

Popping the cork

In 1817 the life of Chief Little Legs of the Shuswap First Nation was saved when his hunting companions performed primitive neurosurgery on the banks of Jacques Creek, Peachland—now known as Trepanier Creek.



Photo by Tania Simpson

Trepanier Creek as it looks today.

Sterling Haynes, MD

Corkscrews were first made by gunsmiths and derived from the gun worm, a single or double spiral (an Archimedian spiral), a steel fitting used to clean musket barrels or extract unspent charges from gun barrels. Theologian Reverend Samuel Henshall of Middlesex, England, patented the first corkscrew in August, 1795. At that time it was used for removing corks from holy wine bottles.

Later, a Canadian metal gun worm was used by hunters in BC to clear their muskets. A gun worm or primitive type of corkscrew was probably used in trepanning human skulls, elevating depressed skull fractures (popping the cork), removing bits of bone driven into the brain, or relieving pressure due to epidural or subdural bleeds

Dr Haynes, a retired physician living in Kelowna, has written for the *Harvard Medical Alumni Journal*, the *Medical Post*, *Alberta Views*, *Okanagan Life*, and other publications.

in the skull. Trephination (trepanning) was known by the native people of pre-Columbian Mesoamerica and was used extensively for a variety of symptoms. Burr holes have been found in the skulls of First Nations people.

Bob Hayes, a high school teacher, gave a talk recently in Kelowna to the Genealogy Society about the use of trepanning that saved the life of Chief Little Legs of the Shuswap First Nation. The original historian in the Okanagan was Leonard Norris, a Freemason, of Peachland, BC. It was likely that Jacques Creek was renamed Trepanier Creek before 1878. “Brother Norris thinks [the name Trepanier Creek] had something to do with ‘trepanning,’ the surgical operation of removing a piece of bone from the skull, or the instrument used in doing so, and cites an incident by Ross in his *Fur Traders of the Far West*, where such an operation took place, possibly in or near Okanagan Lake.”¹

This may be the tale of Chief Little Legs. The chief was hunting bear on Jacques Creek in 1817 when he was attacked by his prey. The bear scalped

him, and he suffered extensive injuries to his skull. He was found unconscious soon after the attack by his fellow hunters, who elevated his depressed skull fracture (or evacuated a blood clot) when they trepanned his skull.² Then they sewed his scalp back on by the banks of Jacques Creek. It is likely that burr holes were made with a gun worm—a case of a primitive neurosurgery. Chief Little Legs survived.

If you are visiting Trepanier Creek in Peachland in the fall, watch the Kokanee spawning and visit the many local wineries. But be wary! Late in the evening, after extensive wine tasting, you may see the ghost of Chief Little Legs—he’ll have a semi-circular scar on his scalp, be partly bald, and have a musket in his hand.

References

1. Trepanier Lodge No. 83. History of Grand Lodge of BC AF & AM 1871-1970. www.trepanier83.com/trepanier_83_history.htm (accessed 2 February 2010).
2. Okanagan Historical Society. What’s in a Name; 1948.