



# Semá:th Xó:tsa

*Sts'ólemeqwelh Sxó:t*sa Great-Gamma's Lake

Story by Thetáx Chris Silver, Xémontélót Carrielynn Victor, Kris Foulds, and Laura Schneider  
Illustrations by Xémontélót Carrielynn Victor

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## Foreword

Dear Reader,

This book is about what Semá:th Xó:tsa means to our people.

To write this book, we drew upon echoes of the stories and teachings of our Sumas ancestors. We have used oral and visual storytelling in the book to help readers to understand how stories are passed down through generations. These stories must be presented with respect, honor, and dignity.

Writing this book is another step in the process of Truth and Reconciliation. It is a chance to share Sumas history with young people so they understand that the lake was part of our everyday lives, and that its memory remains a part of our lives today. The lake is remembered through its stories.

It is important to acknowledge what has happened to our land, and the changes experienced by the Sumas people over the last 100 years. This book is just one story of the changes to the land and water experienced by Indigenous people since settlers came to our territory. These changes continue to impact our people today.

Today, our territory continues to put food on people's tables. We hope this book will open up a world for you, the younger generation, to see that this has always been true and to appreciate how much Semá:th Xó:tsa has provided for our people.

Thetáx Chris Silver  
Sumas First Nation

THIS BOOK IS DEDICATED TO ALL THE PEOPLE WHOSE VOICES KEPT THE STORIES ALIVE

## Language Guide

*Audio files to support correct pronunciation are available online at [thereach.ca](http://thereach.ca).*

### **Semá:th**

Sumas village and surrounding area encompassing present-day Kilgard to the Fraser River.

### **Xó:tsa**

Lake.

### **Xwelítem**

“Be extremely hungry,” since the first settlers were often in this state when they arrived.

### **Sqwélqwel**

A true story that was told.

### **Kw'ekw'e'i:qw**

The name of the Stó:lō settlement now known as Sumas First Nation.

### **Sxwōxwíyam**

Stories from the ancient people.

### **Texqeyl**

A settlement that was on both sides of the Sumas River. The word also means “always going dry,” “inlet,” and “water goes in and out.”

### **Stó:méx**

Warrior.

### **Salí:ts**

A settlement of houses built on stilts above the water in Sumas Lake. People went there to get away from mosquitoes.

### **Móqwem**

Swamp tea, or Labrador tea.

### **T'emó:sa**

Wild rhubarb, or an area where rhubarb grew near creeks.



**T**he boy hurried home from school. Excited to see his Gramma after a long day, he opened the door "Gramma! Gramma!" he called out. "I went to the museum today!"

The boy hugged her and beamed as he shared what he had learned that day on a field trip to the museum.



“There used to be a big, beautiful lake that filled the Sumas Prairie. Sumas Lake!

For the farmers it was a problem. In the spring, the lake would grow and grow. The flooding was bad for the new way of life the settlers brought with them. It flooded their houses, it flooded their fields, and it ruined their crops.”



**“100** years ago, to stop the flooding and to get more land, the lake was emptied into the river. The **xwelítem** bought a giant pump to suck out all the water and turned the lake into farmland.

The lady from the museum said our ancestors lived in understanding with the cycles of the lake, the birds, the fish, and even the mosquitos that were here. They all had story and important roles.

Do you remember the lake, Gramma?”



**G**ramma reached out to hug her grandson, she smiled.

“No my dear, the lake was gone before I was born. But your Great-Gramma shared **sqwélqwel**, one of our family stories, with me when I was a little girl. I think today while we go to get blueberries, I will tell you some of those stories. Let’s go for a drive.”





**A**s they buckled their seatbelts, Gramma began a story.

“The original name for our community is **Kw’ekw’e’i:qw**. It means ‘sticking up.’ Like how Sumas Mountain sticks up over the valley. During the time of the great flood, canoes were tied near here and at Mt. Baker. After the lake was drained, our people saw fish heads sticking up and would say **Kw’e’kwe’i:qw**.

