

# TRIBAL HISTORY

## A Piece of Siletz History

by Robert Kentta, Cultural Resources Director

*This is the 15<sup>th</sup> article in a series of articles about our Siletz Tribal history. Because we are entering a time period of which many of our tribal elders have vivid memories, I am all the more interested in feedback on this article.*

*In the last article, we ended with the formation of Lincoln County from what was originally Siletz Reservation lands. A point I had hoped to convey in that article was the amount of pressure the allotment policies created for our people to get clear titles to their allotments and begin paying property taxes. Titles to allotments created a situation where our allotment lands became vulnerable to foreclosure for non-payment of taxes and non-payment of loans that were originally viewed as improving our families' lives, but ended with some of our families left homeless. All of the combined effects resulted in the statement by Agent Egbert in 1912 that more than half of the Siletz allotments were already owned by non-Indians.*

### Part XV – The Teens to 1940

The 1910s began with the above-mentioned financial and political pressures mounting, but our people still found time to celebrate. There were annual Siletz Indian fairs; at hop picking time there were always fiddle dances, if not feather dances. The people weren't rolling in cash, but most were getting by because they stuck together.

When WWI broke out, our Siletz people showed their patriotism. Even with all the mistreatment suffered over the decades, U.S. citizenship meant a great deal to our people. In 1913, our people hosted the Wanamaker Expedition on Government Hill in an early attempt to gain U.S. citizenship for all Indian people. Many Siletz men and boys signed up for the armed forces. Our women and girls did their part for the war effort, too. We lost some of our people in that war, which was devastating in such a small, close community as ours.

With the war ending, the goals of federal Indian policy were pursued with renewed vigor. In 1919, Agent Chalcraft and two other Indian Department employees were appointed to help issue patents (titles) to Siletz allotments.

The hearings of individual cases were often referred to as "competency hearings." The idea was that if the tribal member could speak English well enough, knew the value of money, could handle business affairs, etc., then he/she was considered "competent." Being competent generally meant that you received title to your allotment, even if you wanted it to remain in trust.

Movements were soon afoot to have the agency sell the allotments of "aged and infirm" Indians and then give them a living allowance from the proceeds. These accounts were often in some sort of dispute. The "aged and infirm" whose property was sold to set up these accounts often had to repeatedly request this "living expense" or "pension" and had to prove the good use that would result from access to their funds. Federal policy toward Indians was still one of parent and child, the "parent" being, alternately, either strict or neglectful and often outright abusive.

In 1924, Congress passed the Indian Citizenship Act. It didn't have a huge direct affect on Siletz people, who already had gained the right to vote, etc., through the allotment policy. What it started, though, was a slow change in public perception of Indian people in general. This would eventually lead to changes in Indian policy, but our people had many hardships to endure before we would see any positive changes.

Loss of Siletz Reservation lands and resources meant there was less "business" for the Siletz Agency to conduct. It also meant that the BIA had fewer reasons to provide services that were generally available on Indian reservations. In 1925, the BIA used this state of affairs as reason to close the Siletz Agency offices. From then on, Siletz and Grand Ronde agency business was conducted in an office on the Chemawa School grounds near Salem.

Some of our relatives who had mostly stayed off-reservation near the mouth of the Columbia were successful in getting land claims heard and meagerly settled

in 1912. The land claims process for our coastal tribes, however, really began with the Coos, Lower Umpqua, and Siuslaw people getting Congress to pass an act in 1929. This jurisdictional act gave those tribes the specific right to sue the federal government for taking aboriginal lands without paying for them.

Families who had left the reservation and were concentrated in the Coos Bay area brought this suit, although many of them were recognized as "Siletz" on our census rolls over the years. They worked hard to establish their proof and did it well, but the court showed extreme bias and ignored the weight of the claim. The elders' testimony was discounted as hearsay. This case eventually was appealed to the Supreme Court, but with no better result. Sad as the outcome was, it didn't deter our other tribes from bringing suit and taught some valuable lessons in presenting to the courts.

Perhaps the Coos, Lower Umpqua, and Siuslaw claims case was partly a victim of the Depression. It wouldn't be the first time that economics influenced a decision about Indians. The Depression, as tough as it was, became an opportunity for our tribal community to regroup. Siletz people formed a tribal Civilian Conservation Corps (CCC) crew, and remodeled and restored the remaining old Siletz Agency buildings. The crew built our first structure that was specifically a tribal council meeting hall – with a room for canning produce, a gas station, and shop buildings, and established picnic grounds on Government Hill – known as Tye Illahee (Chief's Place), elders housing, and other important projects.

The 1930s also brought the first significant and positive changes in U.S. Indian policy. John Collier's ideas were the basis for these changes. He became commissioner of Indian Affairs in 1933 and immediately went to work on changing the way the government treated tribes.

In 1934, he succeeded in getting Congress to pass the Wheeler-Howard Act, also known as the Indian Reorganization Act, which promised to bring reservations to more of a state of self-rule. The act is largely recognized for repealing the Allotment Act.

Collier was one man willing to not only say that the Allotment Act (with its amendments and associated policies) had devastated Indian reservations, but also offer some solutions. Some of them, though, were (perhaps) not very well thought out. One of the early drafts called for the mandatory transfer of allotment lands from individual Indian to tribal control. Although this wasn't part of the final version of the bill that passed into law, it caused enough fear to become a barrier to acceptance in some tribal communities like ours.

As devastating as allotment was to our reservation, it was a reality that our people lived with. Any hint that tribal government might be given the right to confiscate family allotments and redistribute those lands was one barrier to accepting the provisions of the act. Although the act intended to increase the recognized role of tribal governments that incorporated under the guidelines of the act, this "self rule" was supervised by the secretary of the Interior.

Tribal people seeing conflicting intent within the act and political and economic complications possibly springing out of acceptance of the act were leery. Our people had often been told that whatever policy that happened to be coming down the pike was the best thing that had ever happened for Indian people. Our people had become, rightfully, untrusting of any proposed change. In 1935, a vote to incorporate under the Indian Reorganization Act at Siletz failed.

In 1935, we successfully got a special jurisdictional act passed to have our land claims heard for the Nestucca, Salmon River, Siletz, Yaquina, Alsea, Coquille, Tututni (and affiliated bands), and the Chetco people. Although there were successes with these claims, the courts weren't very Indian-friendly and the people eventually were forced to accept very modest settlements for their decades of suffering.

The next article will examine details of the results of these claims and their possible relationship to the buildup toward the termination of our federal recognition as an Indian tribe.