower Nisqually River.

The Creek area was especially rich in salmon and other resources. Indeed, the word "Muck" most likely derived from the Chinook Jargon word "muck-a-muck" that means "to eat," "food," "feast," etc. A major Nisqually village, Yo-wal-sa, existed at the confluence of Muck Creek and the Nisqually River.

Leschi and Quiemuth had good working ties with the Hudson's Bay Company. In the nineteenth century this British corporation operated a trading post called Fort Nisqually on land that later became part of the City of DuPont. Dr. William Fraser Tolmie, in charge of Fort Nisqually for a number of years, knew the Nisqually brothers well.

In an 1858 letter to Washington Territorial Governor Fayette McMullin, the Doctor made the following statement about them: "Towards the whites he [Leschi] and his deceased brother Quiemal [Quiemuth] were from our first settlement here, in 1833, remarkably friendly and in early years they on several

occasions rendered valuable assistance in repressing thefts of horses and cattle on the part of other Indians.”

Quiemuth and Leschi helped more than Hudson’s Bay Company employees. Dr. Tolmie noted in an 1858 letter to the citizens of Washington Territory that the two Nisquallies had a reputation of assisting the first American settlers. For example, Captain J.G. Parker later recalled that Quiemuth led a pack horse that carried provisions and blankets for the pioneers building a rough road over the Cascade Mountains at Naches Pass in the early 1850s.

What type of men were Leschi and Quiemuth? Edward Huggins, the last person in charge of Fort Nisqually, remembered them as quiet and reserved. They were definitely hard working. Both brothers engaged in hunting, fishing, raising horses, and farming. Quiemuth and Leschi appear to have been prospering economically in the early 1850s. So, with good reputations and wealth, it is not surprising that many Euro-Americans saw the two as natural leaders of the Nisqually Indians.

According to historian Cecelia Carpenter, “Leadership under the Nisqually structure existed within each village population. One person, usually an adult male was chosen to become the ‘headman’ in each village by the popular support of his village.” Mrs. Carpenter also noted that “Under normal circumstances there was no one chief or leader in charge of all the Nisqually villages.”

Yet the American settlers felt they needed overall chiefs as negotiating partners for land settlements. Consequently, Governor Isaac Stevens chose chiefs for various tribes in Washington Territory. At least partly based on a recommendation by Dr. Tolmie, the Governor designated Quiemuth as Chief of the Nisqually and Leschi as Sub-Chief in time for the important Medicine Creek Council of 1854.

Two peoples came together at the Medicine Creek Council held on the Nisqually Delta in late December 1854. At this Council representatives of American settlers, led by Governor Isaac Stevens, met with Native Americans from the various bands who lived in southern Puget Sound. The Council lasted three days, from December 24<sup>th</sup> through the 26<sup>th</sup>, and resulted in the Medicine Creek Treaty. Its terms called for the Indians to cede 2,240,000 acres in return for payments in non-cash items, three small confirmed reservations, and promises of federal aid.

Both Leschi and Quiemuth attended the Medicine Creek Council, but their advice was disregarded by Governor Stevens. In 1858 the *Truth Teller* newspaper declared that “It is incomprehensible why Quiemal [Quiemuth] having been made chief should have been completely ignored at the treaty with the Nisquallies and his brother’s protestations treated with insult.”

Many Native inhabitants of southern Puget Sound found it difficult to accept the reservations established by the Medicine Creek treaty. As historian Richard White wrote, "For the prairie and inland Indians especially [and that included Quiemuth and Leschi] the treaty was disastrous. Their new reservations were heavily wooded tracts removed from any kind of adequate grazing land for their herds. Some of them would lose farm lands and horses to the whites and all of them would lose their horses."

The Nisqually Indian Reservation, as originally created in the Treaty, consisted of 1,280 acres of forested land located west of the Nisqually Delta. No wonder Leschi and Quiemuth were unhappy with the assigned reservation. Throughout the spring and summer of 1855 tensions grew between American settlers and Indians in southern Puget Sound and elsewhere in Washington Territory.

Then in the fall skirmishes between settler militiamen and Native Americans broke out starting the Puget Sound Indian War. The conflict lasted into 1856. "Leschi," as Cecelia Carpenter stated, "became the war chief of the allied warriors of the Nisqually, Puyallup and upper Duwamish tribes." Quiemuth, too, became a war leader, commanding a band active near the Nisqually River.

By the spring of 1856 the hostile Native Americans in western Washington were on the defensive before the combined forces of the U.S. Army and Territorial Militia. Leschi and Quiemuth led a group of Indian warriors on a rugged trip across the Cascades Mountains. They found no real peace in eastern Washington Territory, but only a temporary refuge.

Fighting west of the Cascades dwindled away. In early August 1856 Governor Stevens held a council at Fox Island with noncombatant southern Puget Sound Native Americans. Here, the Governor gave more land of better quality to the Medicine Creek Treaty tribes. The Nisqually Reservation, for example, was moved to include Nisqually River bottom land and expanded in size to 4,700 acres.

Perhaps sensing a chance for reconciliation with the American settlers, Quiemuth and Leschi returned to Western Washington. However, Governor Stevens maintained, in the words of historian Richard White, a "single-minded and unswerving" attitude of hostility towards Indian opposition leaders including the two Nisqually brothers.

Betrayed, Leschi was turned over to Indian Agent Sidney Ford, Jr. in mid-November 1856 and brought to Olympia. On November 16<sup>th</sup> he was taken to Fort Steilacoom. The next day, his trial for murder ended with a hung jury. The Nisqually chief was retried in March 1857, convicted, and executed by hanging on February 19, 1858. In the thoughts of many, including U.S. Army officers at Fort Steilacoom, Leschi was "judicially murdered." Nisqually Tribal members buried his body near Muck Creek.

Quiemuth surrendered to American settlers on the evening of November 18, 1856. The settlers and Nisqually leader came to Governor Stevens' office in Olympia that night. The group slept in the office while waiting for their horses to be fed and rested before going on to Fort Steilacoom. However, one or more individuals entered the building and murdered Quiemuth. No one was ever brought to justice for the crime. Quiemuth was buried near Fort Nisqually.

Memory of the two Nisqually brothers did not fade away. On July 3, 1895, Leschi and Quiemuth were reburied near the mouth of Muck Creek. Over a thousand Native Americans and many Euro-Americans attended the solemn funeral proceedings, and the festivities that followed. Both sons of Ya-nat-co were remembered and honored by the event.

More recently, the Washington Board of Geographic Names in 1993 gave the name of Quiemuth Peak to the highest point in Thurston County. This peak, measuring 2,992 feet high, is located in the southeastern corner of the County, close to Alder Lake and the Lewis County line.

In December 2004 a special state historical court retried Leschi and exonerated him on the charge of murder. The last few years have seen the commemoration of the brothers with an annual Leschi-Quiemuth Honor Walk/Run sponsored by local Tribes. Certainly the two Nisqually leaders have not been forgotten.

### **Further Information on Leschi and Quiemuth**

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