

TRIBAL HISTORY

A Piece of Siletz History

by Robert Kentta, Cultural Resources Director

This is the eighth in a series of articles on our Siletz Tribal history. Each article focuses on a particular phase, era, or event in our tribal history. The previous article was about how and why the Coast (Siletz) Reservation was created by President Franklin Pierce's executive order on Nov. 9 1855. This article will discuss the close of the Rogue River Wars and our ancestors' removal to the new reservation.

Part VIII – End of the Wars and Removal

The president's action in creating the Coast (Siletz) Reservation did nothing to quell those in the mining camps and settlements who were screaming for the complete "extermination" of our people. In fact, the last portion of the Rogue River Wars was started by a totally unjustified and bloody attack on one of our villages in the Rogue Valley, just before the creation of the Coast (Siletz) Reservation.

As word of the attack reached our people on the Table Rock Reservation, some of our people went to Fort Lane and pled for protection from the Army. The majority, however, fled downriver into the Rogue Canyon, attacking settlers who were not friendly to our people. Open warfare then raged through the end of 1855 and into the first half of 1856.

In the actual state of emergency that existed when word came that the Coast Reservation had been established, Superintendent of Indian Affairs Joel Palmer knew he needed to take quick action. With that in mind, Palmer established a temporary camp on the south fork of the Yamhill River (Grand Ronde).

He believed that removal to the Coast Reservation before the Siletz Agency buildings were ready and the fields fenced and plowed would be a complete disaster. A good deal of uncertainty also existed about the best way to get supplies to the agency. To prepare for arrival of much of the Native population of western Oregon, the United States bought the improvements on lands occupied by a couple of settlers on the South Yamhill River.

In January 1856, Palmer organized a removal of the Umpquas, Kalapuyas, and Molallas to the temporary camp on the south fork of the Yamhill River. In late February, the coastal tribes on and near the Rogue River rallied with the inland tribes to chase the miners into their fortified positions at Gold Beach, Port Orford, and other locations. The retaking of the coast would be short-lived, however.

At about the same time as the attack on Gold Beach, Palmer organized the removal of our people who had been staying at Fort Lane since the attack in October 1855. As the group was moving out to head north over the snowy passes, a miner rode up and shot one of our men in the back, killing him. This nearly ended any hope of an orderly removal, especially with settlers along the travel route issuing open threats to kill any Indians passing by on their way to the reservation, along with any white men who were with them.

It was apparent by this point that it would be impossible even for the U.S. Army to control the more reckless elements in the miner and settler populations. This is when Palmer wrote the letter mentioned in the last article that stated that the Table Rock Reservation could not be considered for a permanent reservation, the miners would never leave our people alone there, and the Rogue Valley Tribes also would have to remove to Siletz.

The warfare might have ended in early 1855 but for the interference of the "volunteers" (miners/wannabe soldiers) that was calculated to prolong the war. Many clearly thought of the war as a monetary boon, which made it even easier to promote "clearing the country of Indians."

The correspondence between Palmer and General Wool,

commander of the Pacific Division during this period, is filled with disgust for the volunteers. Neither Palmer nor Wool had any respect for the motives or methods of the volunteers, who constantly foiled any chance for peace talks. As our people were coming in for the peace talks at Big Bend, the volunteers were busy ambushing as many of us as they could. It was their meddling that made our people afraid that the peace talks would be one big ambush, and swung the vote toward a battle instead.

At the end of the Battle at Big Bend, the majority of the people were willing to give up resisting removal. Tyee John's Band, along with the Pistol Rivers and Chetco people, were among the last to surrender. Tyee John finally gave up at the end of June 1856 on the headwaters of Rinehart Creek, having been chased many miles from home. Many small groups and individuals hid out as long as they could, but many were hunted down and shot as "hostiles."

In the summer of 1856, two groups of approximately 600 to 700 each were loaded onto the steamship Columbia at Port Orford and taken up the coast to the Columbia River and then into Portland. The rest of the trip up the Willamette and Yamhill rivers to the temporary camp at Grand Ronde took place on other boats and barges, and on foot. All people removed after these two shiploads were marched up the coast. Many were taken directly to Yaquina Bay (where the Army built a blockhouse), the Salmon River, or the Siletz Valley (as a blockhouse and other Agency facilities were built).

The way that the Siletz Agency buildings were established gives people the idea that there was confusion from the start, so it's no wonder that the history of the reservation and its status as a permanent reservation came into question. Of course, there is all the confusion about establishing a temporary camp and by this time, Palmer was actually promoting the idea that the Coast Reservation be extended to include the temporary camp.

The first building at the new Siletz Agency was the requisite Army blockhouse. It was first constructed in 1856 above (what's now) Logsdon on a low hill near Mill Creek. This was not the most ideal location, and the logs were dismantled, floated down to Siletz, and dragged up to what we now lovingly refer to as Government Hill.

Phil Sheridan and his crew built a "road" from Ft. Hoskins to the Agency and actually brought a wagon over it, but the wagon wasn't worth much by the time it arrived. The first shipment of supplies included the year's supply of flour and other staples. It wrecked on Siletz Bay and virtually the whole cargo was lost. The government had no money with which to purchase more supplies.

In May 1857, nearly all of the coastal people and two-thirds of the Rogue Rivers and Cow Creek people arrived at the Siletz Agency from the temporary camp at Grand Ronde. Approximately a month later, President James Buchanan signed an executive order that instead of permanently attaching the temporary camp to the Coast (Siletz) Reservation, established the Grand Ronde Reservation as a separate (but bordering) reservation.

Many of our ancestors decided to return to their old homes, where they knew they could find acorns and other foods not found at Siletz. Usually, they were doomed to make the long walk back to Siletz (sometimes several times) as soldiers made their periodic sweeps through southwest Oregon looking for runaways.

In the spring of 1857, starvation forced one group of about 75 people out of the hills downriver from Grants Pass. The settlers, supposedly thinking them still "hostile," shot all the men (about 10) and penned up the surviving women and children until the agent could send the soldiers down to march them to Siletz.

Yes, those early reservation days were full of hard times, but our people were strong enough for some to survive so that we could be here today.