

# A Giant Walks On

## A Tribute to Nisqually Hero Billy Frank Jr.

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*"I don't believe in magic. I believe in the sun and the stars, the water, the tides, the floods, the owls, the hawks flying, the river running, the wind talking. They're measurements. They tell us how healthy things are. How healthy we are. Because we and they are the same. That's what I believe in."* – Billy Frank Jr.

On May 5, 2014, one of the most respected Native American leaders of the 20th century passed away.

Born in Nisqually, Wash., on March 9, 1931, Billy Frank Jr. was a fisherman, life-long warrior, and one-time U.S. Marine who spent a lifetime fighting for his people and their home. Branded a "renegade fisherman" by government agencies, Frank Jr. helped to transform the relationship of tribes with the state of Washington, winning them an essential role in the self-management of their fisheries and in the broader co-management of the environment. As a result of his successful work in Washington, Frank Jr. became an international symbol of indigenous self-determination, and used that fame to bring vital support to the Chippewa in Wisconsin during their fishing rights struggle, and to document the struggles of Native Alaskan villages after the Exxon-Valdez oil spill.

Two months ago, President Barack Obama awarded Frank Jr. the Presidential Medal of Freedom. This topped off a long list of awards and recognitions he had received in his lifetime, including the American Indian Visionary Award, the Martin Luther King Jr. Distinguished Service Award, and the Albert Schweitzer Prize for Humanitarianism. For his work hosting the film series, "This Is Indian Country," he also won the Northwest Regional Emmy Award.

Former Nisqually chairwoman Zelma McCloud has compared Frank Jr. to the great Chief Leschi, who once laid siege to the city of Seattle. Others have compared him to Martin Luther King Jr. and Nelson Mandela, who waged their own campaigns against white supremacy.

In the beginning, Frank Jr. did not fit the typical profile of someone who would earn so many honors. "I wasn't a policy guy," he once explained. "I was a getting arrested guy." Over the course of his life Frank Jr. was spied on, spat on, shot at, beaten, arrested more than 50 times, and had his property repeatedly stolen by state officials to prevent him from fishing. One of his closest friends, Hank Adams, was even shot in the stomach while napping along the Nisqually River in 1971. Adams survived after undergoing emergency surgery, and went on to play a critical role in several fishing rights lawsuits and eco-management agreements, as well as the formation of the Northwest Indian Fisheries Commission, which Frank Jr. chaired from 1981 to 2014.

"Billy and I were the prime negotiators," Adams explains.

Frank Jr. inherited much of his personality from his father, Willie Frank Sr.; both were respected leaders of the Nisqually and spent their lives fighting for fishing rights.

As a young man Frank Sr. had also attended a boarding school, where he was pressured to shed his culture to achieve entry into paradise. "The religion never made much sense to Willie," wrote biographer Trova Heffernan. "He already lived in

paradise. The mountain fed the river. The river and the land fed his people."

"He was a lifelong fighter for Nisqually rights," said Adams. Despite being in his 80s, he was out in a canoe with the comedian and civil rights activist Dick Gregory in 1966, who later went on a hunger strike behind bars to draw attention to treaty rights. At 103 years old, Frank Sr. was also the key witness in a momentous Federal Energy Regulatory Commission hearing on the re-licensing of Nisqually River dams.

Frank Jr.'s patience and dedication were famous for winning over opponents, including the legendary Sen. Warren Magnuson (D-Wash.) – a friendship that became key in passing groundbreaking legislation like the Northwest Power Act. It also sunk the career of others, like the notorious "Indian fighter" Slade Gorton. Despite everything, Frank Jr. maintained a sweetness and friendliness to everyone – even to those who tried to make him an enemy. According to Adams, Frank Jr. got this sense of cooperation from his mother, Angeline Frank. "His mom was the principle carrier of the good neighbor principle," Adams said. "She instilled it on him – everyone's your neighbor. You've gotta always be a good neighbor."

