

KEEPING TRACK OF A CULTURE

BY: THOMAS DOTY

In 1954, Congress terminated the Siletz tribe and their reservation along the Oregon coast. Since 1856, thousands of Indians from dozens of tribal backgrounds, had lived a meager existence under conditions which might easily have destroyed a weaker culture. Though many Indians died of diseases, of poor living conditions and food alien to their traditional diets, and many more died of sadness at having been shipped and force-marched from their homelands of thousands of years, those who survived were strong. After termination of the reservation, the Siletz River still flowed deep and wide, and morning fog still rolled through a valley once described as "an oasis enclosed by a beautifully carved rim of high mountains ... and an abundance of fishes, wild game and wild fruits." In the spirit of the survival of the landscape, the current strength of the Confederated Tribes of Siletz Indians can be traced to those few who survived a century of barely survivable conditions. Yet they did survive, and so did many of their Old Time traditions.

For centuries, the various tribes who ended up at Siletz have used myths to pass along cultural wisdoms from generation to generation. In Siletz, around campfires and in the living rooms of Indian homes, storytellers still tell the stories of Whistleman, Big Snake and Pitch Woman. These myths are a living oral tradition.

It may not be long before the stories are told once again in their original languages. Last spring Loren Bommelyn, a Tolowa from Crescent City, began a series of language workshops in Siletz, informally called, "Conversational Athapascan." In addition, the tribe hired linguist Thomas Grigsby to collect language and other cultural materials from

tribal elders.

Elders have contributed much to the preservation and perpetuation of traditions. Nellie Orton has revived an interest in the Nados (Nay-dos), a line dance that celebrates creation. Archie ben has worked to keep alive songs and dances. Robert Simmons is well known for his skills in storytelling. Even non-Indian residents, such as George Kentta, burst with a knowledge of tribal history. Skilled basketmakers weave baskets from hazel switches and spruce roots, maidenhair ferns and beargrass. Many traditional foods are still eaten, including mussel chowder, sea roses and all kinds of berries. Salmon are netted from platforms and eels are caught at night.

Both ancient and modern traditions are celebrated at annual tribal gatherings: Memorial Day, each August at the Pow Wow, and in November on Restoration Day.

Much of the current interest in traditions among Indians in Siletz can be attributed to the restoration of tribal status by the federal government in 1977, and the subsequent reestablishment of a patchwork of tribal lands. However, someone had to keep track of the culture through a century of hunger, disease and death. Last year, Arthur Bensell, a Siletz elder, said that "when we were restored, a lot of them said, 'We are going to become Indians now. I told them we have always been.'"

Today, the Confederated Tribes of Siletz Indians numbers nearly 2000 on its tribal roles, people whose ancestors suffered much to keep alive the Old Time culture. This November, the tribe will celebrate the tenth anniversary of the restoration of their tribal status. Yet the real celebration will be of a people whose spirit of tradition, like that of their river, continues to flow deep and wide.

NATIONAL NEWS

NCAI ELECTS FIRST PUEBLO PRESIDENT

The 44th Annual convention of the National convention of the Nation congress of American Indians (NCAI), the leading national Indian organization, has elected the first Pueblo Indian to serve as NCAI President in its four-decade history. John F. Gonzales of the pueblo of San Ildefonso was elected as the thirteenth NCAI President by Indian and Native governmental delegates and individual members on September 24 in Tampa, Florida.

Congressional activities affecting Indian affairs

Sen. Daniel K. Inouye (D-HI) was joined by 16 other Senators in introducing a joint resolution acknowledging the contributions of the Iroquois Confederacy of Nations to the development of the U.S. Constitution. The resolution also reaffirms government-to-government relations, the U.S. trust responsibility to Indian tribes and the need to exercise "the utmost good faith in upholding its treaties with the various tribes."

The Senate passed a bill Sept. 18 to provide for the use and distribution of funds awarded to the Cow Creek Band of Umpqua Tribe of Indians.

SUPREME COURT TO HEAR RELIGIOUS FREEDOM CASES

NARF (Native American Rights Fund) will be filing *amicus* briefs in two religious freedom cases that will be decided by the United States Supreme Court in the 1987 term. In *Lyng v. Northwest Indian Cemetery*, the court will determine whether the construction of a forest service road in an area of religious significance to the Yurok, Karok and Tolowa Tribes violates those Tribes First Amendment right to free exercise of their religion. In the second case, *Employment Division, Department of Human Services of the State of Oregon vs. Smith*, the Court will decide if members of the Native American Church who were discharged from their jobs for peyote use during religious ceremonies are entitled to unemployment compensation benefits from Oregon's unemployment compensation fund by virtue of their First Amendment free exercise rights.

Editor note: Thomas Doty is a Storyteller - Poet - teacher of native American traditions of the Northwest. He recently gave a performance at the Siletz Title IV program in Siletz. Thomas Doty is from Ashland, OR.