

Siletz History

HISTORY

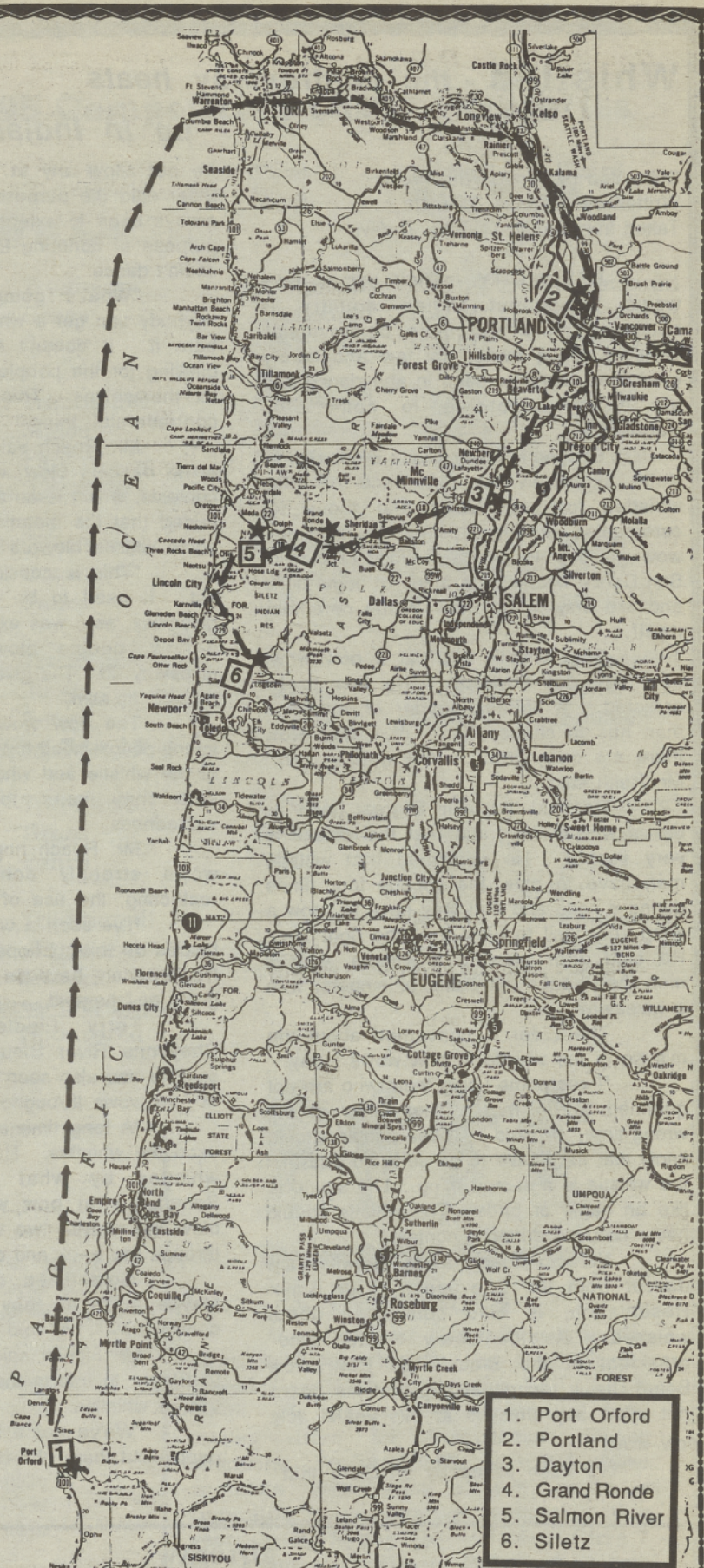
In 1950, Tribal member George Thompson, then a 12 year old student at Siletz School, wrote a paper on Siletz and it's Native American background. George is the son of the late Chief Coquelle Thompson and the story goes as follows:

About the year 1855 there was a great unrest throughout a section of Southern Oregon where a number of Indian tribes were living. Among the tribes were the Chetcos, To-To-To-neys (Tututni's), Coquelles, and other Rogue River bands. After a brief war among the Indians and the white settlers and soldiers of the United States, a man by the name of Joel Palmer made treaties with various bands of Indians. In these treaties the Government agreed to give all the Indians land, homes, horses, cattle, and machinery if they would move to the new location. Some Indians agreed, but many did not want to go because they knew no other lands except their own, where game, fish, and acorns were plentiful. When some Indians refused, the soldiers were summoned, and they were forced to leave and in many instances killed before their loved ones. What was the Indian to do but go? In the meantime the Congress of the United States failed to ratify these treaties made by Mr. Palmer.....

