

Who Was Chief Seattle and Did He Really Say, *"The Earth Does Not Belong to Man; Man Belongs to the Earth?"*

BY PETER STEKEL

Amongst the Indians of the Pacific Northwest, perhaps none is as well known as Chief Seattle. Called Sealth by his native Suquamish tribe, the Chief's fame rests upon a speech made popular during the heady days of the 1970s. It includes such inspiring lines as, "Man did not weave the web of life; he is merely a strand in it. Whatever he does to the web, he does to himself." As early as 1975, the authenticity of these words raised doubts. Although Sealth was an eloquent speaker, could his famous words have been written by someone else?

What we know of Sealth (pronounced See-elth, with a guttural stop at the end) and his life is mostly conjecture based upon myth with a little bit of extrapolated fact. That he was a Tyee, or Chief, has never been disputed. His father, Schweabe, had been a Tyee and the title was hereditary though it conferred no power upon the holder. The Suquamish listened to the Tyee only when he said what the people wanted to hear. The remainder of the time, a Tyee was expected to share his largess with the rest of the tribe during a potlatch.

In 1792, Captain George Vancouver anchored off Restoration Point on Bainbridge Island in Puget Sound. Based upon recollections of various old-timers, Sealth often spoke of seeing the ship and being impressed with the guns, steel, and other goods. Judging from these accounts, he must have been about six years old at the time. Vancouver was not impressed, writing in his log, the village was, "...the most lowly and meanest of its kind. The best of the huts were poor and miserable..." the

people, "...busily engaged like swine, rooting up this beautiful meadow..."

As a young adult, Sealth made his mark as a warrior, orator, and diplomat. He worked to increase cooperation within the 42 recognized divisions of

Salish people occupying the Sound including his own Suquamish. In later years it was remembered that the old Chief had a resonant voice that carried, "half a mile," and, "...eloquent sentences rolled from his lips like the ceaseless thunders of cataracts flowing from exhaustless fountains..."

In 1832, he impressed Dr. William Tolmie, of Fort Nisqually as being, "the handsomest Indian I have ever seen." In 1838, Sealth was baptized, Noah, by Father Modest Demers. One wonders if the Tyee saw this as one practical way to ascend to the white man's affluence. When the Denny-Boren Party landed in 1851, to found their town on Puget Sound, Sealth was there to encourage the construction

of a trading post. When that failed, he made a marriage proposal to young Louisa Boren.

Enter Dr. David (Doc) Maynard in 1855. Maynard had left his wife of 20 years in Ohio to come west and make his fortune. One would assume that the lack of correspondence between the couple and Doc's subsequent marriage to another (without divorcing the first) indicated a glimmer of marital discord. Doc was a dreamer and he saw dollar signs on the shores of Puget Sound. No sooner had he filed on a large piece of property, next to the



Courtesy of Chelsea House Publishers

Chief Sealth represented the Duwamish and Suquamish Indians during their treaty negotiations in the 1850s.

Denny's and Boren's, than he began to give it away to encourage growth.

