Great River of the West

Essays on the Columbia River

Edited by
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What Ever Happened to the First Peoples of the Columbia?

by Eugene S. Hunn

The First Peoples of the Big River, of Nez-Perce—the Columbia as we know it today—flow the river still. They call it home. They come together each year in April at Celilo, Priest Rapids, and Rock Creek to thank the Creator for the sacred foods—salmon, butterroot, Indian celeries, huckleberries, and water—that still sustain their spirit; and they clean the graves of their ancestors each Memorial Day—those graves not drowned beneath the dams, that is—returning to the old cemeteries that overlook the river. These First Peoples have their own history to tell, a continuing saga, a contemporary history that is poorly known beyond their own communities. I will try to sketch that history for you, relying on my reading of the documentary record and on what Columbia River Indians have taught me of these matters. It is a dynamic history, tragic and inspiring by turns.

The First Peoples of the Columbia are the direct descendants of the men and women whom Lewis and Clark and David Thompson encountered on their pioneering journeys of exploration in the nineteenth century opened. The First Peoples greeted these alien—these uspawn, as whites are known in Indian—peaceably; but with a mix of fear and anticipation. They had heard rumors and prophecies of their coming, and they had heard of the whites' great material wealth, of their pale skin, of their magic book. They helped these first explorers in many ways. Without the Indians' forbearance and the generous gifts of fish, of meat, of cakes, and of advice and information about the road ahead, the explorers would likely not have returned to the East to tell their tales, to publish the journals on which we now rely for a glimpse into an independent Indian way of life.

The First Peoples spoke Sahaptin, Sahaptin, and Chinookan languages, languages as disparate as English, Hindi, Turkish, and Japanese. These languages found subtlety and power in the cessions of chiefs and the sacred storytelling by the elders of Coyote's great doings at the close of the Myth Age. Without writing, these Indians nevertheless faithfully transmitted ten thousand years of accumulated knowledge and insight through the generations. Some elders still tell these stories to a new generation of Indian children, and the quiet eloquence of chiefs still guides council deliberations. In January 1991, I was invited to a meeting at Celilo of the Columbia River Indians, an informally constituted council led by Rock Creek, Klickitat, and Celilo chiefs. There was no formal agenda, but a number of critical issues were before them, such as the new education program for the children of Celilo and how to respond to the federal government's latest in fish-planting site proposals. A point of contention was their relationship as the original Columbia River peoples to the established tribal governments at Yakama and Warm Springs reservations; governments that claim to represent their interests. Chief Howard Jen presented. All present were eager to speak their minds—whether in the native idiom, their hearts. Those in command of the Indian language spoke in Sahaptin, which was then translated for those who could not fully understand what was said. The people of Celilo have a lot of worriesome problems. Their lives are not easy, and they feel a heavy sense of loss when they speak of how things used to be when the Columbia River was theirs alone. They miss the river as well their.
Where should we begin with the First Peoples’ story? Perhaps with Luther Crewman’s discovery of a basket knife embedded two feet above the present level of the Columbia River in gravel of the glacial Lake Missoula flood. This flood carved the Grand Coulee and scraped the channel scablands to bedrock. It was set loose perhaps 12,300 to 15,000 years ago. The great lake, impounded by a tongue of the Cordilleran ice cap in what is now western Montana, broke loose in one great sweep across the Columbia Basin.1 Was the man who formed the knife swept off with that flood?

Crewman was also involved with salvage excavations at Fivemile Rapids before the waters rose in 1957, impounded by The Dalles Dam. Such salvage operations have been the norm for archaeological research along the mid-Columbia, one step ahead of progress. Crewman found a record of intensive salmon fishing at the rapids dating to 10,000 years ago—including the use of gill nets, suggested by the presence of grooved stone weights that may have been used to hold the nets in position. During subsequent millennia, styles of tool manufacture changed as the climate first grew warmer and then stabilized several millennia ago, closely approximating present-day conditions. About that time, the bow and arrow supplanted the atlatl as the hunting weapon of choice. The indigenous population no doubt increased gradually over those ten thousand years, but remained in balance with the foods the earth offered.

Were the first occupants of these Columbia River archaeological sites the ancestors of Howard Jim and his people? This issue has been front-page news since the discovery of the fine Clovis points in an East Wenatchee orchard in 1969. Should modern Indians claim hereditary rights to these ancient artifacts? The languages spoken by the Clovis hunters would not have been intelligible to present-day Sahaptin or Salishan speakers, just as we could not have understood the speech of Medieval England, but cultural continuity is undeniable through four hundred generations of Columbia River Indian people.

