Washington state expresses regret over 1884 lynching of Canadian teen

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Washington state legislators have moved to make amends 122 years after a mob of American vigilantes crossed into Canada and lynched a native teenager, in an incident that nearly started a cross-border race war.

Members of the state's House of Representatives approved a Senate resolution on Wednesday that expressed "deepest sympathy" for the descendents of Louie Sam.

Sam, who belonged to the Sto:lo First Nation whose homelands lie in the Fraser Valley, east of Vancouver, was falsely accused in the 1884 murder of a shopkeeper near Sumas, Wash.

A mob rode across the border, snatched Sam from Canadian police custody and hanged him from a tree.

- FROM FEB. 3, 2006: Sask. premiere for 'Lynching of Louie Sam'

Canadian investigators later determined that he never committed the crime and was framed by two white Americans who stirred up the mob.

"Through this resolution, the Senate joins its peers in the government of British Columbia, acknowledging the unfortunate historical injustice to Louie Sam and the proud Sto:lo people," Washington Lt.-Gov. Brad Owen said at the capitol building in Olympia.

"It is meant to further ensure that such a tragedy will never be forgotten, nor repeated."
Owen then handed the resolution to Sto:lo Grand Chief Clarence Pennier, who said members of the tribe had never forgotten the injustice of Sam's death.

He thanked the legislators for righting the historic wrong by acknowledging it.

The passing of the resolution was followed by a traditional native healing circle. The sounds of beating drums and chanting echoed through the capitol building as state officials, a B.C. cabinet minister and Sto:lo Nation elders joined in.

Owen's staff had hired two historians to help prepare the legislative resolution.

One of them, Keith Thor Carlson from the University of Saskatchewan, has long studied the case and is writing a book about it.

He has said Sto:lo leaders turned Sam over to the Canadian police after he was accused, believing he would be safe in custody.

They were outraged when the mob of up to 120 vigilantes abducted and killed the teen.

Carlson said some members of the tribe argued after his death that they should cross the border and randomly kill 120 Americans — the number believed to have been in the lynch mob.

The historian said many believed the incident nearly started a race war.

The B.C. government tried to keep the peace by sending two undercover officers south of the border, who returned with statements incriminating two Washington men in the slaying.

Neither man was ever prosecuted.

The legislators fell short of issuing a full apology, because of legal reasons and in part because Washington did not become a state until a few years after the lynching.