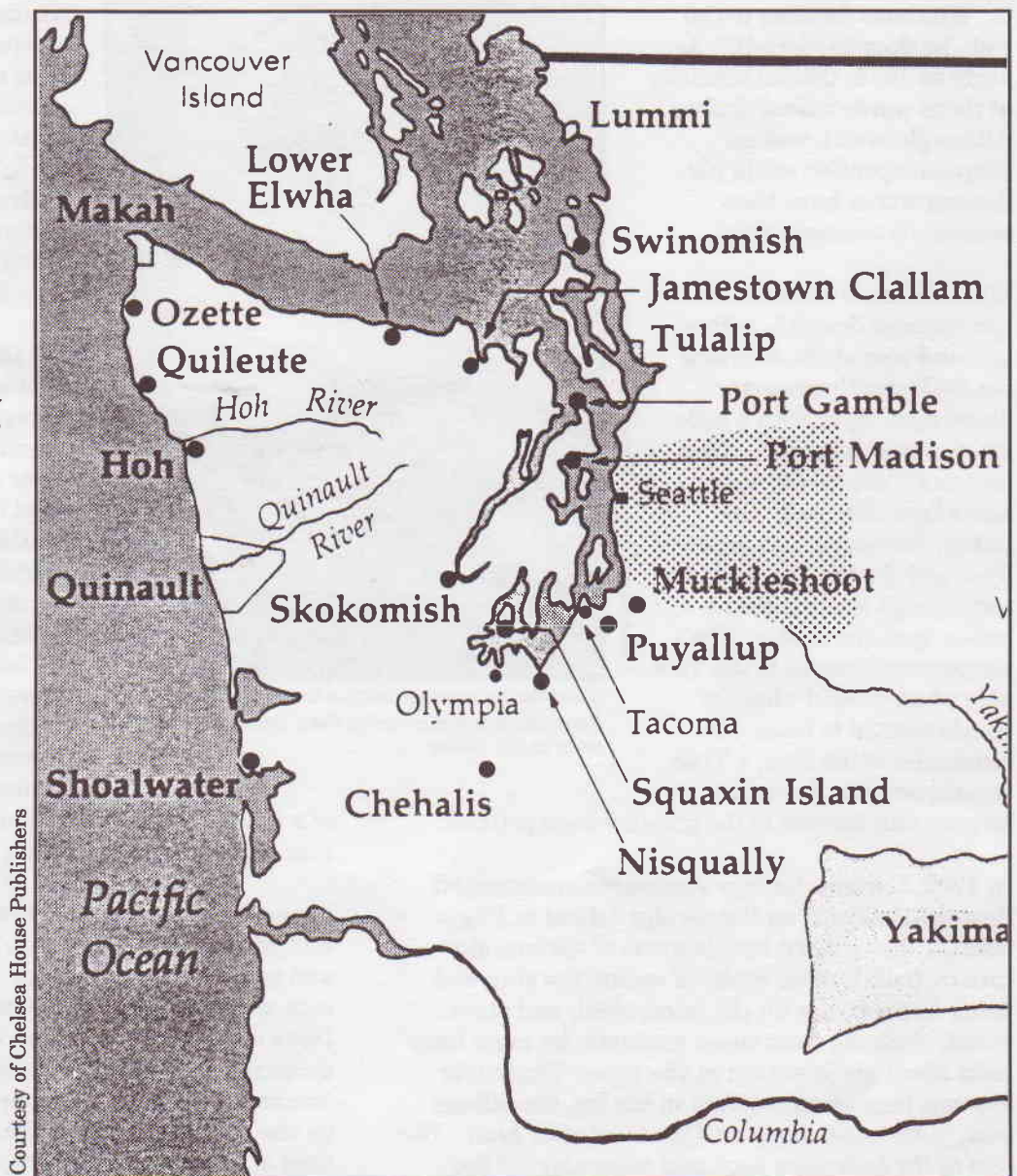
Doc opened a trading post along the shores of the Duwamish River and one of his best customers was Sealth. They became good friends and Doc named the new city after his friend, "Seattle" being as close a pronunciation as most white tongues would allow. The Tyee was less than pleased with the distinction, convinced as he was that, after dying, every time his name was spoken he would turn in his grave.

The 1850s were a turning point for the Salish peoples in and around Puget Sound. Never warlike like their belligerent neighbors to the north, the Salish preferred to raid each other and steal what they wanted. The concept of all-out war, for the sake of killing or to establish territorial privileges, was anathema to them. As more and more settlers moved into the country, aggressively displacing the Salish, discontent rose within the various tribes. With the discontent came ever more acts of violence on both sides, with the Salish increasingly on the losing end.

In 1853, Washington Territorial Governor Issac Stevens, a man who believed in the late 19th century philosophy of, "The only good Indian, is a dead Indian," began buying up or seizing Salish lands and removing the tribes to reservations. In December, 1854, the Governor visited Seattle and Tyee Sealth made a speech lamenting that the day of the Indian

had passed and the future belonged to the white man. Dr. Henry Smith, a man with a penchant for florid Victorian poetry, was on hand to take notes.

In 1855, Sealth spoke again, briefly, at the formal signing of the Port Madison Treaty which settled the Suquamish on their reservation across the Sound from Seattle. His brief remarks have none of the elaborate pretensions of most speeches recorded during that era. As historian Bernard DeVoto noted, Indian speeches tended to reflect the literary aspirations of the recorder more so than the orator.



This map of Washington shows the reservations that still exist today. The shaded area represents the lands which once belonged to the Duwamish and Suquamish tribes.

Three years later, an old and impoverished Sealth spoke one last time for the record, wondering why the treaty had not been signed by the Congress, leaving the Indians to languish in poverty. "I have been very poor and hungry all winter and am very sick now. In a little while I will die. When I do my people will be very poor; they will have no property, no chief and no one to talk for them." This entire text and Sealth's 1855 comments are preserved in the National Archives.

