

A Salute to Siletz Restoration

By Charles Wilkinson

I wish so much that I could be with you today but cannot. You are very much in my thoughts and I would like to pass along these observations about Siletz Restoration.

This whole coast was originally Indian country and had been for many thousands of years. Then came the white people and they came on strong. The Tribes resisted.

Perhaps the most notable leader was Tye John. He was an enormously able and inspirational figure. He could make his points clearly and powerfully to the new arrivals, rally his own people and, if necessary, employ his military genius in combat. The widely respected Oregon historian of the 19th century, Francis Fuller Victor, called him "The Iron Chief." Tye John is rightly included in any list of the great historic Tribal leaders, such as Chief Joseph of the Nez Perce.

The United States wanted to put all the Tribes on one reservation on the coast and many Indian people, including Tye John, resisted. In the spring of 1855, combat broke out in Jacksonville, in the upper reaches of the Rogue River watershed, when American renegades senselessly slaughtered an estimated 100 Indian people in a peaceful encampment. Native people, led by Tye John, retaliated and the Rogue River War was on.

The Tribal warriors moved down the river toward the coast. Their military superiority led them to four straight victorious battles. One American officer called the Indian fighters "the monarchs of the woods." But cavalry reinforcements were coming up the coast from the south and down the coast from the north. Numbers alone, not military capability, were beginning to tip the balance.

Indian and federal military delegations met at Oak flat near the mouth of

the Illinois River, the finishing place of the Tribe's Run to the Rogue. Colonel Buchanan made a long statement on why it was necessary for the Tribes to surrender and move all of their villages and belongings to a reservation on the coast.

Tye John listened intently but still believed that he and his men could prevail in battle. He would not be confined to a reservation. He issued words – laced with sovereignty, love of the land, culture and staying power – that are as good as any that have been put forth in the history of Oregon:

"You are a great chief. So am I. This is my country; I was in it when those trees were very small, not higher than my head. My heart is sick with fighting, but I want to live in my country. If the white people are willing, I will go back to Deer Creek and live among them as I used to do. They can visit my camp and I will visit theirs; but I will not lay down my arms and go with you on the reserve. I will fight. Goodbye."

The final, furious, Battle of Big Bend commenced a week later. At first, the Tribes held the upper hand. After 30 hours, the Americans were exhausted and ready to give in. But then troops arrived from San Francisco and the Army had the upper hand. The resistance was over. Indian people were force-marched north by miserable voyages on jam-backed vessels, by inland under brutal conditions, and up the coast on the brutal Trail of Tears riven by beatings, murders and rapes.

If justice had prevailed, the Siletz Reservation – 103 miles of the Oregon Coast, one of the greatest of all Tribal reservations – would've made a splendid homeland for the Tribe. But the white people wanted it, all of it, and within 40 short years had managed to do exactly that, leaving the Tribe with almost none of the land promised to them by treaty.



File photo

Charles Wilkinson

That was not enough. The United States adopted a policy of hard-edged, forced assimilation. All traditional culture was prohibited, Nee Dosh included. They torched all the proud cedar dance houses. They prohibited the languages. They sent the children off to schools where the culture was scrubbed off them. They allowed no self-determination. The BIA was the real government. All that was Siletz had been targeted for extinction. Then they called termination just to make it clear.

But there was something that the assimilationists had not counted on.

For Tye John's words still hung in the air. They hung over every river, meadow, forest and coastal formation. Yes, Tye John's message of sovereignty, love of the land, culture and staying power was everywhere. Indian people could hear, and feel, those messages and that spirit in the air. But for long generations, the people were kept down and they had no way to break out.

Then came the 1970s and you had leadership. Oh, did you ever have leadership 40 years ago. Yes, Art Bensell and Joe Lane, as Tribal chairs, and Pauline Ricks, Ed Ben, Robert Rilatos, Alta Courville, Dolores Pigsley, Sister Francella Griggs, Dolly Fisher, Bob Tom and Katherine Harrison were indispensable, but there were many others who made all manner of contributions. Together they took Tye John's words and spirit to Washington, D.C., and people listened.

And that powerful sense of tradition and commitment carries over to today. Forty years later, you can remain proud of a government that is stable, visionary and productive. My admiration for what you have accomplished since the 1977 statute is unbounded. You have achieved a great many measurable things: the largest government in the county, the largest business in the county, housing, the magnificent health clinic, the community school and much else. You also have made deeply cultural advances: Land acquisition, the Dance House, Nee Dosh, the language program, the basketry, the Run to the Rogue.

You have, then, put an exclamation point after restoration. Its original meaning was restoration of the federal-Siletz Tribal relationship. You have done that but have made it much more. You have reversed the assimilationist assault by looking back to your truest origins and restoring land, history, sovereignty and culture. There is a great deal to be celebrated today and that will be true at every restoration anniversary celebration in all the years to come.

For Tye John's words still ride on the currents high above Siletz country and always will.

Always,
Charles

Enrollment and Health Committee Vacancies

Open Until Filled

Any Tribal member interested in serving on the Enrollment or Health Committee for a term ending February 2019, please fill out this application and return by mail or fax to Confederated Tribes of Siletz Indians, Attn: Executive Secretary to Tribal Council, P.O. Box 549, Siletz, OR 97380-0549; fax: 541-444-8325.

Name: _____ Roll No: _____

Address: _____

City: _____ State: _____ ZIP: _____

Telephone: Day () _____ Evening () _____

If you only want to be considered for one committee, please indicate by inserting the number 1 next to the committee of interest. If you have interest in more than one committee, please indicate by numbering your preference 1 (first choice) and 2 (second choice).

____ Enrollment Committee ____ Health Committee

If you have any questions, please call Tami Miner, executive secretary to Tribal Council, at 800-922-1399, ext. 1203, or 541-444-8203.

CEDARR

Community Efforts
Demonstrating the Ability to
Rebuild and Restore

Mission Statement

We will utilize resources to prevent the use of alcohol and other drugs, delinquency and violence; we will seek to reduce the barriers to treatment and support those who choose abstinence.



Dec. 6 • Noon

Siletz Community Health Clinic
200 Gwee-Shut Road, Siletz

Siletz Tribal Behavioral Health Programs

Prevention, Outpatient Treatment,
and Women's and Men's
Transitional

Siletz: 800-600-5599 or

541-444-8286

Eugene: 541-484-4234

Salem: 503-390-9494

Portland: 503-238-1512

Narcotics Anonymous Toll-Free
Help Line – 877-233-4287

For information on Alcoholics
Anonymous: aa-oregon.org