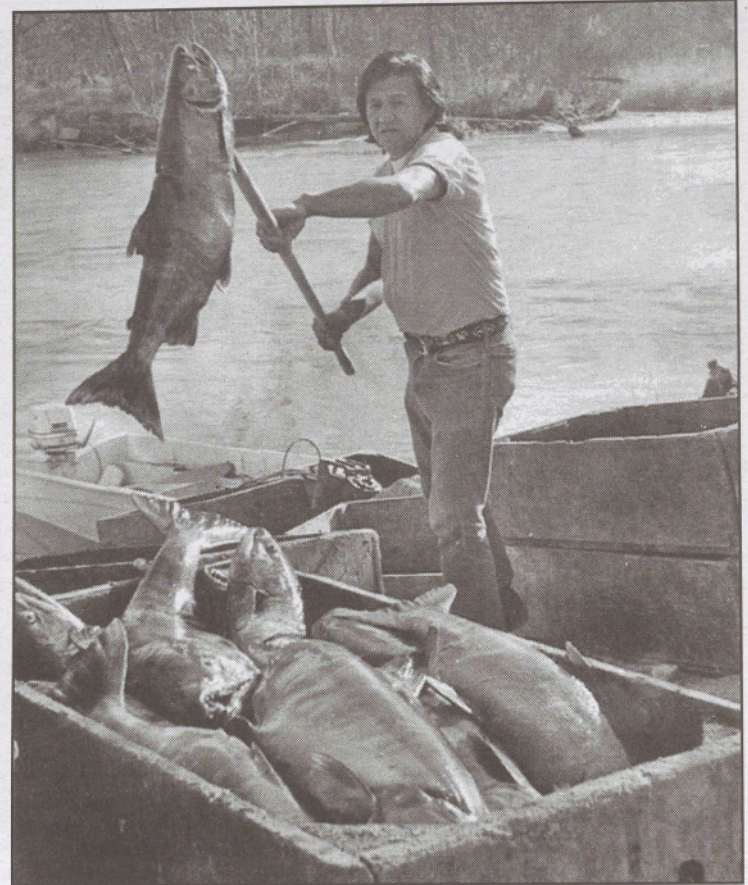
### Battles at Frank's Landing

Frank Jr. discovered early that he would not be able to carry on his family's traditions without a fight. He was arrested at age 14 for fishing on his family's property along the Nisqually River – a six-acre piece of land called Frank's Landing. Frank Sr. had used compensation money from the U.S. government to purchase the land after his original land – along with most of the Nisqually reservation – was seized by the army in the build-up to World War I. The land became a crucial sanctuary to native fishermen, and the center of gravity in the growing fishing rights struggle that took shape in the 1960s.

"People who come into Frank's Landing would gain strength to take into the world," recalled Adams.

When Adams became the head of the Survival Of American Indians Association, the group decided to adopt tactics from the Civil Rights Movement, holding what they called "fish-ins" to demonstrate against racist law enforcement that obstructed their access to traditional foods. As in the South, recalcitrant state governments in the Northwest were sacking the police on people of color, and claiming that federal protections for non-whites could not constrain them.

At one infamous fish-in on Oct. 13, 1965, the people of Frank's Landing managed to capture public attention across the country, and produced a sense of confusion and shock for people in the Northwest.



Billy Frank Jr., 1973

COURTESY OF THE WASHINGTON STATE ARCHIVES

With news cameras rolling, two fishermen lowered their net into the Nisqually River in front of a small crowd of natives and a larger crowd of journalists. State wardens hiding behind bushes on the other side of the river suddenly took off in three powerboats and rammed the native canoe without warning. The Native canoe was mostly filled with newspaper men and children under 10.

Frank Jr.'s niece Alison Bridges, who was 13 at the time, recalled "... this game warden, he grabbed me by the hair and he started to slam my head into the log ... So my sister was fighting with him ... and we got up to the cars and they were arresting my mom ... They were hitting my dad in the back with those brass knuckles.... They were clubbing him and hitting him ... One of the game wardens turned around and he just punched my sister in the face ... the blood was just spurting out."

One bystander summarized, "I think I'll go home and throw up."

Just six days before the infamous fish-in, Frank Jr. and his brother-in-law Al Bridges had been rammed without warning and nearly drowned in the Nisqually River. "Those bastards rammed us at full speed, and knocked us clean over," Frank Jr. later explained. "We had our hip boots on and it was harder'n hell to swim. I honestly thought I was going to drown."

Frank Jr. and his friends were labeled "renegades" for claiming that states had no authority to manage Indian fishing – particularly fishing off the reservation at traditional fishing sites. This was an irritation for state officials, and for the white fishermen who saw no point in sharing. But under a strict reading of the treaties it was hard to dispute – the documents contained no language about regulating native fishing, and under the Winans ruling of 1905, judges must analyze treaties the way tribal signatories would have understood them.

After Frank Jr. and five other fishermen were arrested in March 1964, the resulting legal dispute went to the U.S. Supreme Court three times in a case called the Puyallup Trilogy.

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