From the First Peoples’ perspective, of course, Indians have always been on the Columbia River, at least since the great traveler Coyote—known as Spilays on the middle Columbia—prepared the world for their coming, bringing to a close the Age of Myth. These stories, told only in winter, are still told in a few fortunate families. They tell how Coyote made Celilo Falls, releasing the salmon trapped below the Swallow Sisters’ dam. He tricked them by disguising himself as a baby strapped to a cradle board, abandoned to the river’s current and rafted up against their dam. They took him in, and he stole the opportunity to dig channels through their dam while they were off in the hills gathering roots. Until those channels were flooded by The Dalles Dam, salmon ran up them past a gauntlet of Indian fishermen. Coyote’s cradle board could be seen at the lip of Celilo Falls on the Washington side, turned to stone, until it was hauled away to make room for a footing for a millroad bridge. The mythical cradle board and the rock, called sk’im in Sahaptin, gave a name to the large north bank village at the foot of Celilo Falls, where Lewis and Clark recorded seventeen lodges of Indians on October 25, 1805.

A short distance up the river from Celilo Falls at the head of Miller Island—as we call it—is a deep hole at the foot of a steep bank on the Washington shore. That is where Naybibla, the Swallowing Monster, lived, devouring people. The monster swallowed Grizzly Bear, Cougar, and Rattlesnake, but it met its match when it swallowed Coyote. Coyote built a fire beneath the monster’s heart and cut it down, feeding the monster’s fat to the hungry people trapped inside. You can still see the groove in the hillside where Coyote was dropped down into the monster’s maw. Pieces of the monster were scattered over the surrounding terrain giving rise to the many Indian peoples who would soon occupy the land. Columbia River elders say they were put on this earth by the Creator and were given the Sacred Law by Coyote. They have been told this by their grandparents before them. But this is not what we style “history.”

Just on the “other side of history”—that is, just on the other side of written history—a strange animal appears on the scene, a beast the size of an elk but, like the dog, a “pet.” Today, the horse is called k’los in Sahaptin and a dog is k’los-M’asit, “little horse.” At first, horses were treated
asked about the concentration of villages on the north bank of the Columbia or on islands in the river; they were informed that it was a defense against "Snake Indian" raids. Columbia River Indians returned the favor, raiding Plateau camps for north of normal seasonal hunts. Mounted intertribal parties traveled east across the Continental Divide led by Flathead and Nez Perce warriors, dodging Blackfoot Indian parties to pursue the great bison herds. The motive for the raids was apparently not primarily to acquire meat, though dried meat was sometimes packed home, but rather to obtain valuable bison hides and, once suspected, for the thrill of it. By the 1840s, The Dalles was notorious as a slave market.

One significant consequence of the enhanced mobility was an expansion of social horizons. It seems likely that Plateau Indians first learned of white people from bison hunting parties who had heard about the fur trappers and traders from their Plains Indian allies. Perhaps one such party came home with smallpox, unleashing it on their unsuspecting kin. An epidemic on the Plains in 1814 may have been the source of the first documented smallpox epidemic on the Columbia River, though the Northwest Indians may have been infected a few years earlier from coastal trading ships.

In 1812, Christopher Columbus had set in motion a bold experiment in human contact, which precipitated a biological exchange of unprecedented magnitude. Historian Arthur Cowsley has detailed the global impact of the exchange of new crops and domesticated animals that followed hard on Columbus's first voyage. The exchange was roughly balanced. The New World got Old World wheat, rice, sugar cane, coffee, chickens, beef cattle, sheep, and horses. The Old World adopted New World maize, potatoes, sweet potatoes, cassava, peanuts, black beans, chili peppers, and tobacco. But Cowsley also documents the more sinister biological exchange of lethal pathogens. This exchange was grossly unequal. The New World was infected by Old World scourges such as smallpox, malaria, yellow fever, measles, whooping cough, scarlet fever, plague, influenza, and gonorrhea. In return, the Old World received— it is believed—just one new epidemic malady, syphilis, which first broke out in Italy in 1493. Syphilis was the AIDS of its day and age, yet the ef-
fects of that disease in Europe, Asia, and Africa can scarcely be compared to the devastation brought down on native America by the Old World epidemic diseases.