Until recently, the story of Chief Seattle belonged to the city that bears his name. Then, with the environmental movement in full swing, the speech Sealth made to Governor Stevens in 1854 was resurrected into the consciousness of Americans. It is not difficult to find people who attribute to the speech something approaching the level of Gospel. The speech has had a profound affect upon the environmental movement and people interested in Native Americans.

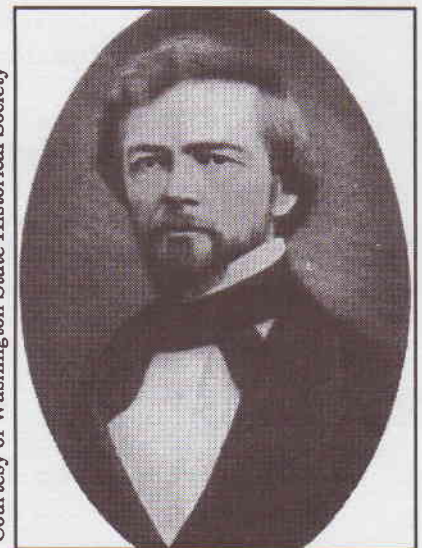
There are problems with modern versions of the speech, which has been called the embodiment of all environmental ideas, that call its authenticity into doubt. References to things Sealth would have never have seen or known about, such as trains, whippoorwills, and the slaughter of the bison (which occurred long after the Tyee's death) raised questions. Comparisons between known versions of the text have turned up four main variants, each with its own phrasing, wording, and sometimes contradictory content. There is also a shorter "letter" purportedly sent to President Franklin Pierce in 1855.

The first version of the speech has been traced to a transcription made by Dr. Henry J. Smith over 30 years after the actual event. Smith's is the original from which all others are based and appeared in the October 29, 1887 issue of the *Seattle Sunday Star* entitled, "Scraps From A Diary". It begins with a favorable description of "Old Chief Seattle" and segues into what is more than likely Dr. Smith's poetic impressions of what the Tyee said, based upon notes made at the time. Smith concludes with the comment, "The above is but a fragment of his speech, and lacks all the charm lent by the grace and earnestness of the sable old orator, and the occasion." Dr. Smith's diary cannot be found so it is impossible to know just how closely his notes followed what Sealth had to say.

Another problem is confronted here. Sealth was a prideful man and, though he embraced the white man's commercial products, refused to learn their ways and speak their language. Hence, it is safe to say that what Smith heard was a translation. It was probably made from Sealth's Lushotseed language into the Chinook jargon and then into English with each transliteration losing or embellishing something of the original. At best, the reader can assume that the Tyee's meaning, and maybe his thinking and some of his words, found their way through Smith's pen to the *Seattle Sunday Star*.

In 1931, Clarence B. Bagley published an article and reproduced the Chief Seattle speech with his own additions. In 1932, John M. Rich published a booklet called, *Chief Seattle's Unanswered Challenge*, which follows the Smith text but with some minor changes. A 1971 version by W.C. Vanderworth in, *Indian Oratory: Famous Speeches by Noted Indian Chieftains*, is essentially the same as these two.

The third major revision of the speech was done in 1969 by the poet, William Arrowsmith, who, "Translated from the Victorian English of Dr. Henry Smith," an interpretation that retains the Tyee's meaning, if not the wording and phrasing. A fourth version displayed at the 1974 Spokane Expo, a shorter "Letter to President Franklin Pierce," and many other variations at this time have familial resemblance to the Smith text but begin to adopt an ecological view. In Smith's 1887 version, the natural world is the canvas upon which Chief Seattle's words are drawn. In the 1970s, the environment is the entire painting.



Courtesy of Washington State Historical Society

Isaac Stevens, the governor of Washington Territory, convinced and coerced Indians to give up most of their lands by signing treaties. His actions triggered the Puget Sound Indian wars in the 1850's.

THE STORY OF SEATTLE

The city of Seattle got its start as a settlement much later than Olympia and Tacoma. Four covered wagons arrived in the northwest from northern Illinois in the fall of 1851, led by Arthur Denny. The group rested in Portland while Arthur's brother David and John Low went to find a suitable location for settling.

They traveled overland to Olympia then continued north by water. At Alki Point, they found that a fire had eliminated a part of the forest making the area ideal for settlement. By November, five more families joined the Denny party. They named the area New York then added the Chinook Jargon word *Alki* which means "by and by".

