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NEWS

Confederated Tribes of Siletz Indians

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Siletz Tribal Restoration – A 30th Anniversary Celebration

by Brent Merrill

Part 1 – “The People are Dancing Again ...”

The people of the Confederated Tribes of Siletz Indians achieved Restoration for their families on Nov. 18, 1977, when then-President Jimmy Carter signed a document that returned the tribe to federally recognized status.

When President Carter signed the Confederated Tribes of Siletz Indians Restoration Act as Public Law 95-195, it was the stroke of a pen in Washington, D.C., that would change forever the future of the people who had been removed from their usual and accustomed areas and forcibly relocated to the Central Oregon Coast. It continues to change today.

The Siletz Tribe was the first one in Oregon to achieve Restoration and the second in the United States to regain its federally recognized status.

“The Tribal Council wants to celebrate the tribe’s Restoration throughout its 30th anniversary year because it is a landmark event in modern tribal history,” said Tribal Chairman Delores Pigsley. “Because of Restoration, the future is bright. This generation is restoring the tribe.”

Tribal leaders felt the same way at their first Restoration celebration.

“In the long, difficult process of working for Restoration, there has been a rebirth of the tribe’s spirit and of the people’s own sense of value as an Indian tribe,” said then-Chairman Art Bensell in 1977.

Today’s tribal population traces its Native American ancestry to 30 bands of Indians that were rounded up by the cavalry throughout the 20 million acres of ancestral land that stretched from the Columbia River to the Klamath River and from the Cascade Mountain Range to the Pacific Ocean.

In the 1850s, the tribes were made up of people from the Rogue River (Takelma, Chasta, and Applegate), Umpqua and Calapooia of Umpqua Valley, Cow Creek Umpqua Band (Takelma), Chasta, Scoton, Grave Creek (Takelma, Shasta, Applegate



Siletz Fair, 1918

River, Galice Creek, Chasta-Costa), Chinook, Kalapuya and Molalla tribes of the Willamette Valley and southern Molalla area.

Many other tribes, like Alsea, Yaquina, Tillamook, Nehalem, Nestucca, See-la-gees, Salmon River, Yoncalla, Luckiamute, and Santiam already were living in the area around the coastal range from time immemorial. Ironically, forced relocation of the area’s Indigenous population brought the people together who remain in the area today.

By 1860, the population on the Siletz Reservation was more than 3,000 people.

The reason the story of Restoration to federally recognized tribal status is so important for the tribal leadership to share is because of termination and its devastating effects on tribal life.

“Throughout those years the people remained strong, practiced their customs, spoke their language, and in their hearts and minds never ceased being an Indian,” said Chairwoman Pigsley at the 20th Anniversary of Restoration.

Termination in 1954 meant the government’s trust responsibilities to tribes

had ended. It meant that promises made with tribes in treaties less than a century before no longer would be honored.

Termination in 1954 was a death sentence.

“Tribal leadership wants you to know that the tribe is alive and vital today and the death sentence didn’t work,” said Pigsley. “The tribe is alive and Restoration was the catalyst for the tribe’s revitalization. This year the tribal leadership invites you to celebrate along with the people of the tribe. They invite you to celebrate the tribe’s efforts in cultural restoration and reclamation, the leadership’s venture into the world of economic development, and the continued establishment of the tribe’s internal infrastructure with

See Restoration on page 17.

First in a Series Celebrating 30 Years

This is the first in a series of monthly articles by Brent Merrill about the Confederated Tribes of Siletz Indians’ 30th Anniversary of Restoration.

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