Why such a disproportionate exchange? The Old World had passed the Neolithic transition three millennia before the New World peoples of Mexico and Peru, and the dense urban masses of medieval cities had provided a rich soil for the evolution of deadly epidemic disease agents. Because the New World was too young a population to have produced such pathogens, Native Americans had neither a genetic nor a physiological resistance to the diseases. As a consequence, Columbia River Indians witnessed the disorienting situation of new diseases killing their people mercilessly but having little or no effect on the white people who had come to live among them. The Indians were quick to draw a reasonable conclusion: the diseases had been brought by whites for the purpose of destroying them.

Smallpox was one of the worst killers. The first pandemic in the New World broke out in Hispaniola in 1519. It swept Cortés to power in Mexico and marked ahead of Pizarro into the Inca realm, rendering that great empire impotent against the triumphant conqueror. Did that great epidemic also reach into the Northwest? Some archaeologists believe that sites near Chief Joseph Domm in present-day Washington hold evidence of a sharp decline in population a short time after that. The earliest positive evidence of smallpox on the river dates to about 1780, when the poXmarked middle-aged Indians seen by Lewis and Clark on the Lower Columbia probably contracted the disease. There are somewhat later accounts for the Nootka. It is estimated that a "virgin soil" epidemic of smallpox will kill an average of 30 percent of the affected population before it runs its course. The survivors have a hard-won immunity, but the next generation may suffer another outbreak, feeding on the young people born since the last epidemic.

The second epidemic on the Columbia came in 1804 and coincided with a heavy rain of ash from Mount St. Helens. The two events inspired eschatological prophecies by Plateau seers who predicted the coming of the whites and the end of the world. One Spokane prophet's words from that time were recorded in 1844 by members of the Wilkes Expedition: "Soon will come from the rising sun a different kind of man from any you have yet seen, who will bring with them a book and tell you everything, and after that the world will fall to pieces."

* Lewis and Clark arrived soon after the epidemic hit. They were followed in short order by Astorians and Nor'Westers competing for control of the global fur trade. As early as 1811, Columbia River Indians at the Dalles confronted David Thompson: "When you have passed down to the sea (the month before), we were all strong in life, but what is this we hear . . . . is it true that the white men . . . have brought with them the Small Pox to destroy us?"

Disease is more than a malfunction of the body. Disease calls into question one's right to live. It inflicts the victim and the victim's family and community with grave moral doubts. Why me? What have I done to deserve this? Such questions are only natural. The belief that disease is sent as punishment or in retribution or that it is induced by evil forces is widely shared by human cultures. We ourselves — prideful though we are in our advanced medical knowledge — are not immune to such thoughts. Witness the common reaction to the victims of AIDS, a disease that carries with it a strong moral stigma. Imagine, then, how the First Peoples of the Columbia might have felt when stricken with this new array of diseases. In traditional Plateau Indian belief, disease was assumed to be personal. It was a spiritual wound inflicted by a hostile Indian doctor, and the cure required the cooperation of more powerful Indian doctor allied with the victim. Native doctors — also called shamans because they cured by means of the spirit powers they controlled — were powerless to treat the new diseases. The curative power of faith was broken. Smohalla, a well-known prophet and religious teacher of Priest Rapids, told an army investigator in 1884:

"Before . . . there was little sickness among us, but since then many of us have died. I have had children and grandchildren, but they are
all dead. My last grandchild, a young woman of 40, died last month.

If only her infant son could have lived... I labored hard to save
them, but my medicine would not work as it used to.”

Perhaps the destruction of the Indians was “the will of God,” as some whites loudly proclaimed. In November 1847, acting on the belief that “Marcus Whitman many years ago made a long journey to the east [in 1841] to get a bottle of poison for us,” a group of Cayuse warriors over-threw Whitman’s mission near Walla Walla, killing him, his wife Narcissa, and perhaps ten other unfortunate witnesses to the event. Soon, the missions closed, and the great Hudson’s Bay Company pulled out of what had been the United States territory.

The white settlers established in Oregon Territory reacted to the Whitman incident with alarm and hastily organized parties of irregular militia to pursue the murderers. The federal government also responded, directing the army to establish control in the “Indian country” east of the Cascades. Thus the stage was set for the treaty councils of 1855. Governor Isaac Stevens, and General Joel Palmer, each in charge of Indian affairs for their respective territories of Washington and Oregon, prepared a careful plan to divert the Indians of the largest part of their land, “to purchase all their country,” as Stevens’ secretary phrased it. Stevens and Palmer subsequently negotiated ten treaties in the two territories during 1854 and 1855. All were duly ratified by the distant Senate and signed into law by President Buchanan. The treaties, modeled on documents that had proved useful in dealing with Indian tribes on the Missouri, all followed the same outline and used much the same language.

