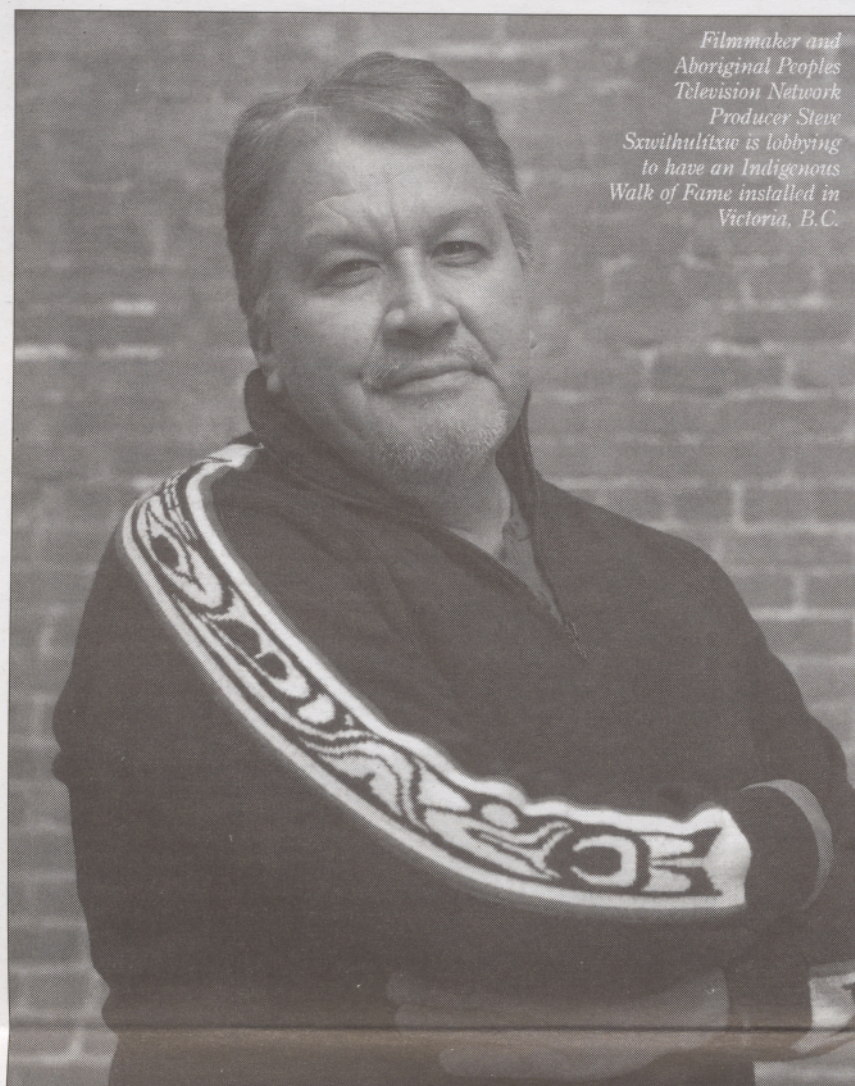




Filmmaker and
Aboriginal Peoples
Television Network
Producer Steve
Sxwithul'twx is lobbying
to have an Indigenous
Walk of Fame installed in
Victoria, B.C.

PHOTO BY JOSH TANASICHUK

Star power

Underrepresented elsewhere, native peoples in Canada are working to create an Indigenous Walk of Fame to commemorate their work in the entertainment industry

BY CAM WELCH
CONTRIBUTING WRITER

There is only one Indigenous person on Hollywood's Walk of Fame: Jay Silverheels, the Mohawk actor who played Tonto in the original Lone Ranger. Only three Indigenous people are featured on Canada's Walk of Fame.

These facts stood out to filmmaker and Aboriginal Peoples Television Network Producer Steve Sxwithul'twx (pronounced Swee-thult).

How can a demographic that is so inextricable from stories and visual art be so shut out of mainstream recognition when it comes to the dominant medium for visual storytelling?

Sxwithul'twx, a member of Vancouver Island's Penelakut Tribe, envisions that an Indigenous Walk of Fame could be created to recognize and honour the accomplishments of First Nations people in Canada.

"With filmmaking, let's go back in history.

Indigenous people are storytellers," he said. "Our history, our ways, our names and our cultures have all been passed down verbally. And now we're (using) the tools of today."

In fact, the connection between Indigenous Peoples and film is so distinct that some frame Indigenous cinema as its own genre.

"When I think of Maori and Sami cinema, I think of all of it as being part of the same genre," the Cherokee documentarian, producer and actor Heather Rae told Muskrat magazine in 2015. "It's essentially the storytelling tradition from the world's original culture in its modern form."

