

TRIBAL HISTORY

A Piece of Siletz History

by Robert Kentta, Cultural Resources Director

This is the ninth in a series of articles about our Siletz Tribal history. Each article concentrates on a particular event or era in tribal history. Last month's article was about the end of the Rogue River Wars and removal to our reservation beginning in 1856. This article will discuss conditions on the reservation shortly after removal.

Part IX – Early Days on the Siletz Reservation

All of our families have stories about things that happened during the removal to the reservation and/or events in the early days of the Siletz Reservation. It was an unpleasant time for everybody involved, marked by starvation, disease, violence, poverty, and depression of spirits.

It's good for us to try to understand what our ancestors went through so that we can be healthy Indian people today. I think it's Terry Tafoya who says something like "that which we forget, we always are ... that which we remember, we can overcome."

The end of the wars did not mark the end of life-and-death struggles for our ancestors. The government made matters worse by not treating our people equally.

All of our interior valley people (Rogue, Umpqua, and Willamette valleys) were entitled to ratified treaty-appropriated food, medicine, clothing, shelter, etc. Whatever that annual amount was, it certainly was not a fair amount, but at least it was something.

Here within the same valley were tribes who were parties to the 1855 Coast Treaty, which was never acted upon by the U.S. Senate. The general operating fund (a small appropriation to operate the Siletz Agency) was the only funding the Siletz agent could use to provide anything to ease the misery of the coastal people. The agents often were accused of being too busy lining their pockets with agency and treaty funds to worry much about the basic needs of the people.

Our ancestors, experiencing mistreatment and unequal treatment all around them and looking for a reason for all of their woes, took to pointing fingers. In traditional ways of thinking, most disease could be tracked to another person having unfriendly intentions against the person who was ill.

Our traditional doctors had lots of sickness to deal with. Another doctoring tradition was that if a doctor accepted a patient, he accepted responsibility for the patient's well-being. If the patient died, the family of the deceased would often seek revenge on the doctor for failing.

Our doctors often had a hard time applying traditional cures to introduced diseases, probably because our people were in such a condition that "whiteman disease" included a viral or bacterial infection that was new to our people, backed up by starvation and weakness from depression. With so much going against them, doctors took cases but often failed to save their patients. Payment was sometimes an option, but too often the payment was in blood. When that didn't stop sickness from spreading, the people began looking at their neighbors, blaming them for bad doctoring.

Sometimes it may have been true. A lot of hard feelings existed about being forced to move to a place that for many people was a long way from and so different than their old homes. Our coastal people often blamed our interior Southwest Oregon people for involving them in the war.

They believed that maybe, just maybe, if they hadn't been dragged into the war, they would have been allowed to stay in their old country, depending upon their old foods and living in familiar surroundings. The result of all this disease, conflict, and turmoil was that not only did many of our people die of sickness, but within the first few years of being on the reservation, more than 100 doctors and others accused of causing illness also were killed.

Another hardship our ancestors faced was the federal policy of "civilizing" our Indian people. Civilization meant, in the U.S. government's mind, cultivating the soil. At the time that the treaties were drafted, the purchase of farming equipment, seed, and supplies and the hiring of a "boss farmer" to teach farming on the reservation was a standard part of the treaty package.

This definitely was not a voluntary thing. All able-bodied Indians were expected to work long days every day except Sunday (another part of the civilization effort) fencing fields, plowing, sowing, tending, and harvesting crops that often failed. Our people worked diligently on farms that often didn't produce much for all the labor that went into them.

Wheat was a waste of time, but the worst part was that when the crop failed, the people really had to scramble to gather and prepare enough salmon, venison, eels, seaweed, camas, hazelnuts, berries, etc. to make it through the winter. Some were not able to scramble fast enough.

In 1857, a special inspector, J. Ross Browne, came to the Siletz Agency to report to the Great White Father in Washington on the wants and needs of the people at Siletz. All the headmen at the meeting stated the same complaints. The U.S. had not kept the treaties (ratified and unratified). All of the Indian people had the same understanding of the treaties that had been signed. The government's interpretation was many times something entirely different, or else policy was based on what was convenient for the government because it knew it had the brute force of the U.S. Army to back it up.

Tyee John of the Upper Rogues stated:

"A long time ago we made a treaty with Palmer. There was a piece of land at Table Rock that was ours. He said that it should remain ours, but for the sake of peace, as the white settlers were bad, we should leave it for a while. When we signed the paper, that was our understanding; we now want to go back to that country.

"I am glad I can now send my talk to the president. During the war my heart was bad. Last winter, when the rain came and we were all starving, it was still bad. Now it is good. I will consent to live here one more year; after that I must go home. My people are dying off. I am unable to go to war, but I want to go home to my country."

Other headmen echoed John's statements. It appears that John was willing to follow through on his words. In 1858, Tyee John and his son, Adam, were arrested at Upper Farm. John's son-in-law, Cultus Jim, was shot and killed.

Old John and Adam were taken to Vancouver Barracks and tried for creating unrest on the reservation (he was preparing to lead a group of his people back to the Table Rock Reservation). Both were convicted and sent by boat to prison at the Presidio in San Francisco, where they were held for several years.

This may have made some people think twice about trying to leave the reservation, but many would wander back to their home place out of desperation of poverty or loneliness for a familiar, friendly place.

The next article will discuss events leading up to the first reduction of the reservation in 1865.