The Yakama treaty begins by naming the signatory parties:

Articles of agreement and convention made and concluded at the treaty ground... by and between Isaac I. Stevens... on the part of
the United States, and the undersigned chief... and delegates of the... confederated tribes... occupying lands therein after bounded and described... who for the purposes of this treaty are to be considered as one nation,

under the name of “Yakama,” with Kama’sakamas as head chief, on behalf of and acting for said tribes and bands, and duly authorized to sign hereunto... as head chief, and to convey to the United States all their right, title, and interest in and to the lands and country occupied and claimed by them, and bounded as described... (emphasis added).”

Henry wrote. Note how a “nation” was invented and a “head chief” appointed—by Governor Stevens, of course. The “head chief” was granted unprecedented powers, powers that no indigenous leader had ever claimed or entertained, the power to sell to millions of acres of Mother Earth on behalf of dozens of autonomous village communities within the ceded area boundaries. Kama’sakamas had little to say at the council deliberations and subsequently refused the title Stevens gave him along with the $500 annuity that came with it. Instead, he took to the field of war in one last desperate effort to assert the independence of his people.

Though the Yakama, Nez Perce, and Umatilla treaties were duly “signed” at the Walla Walla Council, the official record of the deliberations clearly indicates the great ambivalence felt by the Indian participants. For example, the entries for June 7 and 8 read in part as follows:

The Walla Walla, Cayuse, and Umatillas, were understood as consenting to the Treaty, though some of the Cayuse did not assent and seemed much distressed. The Yakamas still held back. June 8th. Friday. Much discussion and agitation among the Indians. The Cayuse and Walla Walla retort. Kamisakamas is understood to express himself in favor of some treaty, but does not agree directly to the one proposed.”

Then the Nez Perce chief Looking Glass rode into the council fresh from hunting buffalo in Montana. He cried out: “My people what have you done! While I was gone you have sold my country. I have come home and there is not left me a place on which I pitch my lodge.”

Lawrence Rip, a lieutenant in the army, attended the council as an
observes. His accounts of the speeches of the Indian leaders are more extensive than those in the official record, yet similarly garbled, unless we are to attribute to the Indian orators an uncharacteristic mental confusion. Young Chief, a Cayuse, is recorded at some length on a theme introduced by the rhetorical question,

I wonder if the ground ["earth" might be a more faithful translation] for anything to say? I wonder if the ground is listening to what is said? ... The ground says, "It is the Great Spirit that placed me here ... the Great Spirit tells me to take care of the Indians, to feed them right ..." The Indian Chief said, "You Indians who take care of certain portions of the country should not trade it off."

Young Chief immediately followed these statements with the old caveat, "except you get a fair price." Governor Stevens went on the attack, chiding the Indian leaders for their reticence and their embarrassment.

Kamakim, the great Chief of the Yakimas, has not spoken at all. His people have no voice here today. He is not ashamed to speak? He is not afraid to speak? Then speak out. Oh! Kamakim's uncle and Upper Yakima chief is afraid to speak lest God be angry at his selling his land. Oh, my brother! I do not think God will be angry with you if you do your best for yourself and your children. ... But Oh! Kamakim's people are not here. Why then did he tell us, come here and talk to us? Do not be ashamed of him. Oh! has the heart of his people. We expect him to speak out. ... The treaty will have to be drawn up tonight. ... The Nes Perces [who, led by Lawyer and having little to lose, were willing to sign] must not be put off any longer. This business must be dispensed with.

And so it went. Surely, from the Indian perspective, this contract was not negotiated in good faith. The treaty was written in the legal jargon of a foreign language, with translation of the treaty and accompanying commentary relegated to local Anglo-blood settlers, none a native speaker of any of the several Indian languages represented among the Indians attending the negotiations. With his military escort at the ready in case of trouble, Stevens pushed as hard as he felt he could without driving the chiefs away. Yet, despite the coercive atmosphere of the council, these treaties now stand between the Indian people of the Columbia and their cultural oblivion. The treaty recognized their just claim to the lands and reserved for them and their descendants a tract of land "for their exclusive use and benefit." It also guaranteed "the rights of taking fish at all usual and accustomed places, in common with the citizens of the Territory, ... together with the privilege of hunting, gathering roots and berries, and pasturing their horses and cattle upon open and unclaimed lands [emphasis added]."

