

THE MASHEL MASSACRE OF 1856

Years before the Mashel massacre and prior to any pioneer settlement in the area, the Mashel (or Me-Schal) Nisqually Indian people lived in the area now known as Eatonville. It was rich in timber, vegetation and wildlife. The two main rivers that replenished the Nisqually people were the Mashel and the Nisqually. The Nisqually River served as the local superhighway for canoes.

Though walking was the primary means of travel, canoes made up the secondary mode for the Mashel Nisqually people. Carved from a single log, they allowed passage through shallow waters as well as lakes. Using long poles instead of paddles, the Mashel Nisqually guided their canoes through other familiar waters such as Ohop Creek, Ohop Lake, Muck Creek and Clear Lake.

Along side these waters, the Nisqually built their homes and shelters according to the seasons. In the spring and summer, they used woven Cattail mats over cedar frames. During the colder months, cedar plank houses retained more warmth. The Nisqually, unlike their other coastal brothers were horse Indians.

By the time Chief Leschi, a Mashel Nisqually, was a grown man in the 1830's, the Hudson's Bay Company built Fort Nisqually. This attracted an increasing number of non-Indians into the South Puget Sound area. For years the British and Nisqually had lived and worked next to each other peacefully. Hudson's Bay employees took Nisqually wives and began homesteading in the Muck Creek and Yelm Prairie regions. The worlds of the Nisqually and the British had merged and complimented each other. Apparently the presence of the British and the early homesteaders did not change the Nisqually's life style excessively.

Starting in the 1840's, many American Settlers began coming to the area. At first the Nisqually people didn't seem to mind these newcomers. The Nisqually people continued to roam freely throughout much of the Pierce/Thurston County region. The Settlers in the area became increasingly agitated by Indians riding through "their land". Eventually, as friction increased, the Nisqually became concerned with the growing number of settlers. For some reason the settlers felt they had a right to what was legally theirs. These Americans were coming from the Oregon Trail. As of 1850, the Land Donation Act gave them "legal" title to the land. There was one major problem: it was not the Governments land to give.

Over a year after the Medicine Creek Treaty of 1853, the Nisqually Indian people were still refusing to go to their assigned reservation. Many stayed in and around their ancestral lands in what is now Eatonville, Spanaway and Yelm. Tension escalated. On March 31, 1856 fifty eight members of the Washington Mounted Rifles attacked Nisqually villages on the Mashel and the Nisqually. Accurate records were not possible so nobody knows exactly how many Nisqually died. We do know, there were no military casualties reported.

One witness states, "The old men and the women were shot down first. Then the defenseless children were killed and later the babies were found crushed against the boulders by the river and in the river..." She believed "not a life was spared." Witness Robert Thompson, who claimed to be with the Washington Mounted Rifles at the time, stated: "About fifteen or more were murdered. I saw the dead ones; two in the river. There were but two men among them. The rest were women and children." Conflicting, but unconfirmable reports suggest over thirty Nisqually perished during what was later to become known as the Mashel Massacre of 1856.