Canada's Walk of Fame acknowledges the achievements and accomplishments of Canadians and features a series of maple leaf-shaped stars embedded in 13 blocks of sidewalks in Toronto. Since 1998, 168 Canadians have been inducted into the walk, including athletes, coaches, actors, directors, writers; movie, television and stage directors; singers, songwriters and

musicians; and playwrights, authors, comedians, cartoonists and models.

The Hollywood Walk of Fame is made up of more than 2,600 terrazzo and brass stars embedded in the sidewalks along 15 blocks of Hollywood Boulevard in California. The Hollywood Walk of Fame includes actors, directors and producers of movie, TV, radio and live productions. Special stars recognize contributions made by corporate entities, service organizations and honorees.

The lack of First Nations representation on these mainstream walks of fame, which include just four individuals out of more than 2,700 names, spurred Sxwithul'twx – who has been in the industry since 2007 and has his own production company, Kwassen Productions – to produce a walk of fame created by and for Indigenous Peoples, rather than waiting for settler culture to acknowledge their work.

After gathering input from others, he expanded his initial scope beyond the screen arts to also include sports, music, and the arts.

In November 2017, Sxwithul'twx went before Victoria City Council to do a five-minute presentation on his idea. The motion was put forward formally by three councillors at the next meeting and passed pending approval from local First Nations, which Sxwithul'twx had already sought.

"I'm from the Island, so bringing it to Songhees and Esquimalt was very simple for me," he explained. "I follow protocol; I know the ways of our people."

Sxwithul'twx, says that due to his track record, he received the trust and support of Songhees Chief Robert Sam and late Esquimalt First Nation Chief Andy Thomas, who died in April at the age of 71.

Sxwithul'twx is hoping for a \$400,000 budget for the first year and an ongoing budget for following years. He envisions the Walk of Fame starting in Bastion Square and running along Government Street.

Some of his initial ideas for the first round of inductees are: Alanise Obomsawin (longtime documentary filmmaker), Gino Odjick (former Vancouver Canuck), Buffy St. Marie (singer), the late Chief Dan George (actor), and Tantoo Cardinal (actor). The process will likely involve a nomination system and selection committee.

Interestingly, Cardinal is among hundreds of people who, last month, were invited to join the Academy of Motion Picture Arts and Sciences, the academy behind the Oscars.

The Cree/Métis actor told the CBC that her invitation represents a shift toward increased cultural diversity at the star-studded Hollywood event.

"There has been a cry out for more diversity at the Oscars and kind of all over in our society, actually," Cardinal said in an interview with CBC Radio. "There is a lot imbalance that has to be looked at."

Cardinal, who has been awarded the Order of Canada and who has received numerous accolades for her contributions to the Indigenous community, said that the invitation is an important symbolic gesture.

Indigenous People have been breaking

barriers as filmmakers, actors and storytellers, and Hollywood is starting to take notice, she said.

"Our voices have to be brought forward," she said. "It's happening and that's very exciting, so this just another part of that movement."

Meanwhile, the Victoria Walk of Fame project's further development is now in the hands of the City Family, a body consisting of Songhees, Esquimalt and Victoria council representatives. The City Family began in 2017 as part of the City of Victoria's move towards reconciliation.

"The City Family structure was based on some of the practices and traditions of the Esquimalt and Songhees Nations, rather than a city committee structure and how we usually do business," explained Councillor Jeremy Loveday, one of the initial supporters of the walk.

Sxwithul'twx checks in regularly on the walk project's progress but doesn't anticipate laying any stars until 2020.

In the meantime, he's continuing to seek funding and support for when it comes time to finance the construction, producing events, alerting the media and manufacturing the stars themselves.

He says he's spoken with Legislative Assembly member Victoria-Beacon Hill, Carole James and federal Member of Parliament Murray Rankin, who passed word of the project on to both Canada's Justice Minister and Prime Minister Justin Trudeau.

While the walk is in the works, Sxwithul'twx is keeping busy with his

own career. He has approached the CBC network with the idea for a First Nations scripted program, which he feels the network and other mainstream outlets were not ready for 10 or even five years ago. But many media sources are beginning to seek and support Indigenous content, he says, and he's cautiously optimistic.

"We (Indigenous Peoples) don't trust a lot of people because we've been burned so many times," he explained. But Sxwithul'twx is hopeful that a new paradigm is beginning that the next generation can benefit from.

"I tell all of our youth, 'You are in the perfect position if you decide to excel and promote yourself and find expertise in certain areas ... you will be sought after,'" he said. "And that's something that our people are not used to. I'm getting used to it – I love it – and that's the way it should be."

It's for these young people that Sxwithul'twx believes the walk will make a real difference. Making the creative industries and mainstream culture as a whole more welcoming for young Indigenous storytellers is much of what drives him to push the project forward.

"Our people need role models," he said. "We've been oppressed, we've been put in residential schools, we've been nickel-and-dimed. We've had a rough, rough time in the 150 years we've been a part of this country. We've had little or no role models in multiple areas."

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