Thus, the treaty embodies a deep ambiguity. On the one hand, the intent of the U.S. government was to combine the Indians into an out-of-the-way, "useless" corner of their traditional territory. As Secretary Denny explained it, the Indians "were to remain upon their reservation where required, and were in no manner to interfere with the whites when they left from it." On the other hand, the treaty affirms the Indians' right to continue their customary and traditional subsistence activities—to harvest fish, game, roots, and berries and to graze their horses and cattle (a new cultural enterprise among them) as before and throughout their traditional lands so long as they did so "in common with citizens," language that specifically excluded the First Peoples until 1924. It is this clause that was the keystone of the Boldt decision in 1974 and the ground on which many modern legal battles are now being fought. The existence of Indian reservations is contested for in many American, both Indians and non-Indians. Those who oppose reservations see them as little better than concentration camps where Indian people are trapped in vicious cycles of dependence, whether on welfare or on alcohol. Those who hold this view—whether well-meaning or not—oppose treaty rights in the belief that they promote an unfulfilled citizenship within the body politic. Those who defend reservations and the treaty rights on which they are most often based—and I count myself
among them—see reservations in a different light. They provide a permanent home, a legal base, a collective anchor—a fund in trust—for the tribe and its members. In the Indian language, the reservation is known as 'timoni kwunam,' the 'written earth or land.' The natural resources of this remnant of the aboriginal territory continue to feed the people. Managed by and for the tribe as a communal corporation, the land has the potential to provide good jobs to tribal members so that they can live well and support their families at home. They need not—as immigrant Americans by and large must—constantly uproot themselves to advance their careers. Family ties remain primary, and the tribes are like very large families, not always happy with one another, but still family.

This ideal of economically self-sufficient, reservation-based tribal societies is far from being the reality for Columbia River Indian people, but it is not a pipe dream either. The Warm Springs tribe reports, for example, that 2,000 people, mostly tribal members, lived within the same 4,000 square miles of their reservation in 1982. Meanwhile, the Confederated Tribes of the Warm Springs Reservation—through its successful forest products and hydropower plants and its hotel resort—provided over fifteen hundred jobs. The 1987 payroll exceeded $3 million, and the tribal corporation was able to return an annual dividend of $500 to each tribal member. This is not welfare, any more than a corporate investor's profit-sharing is welfare. At Yakama reservation, the tribal government is largely on income from timber sales and grazing leases on reservation lands. With this income, the tribal courts administer justice; professional tribal police force maintains law and order, and, with joint tribal and federal funding, housing, welfare, health, and educational services are made available to tribal members. Despite continuing poverty and alienation, the reservation land base sustains a unique, indigenous American community that enriches all lives.

Yet, the reservation story is not the only continuing saga of the Columbia's First Peoples. In the aftermath of the treaty councils and the skirmishes that followed, some families resisted the urging of territorial authorities to "move to, and settle upon" the distant reservations.
The reservation communities depend on the reservation of the independent river Indians for guidance and connection to their traditional life, while the reservation lands provide an economic base and legal protection for a threatened way of life. This is what happened to the First Peoples of the Columbia. The People still live. The river is still their home. The river sustains their way of life and waters the roots that hold them to their land. They certainly deserve no less.

NOTES
1. Luther Cressman, Prehistory of the Salish: Indians of the Columbia River Valley (Salt Lake City: University of Utah Press, 1977), 96.
7. Ibid.
9. Ibid.
10. Ibid.
11. Ibid., 28.
13. Ibid., 22.
15. Ibid., 97–9.
The incident happened early Sunday morning outside of Butler Library on the Morningside Heights campus of Columbia University. The students involved say the sophomore, identified by the University’s campus newspaper as Julian von Abele, had targeted them, having followed the group from a campus eatery to outside the library. Video of the rant has now gone viral and is raising a lot of questions. In response to the incident, Columbia University will be holding what they’re calling an open reflection space Monday evening where students can be in community with each other and raise any concerns they may have. Filed in: News. Topics: Columbia, columbia university, white people. Suggest a correction.


[Chorus]
I wanna be forgotten
And I don't want to be reminded
You say, "Please don't make this harder"
No, I won't yet
I wanna be admired
You say, "Please don't make this harder"
No, I won't yet.

As the opening track on their second album, Room On Fire, “What Ever Happened?” kicks off the album’s themes of the band gaining newfound fame and relationships. The fact that this is the first song in the album may be a kind of anticipation to all the hate they knew the album would receive when it saw the light. “What Ever Happened?” The first people on the American continent came from Asia. It was more than 40,000 years ago. They had red skin.

What was their way of life? What happened to the Indians? Where do they live now? It’s Interesting to Know.

1. The first Negro slaves in the English colonies were brought in a Dutch ship in 1619. The slave trade was very profitable. It began in Rhode Island early in the 17th century.