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A Short History of Port Gamble S’Klallam Tribe

By Jeromy Sullivan, Tribal Chairman

Every year thousands of people pass through Little Boston, but don’t understand the centuries of history and tradition that the area represents. This is my home and has been for generations in my family, for our people.

The S’Klallams were originally called the Nux Sklai Yem, meaning “Strong People.” We are descendants of the Salish people and have been established in the Puget Sound basin since 2400 B.C. The S’Klallams once lived in small villages, many located on the shores of the Straits of Juan de Fuca, but following the 1855 Treaty of Point No Point, many S’Klallams ended up at Lower Elwha, Jamestown and Port Gamble. Each of these villages would later attain status as recognized tribes.

Port Gamble S’Klallams once called what is now the town of Port Gamble home.

In 1853 William Talbot founded the Port Gamble Mill. As the mill grew, the Port Gamble S’Klallams were asked to relocate across the Bay to Point Julia. We agreed with the promise that our people would have jobs at the mill and lumber to build homes. Community facilities, including a new school, were also constructed. S’Klallams traded with the settlers while working at the Port Gamble Mill and establishing life-long friendships with many families in the surrounding towns.

The new village became known as Little Boston. The mill company bought up land in the area, including Little Boston. In the late 1930s the federal government purchased Point Julia and some surrounding parcels owned by the mill, in order to create the 1,231-acre Port Gamble S’Klallam Reservation. Although the federal government initially purchased the Reservation land, the Tribe reimbursed the cost in the 1970s. Today, the Tribe has a reservation with 100% tribal trust status and no individual or outside ownership.

Over the years, as the Strong People, we have survived through an exceptional ability to adapt and adjust to change. In 1976 a modern tribal center was built and, by 1992 the Tribe became self-governing, taking over responsibility for providing programs and services from the federal government. Over the years the Tribe has proudly grown to serve its members as well the surrounding communities, where possible, with an award-winning health clinic, new housing, a fish hatchery, and, most recently, the House of Knowledge with its longhouse, education center, youth center, elders center and award-winning Little Boston Library.

In 2004, the Tribe purchased 391 acres of former DNR land and added this to other small parcels of land owned near or adjacent to the reservation. While the Tribe is looking to

build its businesses with an eye on self-sufficiency, we hold most dear our traditional culture. Our songs, dances, and traditional art as well as our participation in annual canoe journeys, our love of being in the midst of nature, and our honoring of our elders and close family ties: these are the important values of our community. We have demonstrated determination to remain together as a close-knit family of many, while striving to be a good neighbor through environmental efforts and charitable contributions to support schools, food banks, and those in need.

If you're interested in reading more about Port Gamble S'Klallam history, I would suggest: Shadows of Our Ancestors: Readings in the History of Klallam-White Relations, edited by Jerry Gorsline, and Native Peoples of the Olympic Peninsula, edited by Jacilee Wray. Additional information about the Port Gamble S'Klallam Tribe is available at www.pgst.nsn.us.