The following year a brig heading for San Francisco stopped to buy timber. The shallow beach at Alki Point made the loading difficult. In a dugout canoe using Mary Denny's clothesline weighted with horseshoes, the group systematically sounded the water depth of the shore from as far south as Dash Point (near Tacoma) northward to Elliott Bay. They decided on a place in Elliott Bay called *Tzee-tzee-lal-itch* by the Duwamish. This meant "Little Portage", named for the path which lead from the Sound to Lake Washington.

Additional settlers arrived including David Maynard who opened a store, Thomas Mercer who set up his horse and wagon for freight and milk delivery, and Henry Yesler who set up a steam sawmill.

Seattle's population grew to 182 but were mainly bachelors. To increase the population of the area, Asa Mercer arranged to have brides brought out from the East. Since the Civil War had reduced the male population by thousands, women who were widowed or had little chance to marry were willing to come.

Another event which would increase the chances for Seattle's success was the lobby for a territorial university. This would not only enhance education but would also stimulate real estate development. In 1861, the university opened with Asa Mercer as the president and only instructor.

By 1870, Seattle's population was over 1000. This number more than tripled by 1880 and continued to grow as the lumber and coal industries grew, drawing more immigrants and settlers to the area.

From *Exploring Washington's Past: A Road Guide to History* by Ruth Kirk and Carmela Alexander, 1990, University of Washington Press.



Dr. William Tolmie, Chief Factor of Fort Nisqually, met Chief Sealth in 1832, stating that he was "the handsomest Indian I have ever seen."

The differences between the Smith and this latest Chief Seattle are striking, including the line, "Your God loves your people and hates mine," vs. "Our God is the same God." There are phrases, the most inspiring from the newer version, which the Smith transcription lacks, "How can you buy or sell the sky, the warmth of

the land? The idea is strange to us... The rivers are our brothers... The air is precious...for all things share the same breath." And, "This we know. The earth does not belong to man. Man belongs to the earth. This we know. All things are connected like the blood which unites one family."

For many years this fourth variant has been the accepted version of Chief Seattle's speech. So, it came as some surprise when this last rendering was traced to a screenwriter, Ted Perry, for the 1972 movie, "Home", a production of the Southern Baptist Radio and Television Commission. Perry heard Arrowsmith read his version, and with permission, used the text as the basis for a new, fictitious speech for a film on pollution and ecology. The film's producers revised Perry's script without his knowledge, removed his name from the film credits, sent off 18,000 posters with the speech to viewers who requested it, and glibly began the confusion we have today. Perry was not pleased.

Ted Perry is now a professor at Middlebury College in Vermont and has tried to set the record straight but with little result. In a *Newsweek* article in 1992, Perry mused, "Why are we so willing to accept a text like this if it's attributed to a Native American," and not by a Caucasian? Over the years, he has been embarrassed by his role in putting words in the mouth of Chief Seattle. "I would never have

allowed anyone to believe that it was anything but a fictitious item written by me," he has said. Yet, Perry has also been pleased that his words have served as a powerful inspiration for so many others, "Would that this stimulus had not come at the expense of more distancing and romanticizing the Native American," he adds.

And what of Dr. Smith's version? The best that can be said is he was there when Sealth spoke in 1854, took extended notes, and waited 33 years to write them up. Any other comment about authenticity must honestly wait until Smith's diary is found and his notes disseminated.

Like many mistaken ideas given to us through the medium of popular entertainment, the legend of Chief Seattle's speech will take a long time to die. Undoubtedly there will be many who refuse to believe that such fine and noble words and sentiments could have been made by a non-Indian during the 20th century and for a television show at that. To allow any version of the speech to pass away would be to deny the magic and power of the words and their meaning. If something is true, it shouldn't matter who said it and when it was said as long as we recognize the source. What matters most is that the "Chief Seattle Speech" has something to teach us all. "So if we sell you our land, love it as we have loved it. Care for it as we have cared for it. We may be brothers after all."

The Chief died in 1866. His grave lies in a little cemetery behind the historic St. Peter's Catholic Church in the hamlet of Suguamish on Washington's Kitsap Peninsula. Through tall Douglas-fir trees towards the west, visitors can gaze across mist covered Puget Sound on warm summer days. With the snow clad Cascade Mountains on the far horizon as background, the tiny bumps of downtown Seattle rise like headstones.

Peter Stekel is a novelist living in Seattle, Washington. He has recently completed a mystery-thriller, *Collateral Damage*. Stekel also writes about science, adventure travel, and history.