The lake was still here when your Great-Gamma was a little girl. Back then, they called it **Semá:th Xó:tsa**. The lake was known for sturgeon, and Great-Gamma said that for years after it was drained farmers would still find them living in the mud! Some live more than 150 years!”



**G**amma drove up the big hill. They got out of the car and climbed through the fence.

“Here’s Lightning Rock. Our *sxwōxwíyam*, the long-ago stories that tell us about creation, say this rock was hit by a bolt of lightning that split it into four pieces, pointing in the four directions.

We need to be careful here, there are burial sites nearby. This is a spiritual place for Stó:lō families. We always need to protect what’s been left to us my boy.

Between Sumas River and the mountain there was a big village of plankhouses and pithouses. The pithouses were built into the ground and stayed warm in the winter and cool in the summer.”



**A**s the boy was imagining the impressive village, Grandma's car crossed a bridge.

"The channel near the Vedder Canal Bridge was an entrance to the lake. On both sides of that channel there was a village called **Texqeyl**.

This was a place for warriors, **stó:méx**. Sometimes people would travel from the coast to raid our villages. The rock bluffs on the mountain were lookouts for the **stó:méx**. When they spotted the invaders, they would use fires or smoke to send warning signals upriver."



**T**he boy was wide-eyed as Gramma described the warriors.

“The **stó:méx** were brave and clever, they could appear to run on top of the water using the long, thick grass in the lake. The invaders saw them and tried to follow but fell in!

There are so many stories about how **Semá:th Xó:tsa** was important to our ancestors.”



“I am going to stop and buy some blueberries from a market,”  
said Gramma.

“Many kinds of wild berries and plants still grow all around the lake. Long ago, each family tended and harvested their own special berry picking places. And there were so many kinds of fish: salmon, trout, sculpin, dace, suckerfish, steelhead, and most of all sturgeon!

Some of the ways to harvest and prepare fish are still used today, and some were lost or replaced. **Semá:th** sockeye were once abundant but are now extinct. Other species still live in rivers and lakes nearby.”



**G**amma chose several flats of large, sweet blueberries carefully placing them in the trunk of the car. As they set off again, a pair of ducks flew across the road in front of them.

“The flocks of ducks and geese that came here were so large they covered the sun like huge, dark clouds,” she explained. “Depending on how many ducks were needed, some hunters would lay nets across the surface of the lake and wait quietly for the flocks to land, then pull on the nets to tangle their feet.”



“Where we are driving now is where the lake used to be, can you imagine?”

Gramma gestured towards the community of Yarrow. “Over there was **Sali:ts**, a seasonal village of houses built on stilts above the water where the wind blew almost all the time. The mosquitos hatched in the shallow edges of the lake and were kept near the shore by the wind.

To get to and from the village the people travelled in shovel-nosed canoes. That style of canoe has a wide, flat bottom for carrying things and they are very safe, even for river travel.”



**A**s Gramma turned the car toward home, they continued their drive across the lakebed. The boy tried to imagine the open fields as a bountiful lake.

“**Semá:th Xó:t̥sa** was always changing,” Gramma said. “The people would move with each seasonal rise and fall, following and caring for the abundance around them. The marshes around the lake were rich with food and medicine plants, like your favorite tea, **móqwem**. Many of those old medicines are still here.”

