

Washington court considers Chief Leschi's legacy

Will he be known as hero or murderer?

YELM, Wash. (AP) - Chief Leschi fought to preserve his tribe's way of life and died a hero to his people.

But in the official records of Washington state, Leschi is a convicted murderer, hanged for the death of a militia soldier in the 1855 Indian War.

Everyone from Leschi's executioner to respected historians have questioned his guilt. This week, the chief justice of Washington state's Supreme Court is convening a historical trial to seek justice, at long last, for Chief Leschi.

"It's a search for the truth," Chief Justice Gerry Alexander said.

The search began generations ago, among Nisqually Indians who kept Leschi's legacy alive through stories they told their children and grandchildren.

Cynthia Iyall, a descendant of Leschi's sister, remembers visiting her grandfather's home on a bluff where Leschi (pronounced LESH-eye) and his brother Quimeth (KWAY-muth) used to camp.

"It was just fantastic. He would tell us how they used to burn the prairies for grazing, and about their horses," Iyall said. "They had a view for miles. I could imagine way back when, Leschi and Quimeth sitting up there watching the militia men."

Iyall grew up knowing Leschi's life by heart. She didn't dwell much on his death until she had a child and started thinking about the stories she would pass down to him.

"It really makes a big difference to know who your ancestors are and where they came from, and pass that on to your kids," Iyall said. "To know our historical icon, the person who is why we are here today, is considered a murderer - the people of Washington state need to know the true history."

Legend says a bright star rose over the Nisqually plains the night Leschi was born in 1808. Wealthy in horses, Leschi was also known for his wisdom and eloquence.

The Nisqually Indians did not have formal chiefs, though. That distinction was conferred upon Leschi by Isaac Stevens, Washington's first territorial governor, who needed someone to sign treaties for the tribe.

The Medicine Creek Treaty of 1854 defined reservations for the Nisqually and several other Puget Sound tribes. An X appears next to Leschi's name, though some historians say he refused to sign. The treaty consigned the Nisqually - whose original name, Squally-absch, meant "people of the river and people of the grass country" - to a high forest, cut off from their homes on the prairie and the river.

War between the Indians and the territorial militia broke out in 1855, and in 1856 Leschi was captured on Stevens' orders.

The government charged Leschi with the murder of Col. A. Benton Moses, a militia soldier killed in battle. The trial ended with a hung jury. At the second trial, the court refused to instruct the jury that killing an enemy soldier in war is not considered murder. Leschi was convicted and sentenced to death.

On appeal, the territorial Supreme Court declined to consider new evidence showing Leschi was miles away when Moses was killed.

The U.S. Army refused to execute Leschi, as military lead-

ers believed the rules of war should have prevented him from being charged with murder. Then as now, debate raged about the distinction between prisoners of war, "enemy combatants" and terrorists.

Pierce County authorities oversaw Leschi's execution on Feb. 19, 1858.

Indian drums sounded in the distance as Leschi stood on the gallows. His hangman, Charles Grainger, later said, "I felt then I was hanging an innocent man, and I believe it yet."

Leschi did win one battle in the end: after his death, the government moved the Nisqually reservation to a more suitable spot on the river, about 50 miles south of Seattle, where his descendants still live. When Iyall was hired as the Nisqually tribe's economic development planner, she also became chairwoman of the Committee to Exonerate Chief Leschi.

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