



The item was a small one. Eight column inches buried in a back section of the Oregonian. The headline read: "U.S., NW Tribes sign fishing pact." Once again the state's newspaper of record lives down to its name.

What happened, a landmark event the headline makes no effort to announce, is this: after half a century, the United States Government is making good on its promise to the Columbia River Tribes to replace fishing sites drowned by the waters of Bonneville Dam. The dam was built in 1938. Good work takes time. So, evidently, does no work at all.

But that was then and this is now. The Department of the Interior and the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers have budgeted \$57 million over the next five years to build 29 fishing sites. There are, of course, no salmon to catch, but the River People will still celebrate. We should celebrate too. The beginning of the end of half a century of stinking injustice is worth singing and dancing about.

To put matters into perspective demands some imagination. Before they closed the floodgates at Bonneville in 1938, the Columbia was a wild river, the Columbia Gorge its wildest stretch. Bonneville Dam was more than just a monumental feat of engineering, a 20-story concrete testament to what humans can accomplish if they put their minds and muscle to it. Bonneville Dam was about power and, without it, Portland would be a small town in western Appalachia. The Columbia was a source of free energy. It was the River People who paid the price.

We need to bear in mind that, when Lewis & Clark discovered the River of the West in 1804, the River People had been flourishing for 10,000 years. What their federal surveying party surveyed was settled land, the banks of the Columbia lined with villages and ancient fishing sites of a civilization that stretched from the Rocky Mountains to the sea. To their credit, Lewis & Clark recognized the River People as the most advanced native culture on the continent. Within ten years, 90% of it was gone, quietly massacred by emigrant borne disease.

What followed was a century of relentless theft and genocide. The people who fed Lewis & Clark were in the way and, when they wouldn't move, our government made war on them. Their resistance was such that the pre-Civil War army was nearly entirely devoted to beating them into submission. By 1885, it was all over. In that year, the U.S. Government signed treaties with the five recognized river tribes. The treaties guaranteed their rights to fish on the river for "as long as the grass grows and the river runs." There was no escape clause covering hydroelectric projects.

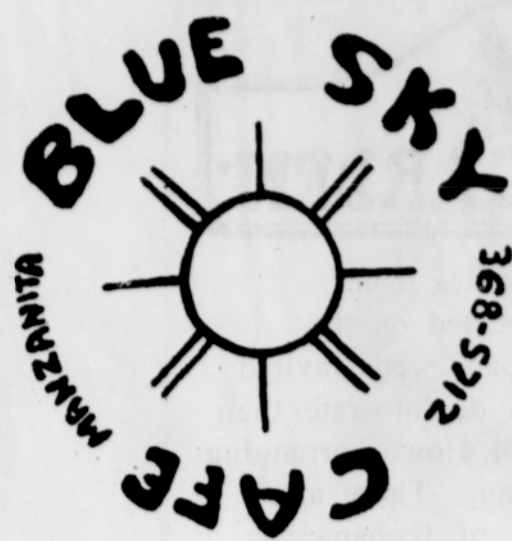
Even after the treaties, the duplicity and murder went on. The tracks of the Northern Pacific Railroad are built, literally, on the bones of the River People. To gain right of way, the railroad signed contracts deeding land to individual Indian families with the proviso that, should the families cease to exist, the land would revert to the stockholders. Systematic slaughter is the only term to describe the next part of the business plan. As a young and angry Yakama put it to me once: "You've got pictures of the Holocaust. We've got pictures of buckboards filled with dead Indians. Men, women and children."

Even compared to this, Bonneville Dam was a hammer blow. The waters behind its steel and concrete wall drowned scores of villages and fishing sites. These, our government vowed to replace. But the Great White Father was a busy man and World War II intervened. The men of the River Tribes went to fight for the country that once was theirs. Many of them didn't come back. When the war ended, more promises were made. The River People waited.

In 1954, their patience was rewarded with The Dalles Dam. A government unable to replace fishing sites somehow managed to construct a second hydroelectric dam which submerged the great falls at Celilo, a thundering cataract a mile long that was the spiritual center of the River People. For generations, the people gathered here in the spring to feast on the first salmon, renew old friendships, and give thanks to the Maker of the World. At a feast four years ago, Maggi Jim, whose husband Howard Jim is chief of the Celilo, cleaned bitter roots and described scenes from her youth. "The drumming and the singing was so loud, you couldn't hear the falls. There were so many people then."

Now, there is nothing. The Dalles Dam effectively removed the River Culture. Still waiting for the return of their land above Bonneville, the tribes accepted a lump sum payment and moved to reservations off the river. All that physically remains of the River People is Celilo Village: a barren 34 acre plot cut off from the Columbia by the Amtrack railbed and six lanes of interstate highway. Aside from that, only seasonal fishing sites.

But we mustn't let this mar our celebration. After half a century, the Great White Father is settling the first of his debts to the River People. Twenty-nine fishing sites to replace the 37 sacrificed for electric toothbrushes and cheap aluminum. No, the River People can't live there. And no, there are no longer fish to catch. Nobody said it's a perfect world. But at least, by God, it's something. When you stand in the way of civilization and profit, you take what you can get.



Fear is that little darkroom where negatives are developed.
Michael Pritchard

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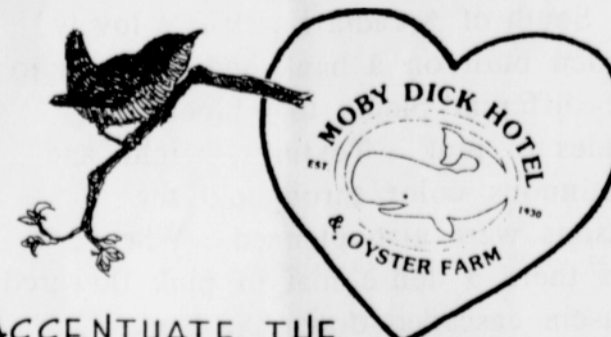
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