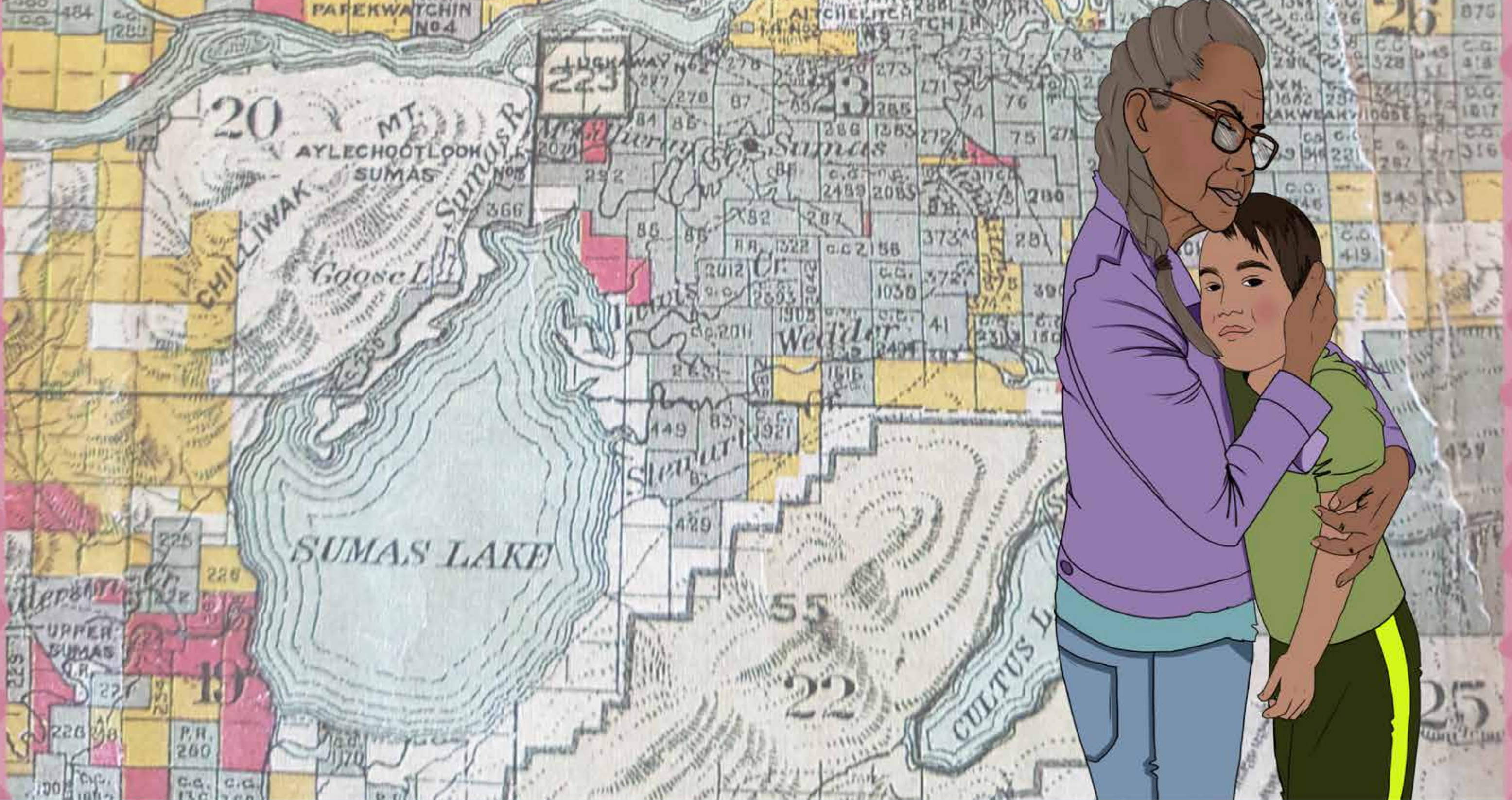




**A**s they crossed the freeway, the boy spotted people playing mini golf. “Gramma, look!”

“Yes, that’s the last place I want to tell you a story about. Long before there was an amusement park, this prairie was like a market and a pharmacy for many families, not just **Semá:th** people. Your Great-Gramma called this prairie **T’emó:sa**.

Deer and elk came down from the mountain to drink at the lake, hunters laid traps in fallen trees to catch them. Sometimes there would be two or three deer in the trap, so hunters would let some go.”



**G**ramma smiled at the boy as they arrived home safely.

“The lake is gone and now you know a few stories, but there are many stories to tell. Do your best to remember every little thing. Each person you come across with knowledge of **Semá:th Xó:tsa** may have a new and interesting story to share with you.”



*Semath Xotsa; Sunas Lake*

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