

Release & Backgrounder
For Immediate Release:

Sacred Rattle Returning to W'SANEC Family After Absence of More than 76 Years

A sacred Ceremonial rattle is returning to a W'SANEC family after an absence of more than 76 years. The rattle which is carved out of horn, adorned with mountain goat wool and features a man with up-raised hands – belongs to the Claxton family of the Tsawout First Nation. It was taken from a Saanichton Museum 43 years ago by an art dealer and almost disappeared into the shady antiquities market for ever.

The sacred rattle was used for naming ceremonies, weddings or funerals of members of the society. Along with the rattle, there was a song that belonged to the family. It was a great honour to be able to use the rattle when called upon.

After an international appeal by the family, they were successful in rescuing the rattle from a New York auction block in 1997.

Dr. Nick Claxton's grandfather, Johnnie Claxton, first placed the rattle in the local museum back in 1947. Nick, a specialist in Indigenous education and Saanich cultural revival who teaches at Uvic, says his family is thrilled to have their sacred rattle returned to them at last. It would have meant so much also to the dearly departed family, two uncles, Earl and Clyde, two aunts, Molly and Janet and Gramma Elsie. The rattle was very important to them also.

Claxton says the story of the rattle's long journey home should also serve as a warning about the trade in sacred ceremonial objects and the importance of repatriating cultural materials to the First Nations. Nick would also raise his hands to all that took part in getting the rattle returned. Clarine Ostrove of Mandell Pinder, Barristers & Solicitors, who assisted Earl Sr and Jr. With much correspondence, Alan Hoover; Manager Anthropology RBCM, Saanich Native Heritage Society in much correspondence in locating the rattle and steps required to repatriate.

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TIMELINE OF THE SACRED CEREMONIAL RATTLE

The sacred rattle was originally owned by KOTTENOT, who handed the rattle down to her nephew, YELKATTE, who handed it down to his son, Johnnie Claxton. It was stored in the Claxton home until 1947 when the late Chief Ed Underwood suggested that the rattle be kept for Safe Keeping at the Saanich Pioneer Loghouse Museum.

1934 – the rattle was photographed by the Royal BC Museum, E. Newcomb.

1947 – The rattle was given by the family to Chief Ed Underwood to be kept for safe keeping at the Saanich Pioneer Loghouse Museum.

1961 – Death of Johnnie Claxton

1971 – Death of Chief Ed Underwood.

1973 – Mr. Howard Roloff paid to Mrs. Underwood the sum of \$5000 for the rattle described as Salish Rattle carved out of horn with mountain goat wool attachments, design on front of rattle, man sitting with up-raised hands. The bill of sale was signed by Mrs. Underwood as the owner and Mr. Howard Roloff as purchaser. Mr. Roloff attempted to sell the rattle to the RBCM but the museum refused to purchase it because they felt something was not right. Mr. Roloff then sold the rattle to a private collector in the USA. It disappeared thereafter for 25 years.

1997 – Mandell, Pinder, Barristers & Solicitors was hired to locate the rattle. On May 22 the Claxton family lawyers received a call and fax from Mary Jane Lenz of the National Museum of American Indian Smithsonian Institute, that the rattle was to be auctioned at the Southeby's in New York on June 4, 1997 with a starting price of \$30,000 (US). Letters of support went out to Hon. Ethel Blondin-Andrew, PC., MP Hon Murray Cole, MLA, FNCCEC, BCR signed by Tsawout Band Council, Canadian Cultural Property Export Review Board with a plea to stop the sale of the rattle.

2016 – The RBCM agree to release the rattle back to the rightful owners, agreement made by Martha Black to Dr. Nick Claxton.

BACKGROUND

Dr. Nick Claxton recounts the story of the rattle.

My dad, Lou Claxton, told me that when he was about 12 or 14 years old, the old Chief of Tsawout, Ed Underwood went from door to door asking people if there was anything that they would like stored for “safekeeping” in the Saanichton Pioneer Loghouse Museum. My dad remembered that his parents, Johnnie Claxton and his mom, Elsie Claxton had a discussion between them, and then handed the rattle over to the Chief. It was all wrapped up and in a little suitcase. My dad said the rattle had to be always wrapped up when it was not in use. So, the rattle was stored in the Pioneer Museum under the name of Johnnie Claxton, on loan to the museum by Ed Underwood. The passing of both Ed Underwood and my Grampa Johnnie Claxton made for unfortunate happenings in the weeks to follow. An antiquities dealer who knew that they had both passed on, approached the Chiefs widow and offered her a large sum of money for the rattle.

From the hands of Howard Roloff the antiquities dealer began a journey of the sacred rattle to other countries and art dealers around the world. Many, many weeks and months of searching for the sacred ceremonial rattle finally came to an end when the rattle was found, about to go up for auction in New York.

The asking price for the sacred rattle was in the thousands of dollars, which undoubtedly our family could not afford. Arrangements were made finally for financial assistance and the RBCM was to keep the rattle in their establishment for safe keeping. The long journey for our familys very precious rattle will soon come to an end when the rattle is given back to its rightful owners.

In a paragraph of the US Native American Graves Protection and Repatriation Act it states (b) Whoever knowingly sells, purchases, used for profit, or transports for sale or profit any Native American cultural items obtained in violation of (NAGPRA) shall be fined in accordance with this title, or imprisoned not more that one year, or both. I hope that antiquities and art dealers will remember this, should you decide to put any more of our people through the grief of losing our cultural and spiritual objects.