I am a Coquelle Indian, my father is a Coquelle, and his father was one of the original signers of the treaty. He had to sign because he was a tribal chief. He was named after our first president, Washington--the Indians called it "Wah-shee-toon-ya." At my father's passing I will inherit the honor of being the Chief of the Coquelles, the title held at present by him. I will tell you the story of how my grandfather was brought here to the Siletz Valley about 95 years ago. I repeat his words:

"It was summertime. We were all herded down to the edge of the ocean at Port Orford, Oregon, by the soldiers of the Government. Some people were crying, others were just quiet--nobody talked. Each person was allowed only one package or pack, generally made up in a basket. The Indians took mainly something to eat, as they did not know where they were going. The only clothes were what they wore; later on the Government gave us a blanket apiece. We left behind many fine canoes, homes, tanned hides, and other belongings. All of us were heartsick. Someone said they were going to shoot us and throw us into the ocean, but my father assured us that the whites meant no harm. We camped at Port Orford for one night, and during that night many Indians disappeared and were never heard of again. The next day about 11:00 o'clock we saw a large boat with many sails on it coming straight in from the ocean. It anchored 300 yards away, and boats were let down and came ashore. Then began the task of loading all the Indians. After several hours the captain gave the word that the loading was completed and we were ready to sail.

"It was our first night at sea, and many of the Indians were sick--some tried to jump overboard and swim back. When daylight came, we could not see land and we were afraid; we begged the Captain to turn around. The sea was getting angry and the ship seemed to capsize with each swell. This went on for five days and nights, and then one morning we saw land and we were happy again. The water was smooth. We did not know it then, but we were in the Columbia River. We sailed up to Portland--only a few large buildings at that time. Here we got off the ship. We were fed and transported to Dayton, Oregon, for the last part of our Journey. From Dayton we traveled by ox-team to Grand Ronde, Oregon. Some of the people stayed at Grand Ronde and rest of us went on to Salmon River. The government had provided stations along the way, so food was plentiful and we could always get soldiers' hard tack. It must have been about September when we reached Salmon River because there was an abundance of fish in the river. Some men killed deer and others got mussels from the rocks. Winter was drawing near and my father was anxious to get shelter for his people. When he inquired about the houses the Captain laughed and said 'You Indians don't know how to live in houses. What do you want with a house?' This made my father angry and he gathered his followers and started south, hoping to find some place to build a longhouse to withstand the rain and cold wind. Then the measles came. It killed many of our people and with the coming of spring we had only a handful of people left, 16 in all. We started up the Siletz River (at that time it was called SE-LA-GEES) and finally stopped at Euchre Creek and built a longhouse and some small huts so that another winter would find us prepared. There was plenty of camas, fish and deer, and my father said, 'We will stay here.'



"In the meantime the Government was opening up more territory west of Fort Hoskins, and soon they came as far west as the Siletz River, about where the town of Siletz is now. They found some Indians on the river, and, as well as I can remember, my father told me they did not come with us, but had been here all the time. When the soldiers found this fine valley with Indians already here, they merely presumed that the Indians were some that had been brought from southern Oregon. However, this was not true; my father understood that they had always been here. When the agent wanted to know their name, they told him SE-LA-GEES. The agent simply called it "Siletz" after his own pronunciation. Consequently the birth of a name and an Indian Reservation at the same time. Siletz now stands as an old Indian Agency town, with many stories connected with its name. Now the white man has made it a city with laws and a council and everything that goes to make up a modern city."