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## One River, Two Cultures, A History of the Bella Coola Valley

### Chapter 20: A Pot of Gold



**Lester Edgar scoops grease from the top of the cook box. The grease is then reheated, skimmed and strained to remove any impurities. Photo by Paula Wild**

Linda and I spent our last evening in Bella Coola, in the spring of 1997, exploring the estuary. It was low tide and we walked out farther than I'd ever been before. There were signs that something had been eating the roots of certain plants. "Bear," I thought but didn't say anything.

A little while later, it was obvious that something – or maybe more than one something – had been eating a lot of roots. And the activity looked recent, like about five minutes ago. We were standing in a patch of Scotch broom and each bush was big enough to hide at least one bear. "Come on," I urged Linda. "We have to get out of here."

I knew any bears around at this time of year would have just come out of hibernation. They'd be hungry and cranky, especially if it was a mother with cubs. "We need to make some noise," I said. We each grabbed two sticks and clapped them together as we walked briskly toward the townsite.

"No matter what happens, don't run," I added. I remembered once asking Rick who would be a good person to have with me in the valley in case I ran into a bear. "Someone who runs slower than you," he'd replied. It had seemed funny at the time.

Then I realized that we were in serious trouble. Linda and I had just spent the weekend at the Walkus “grease camp,” cooking ooligans. We had showered, washed our hair and changed our clothes but I was wearing the only coat I had brought with me. It smelled like rotten fish – a bear’s favourite food.

I took my jacket off and tied the sleeves around my waist. If we saw a bear, I’d drop the coat – that might provide enough of a distraction for us to get away. Numerous thoughts scurried through my mind. “Linda’s family will never forgive me if we’re killed by a bear.” “What would the grease gang think of the ‘white girls’ now?” But most of all, I kept asking myself, “How could I have been so stupid?”

I felt a tingling between my shoulder blades and was convinced that a bear was stalking us. The fear must have shown on my face because as I turned to look, Linda shrieked and broke into a run. I joined her, and yelling and banging our sticks, we burst through a thin screen of trees to the safety of a paved street.

I knew the safety was relative – no patch of pavement would deter a bear intent on a savoury meal – but it was a short walk to the motel and the more realistic security of four walls and a door.

When I had the opportunity to participate in the centuries-old tradition of making “grease,” I’d never considered the possible presence of bears. But then I’d never thought I’d be excited about cooking a bunch of stinky fish either.

Every spring for as long as anyone can remember and, according to oral legend way before that, the Bella Coola River has filled with millions of ooligans pushing their way upstream to spawn. For thousands of years, the Nuxalkmc have used the oil rendered from these smelt-like fish as a food, medicine and a highly valued trade commodity.

Ooligan oil was bartered with Interior First Nations for moose meat, leather goods and obsidian, and with the coastal Heiltsuk for seaweed, herring eggs and abalone shells. The oil, or “grease” as it is commonly known, has a high nutritional value and is especially rich in vitamins A, E and K.

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