

# TRIBAL HISTORY

## A Piece of Siletz History

by Robert Kentta, Cultural Resources Director

*This is the third in a series of articles, each dealing with a specific period in our Siletz Tribal history. The first article was a general introduction to who our Siletz ancestors are and attempted to describe the incredible richness and diversity in languages, cultures and lifeways of our people.*

*The second article focused on the early period of contact with non-Indians and the effects of that contact (deadly diseases and severe cultural, political, social and economic disruptions). This article will discuss the beginnings of land-based trade and exploration by foreigners within our lands and the effects of that occupation.*

*Please contact me with comments or questions.*

### Part Three – Fur Trade and Early Exploration

The previous article also addressed the fur trade and early exploration, but only the early period of contact. At that time, all interaction was relatively brief and often limited to trading conducted in canoes and sailing ships on the open ocean. Many changes occurred in our villages within a very short period, leading up to the time that land-based foreigners took the next steps of colonization. The mass epidemics transmitted by the earlier contacts dramatically reduced populations and thereby the people's ability to protect our own interests when push came to shove.

The occupation of our lands took place gradually, and the slow infiltration probably was not recognized in most areas until it was difficult to resist. Also probably not understood were the complex, artificial European laws and customs supporting the concepts of "discovery rights," "right by conquest," "manifest destiny," etc., that would come into play. Also not understood was the force with which Christian conversion would be expected of all native survivors of colonization.

In 1805, Lewis and Clark made their way down the Columbia River to its mouth. They were the first to make the overland trip from the middle of the continent to our shores. The reports that they made upon their return led to land-based fur trading posts and (later) to Christian missions in our country.

The fur trade era is often described as a friendly period of "free trade." That may have been true in some cases, especially in the earliest phases. Once the trappers discovered how to get from one place to another, however, they began engaging us in economic warfare. They started running their own trap lines in **our country**, instead of depending upon our people to sell furs to them. These were some of the early signs of things to expect of the foreigners – taking without permission or apology.

In the early trade on the coast, the Spanish and Russians (as well as the British, Americans and others) were involved to some degree. But by the mid-1820s, however, the only remaining fur trade competitors were the Hudson Bay Co. (British) and the Pacific Fur Co. (USA). Fort Astoria (P.F. Co.) and Fort Vancouver (H.B. Co.) were signs of the political

posturing that was the reality of the day. Employees of the fur companies also manned many smaller outposts and trap lines.

While the U.S. Constitution recognized our native people's right to our homelands (aboriginal title), the United States also participated in constitutionally contradictory political practices. It subscribed to the same European concepts that permitted colonization of foreign lands and peoples and empire building by European nations.

In 1832, John McLaughlin, chief factor at the Hudson Bay Co. post at Fort Vancouver, ordered an attack on the Yaquinas. Two HBC trappers were running a trap line in the Yaquina/Alsea territory without permission of our local people. The trappers paid for their disrespect with their lives.

When news of their deaths reached Fort Vancouver, McLaughlin ordered some HBC employees to teach the north central coast natives a lesson. He wasn't sure who was responsible, but thought that a reprisal anywhere in the neighborhood, issued with sufficient force, would deliver the desired message.

This attack on a village at Yaquina Bay (well-documented in both HBC records and our tribal oral histories) was brutal enough that it (combined with the epidemics) was given as a reason that so few Yaquina people survived into the reservation period. Some of the fur trappers and traders took Indian wives, such as Jean Baptiste Garnier on the Umpqua River, as did many of the fur company employees in the Willamette Valley. This eased some relationships in local areas, but strangers stomping through our lands with little respect or humility were not welcomed.

As the fur trade era faded, many of the trappers became farmers and by the late-1830s, various missionary settlements revolved around the main Methodist mission at what is now Willamette University (Salem). A mission school for our children in the valley was one of the first non-Indian structures. The relationships between our tribal people and the settlers changed slightly or radically, depending on the rate of population influx and the main activity of the new population as the focus switched from fur trade to permanent settlement activities.

It doesn't appear that our ancestors resisted settlement to the point that they thought **all foreigners** should be kept out, but instead tried to accommodate settlers who were respectful. Each year our people grew weaker in number, however, as the strangers grew stronger in number and presence.

The treaty signing between Great Britain and the United States in 1846, and the subsequent establishment of the Oregon Territory and a provisional government, would change the direction of all future encroachment on our homelands. Our people's interaction with the citizens of the new Oregon Territory and United States will be the subject of the next article.