

ORIGINS

Place names in British Columbia tell a story about the cultural interplay between First Nations

and European settlers in the recent history of the province. At one time, all place names in the province were derived from First Nations languages. Many became replaced with the European names by which we know many towns and districts in the province today.

What is less widely known are the origins and meanings of the names for some First Nations' communities. In some cases, government commissioners simply changed the traditional name of a Band. This is the case of the [Bonaparte Band](#) near the community of Ashcroft, BC, which was re-named by government officials in the 1870s to commemorate Napoleon Bonaparte, the French Emperor.

“Government commissioners simply changed the traditional name of a Band”

Other names that may appear to have European origin are in fact traditional names. This is the case for the Canim Lake Band because the word [Canim](#), in Chinook jargon, means canoe or broken rock. In this case, the lake part of the name was tacked on by the government. The name for the [Cheslatta Carrier Nation](#), located near Burns Lake, BC, is either interpreted in the Carrier language as meaning top of the mountain, or small rock mountain at the east side. The [Esquimalt](#) Band near Victoria, BC, draws its name from the Salish word meaning “the place of gradually shoaling water.” On the north central coast of British Columbia, the [Heiltsuk](#) Nation, formerly known as the Bella Bella, reflects this First Nation’s traditional values with respect to good manners. The word Heiltsuk translates as “to speak or act correctly.”

In central British Columbia the Kamloops Band derives its name from the Shuswap language where the word [Kamloops](#) means “the meeting of the waters.”

As First Nations languages in many cases fell into disuse, it is not surprising that elders engage in lively debates with respect to the true meaning of some words. This is the case of the Malahat First Nation on the Saanich Inlet, north of Victoria. One interpretation of the name [Malahat](#) holds that it means “infested with caterpillars” referring to a year when tent caterpillars stripped the trees of all their leaves. The other interpretation of the name is that it means “place where one gets bait” which could likely mean that the bait in question were the very same caterpillars.

In the far south of British Columbia can be found the Osoyoos Band, who enjoy a vigorous economy including wineries, golf courses, resorts and construction companies. The word [Osoyoos](#) comes from the Okanagan language where the word [sooyoos](#) means the long strip of land that cuts Osoyoos Lake in two. The nearby Penticton Band takes its name from the [Okanagan](#) word meaning “permanent abode.”

The Tahltan First Nation, northwest of Terrace, BC, takes its name from a word in the [Athapaskan](#) language which reflects the importance of salmon in the culture. The word [Tahltan](#) is said to translate as “something heavy is going up the little water” referring to the masses of salmon working their way through smaller streams. At the other end of the province, the Tsawwassen First Nation takes its name from the [Halkomelem](#) language, which means “facing the sea.”

The meanings of many names for First Nations are lost in time. But for each member of the almost 200 First Nations in British Columbia, the name of their community means something uniquely personal.