



Chris Howard and Woody Simmons, both of Walla Walla, watch a video of Celilo Falls projected into a miniature theater in the Celilo: Progress Versus Protest exhibit on Wednesday at Tamastlikt Cultural Institute in Mission. Staff photo by E.J. Harris

SILENT FALLS

Progress silences Celilo Falls; stories keep its memory alive

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East Oregonian

Although just a baby when the waters of Celilo Falls went silent just more than 60 years ago, Fred Hill passes on stories to keep the memory alive.

"I never got the privilege to see Celilo Falls," he told a crowd during "Stories & Songs," a May 31 Pepsi Primetime @ the Museum presentation at Tamastlikt Cultural Institute.

"The falls died, according to the stories and things that I've heard, on March 10, 1957," added Thomas Morning Owl, who also is too young to have firsthand memories.

The presentation coincided with the museum's current exhibit, "Celilo: Progress Versus Protest." The display, which remains through July 14, tells the story of the demise of the falls as a result of construction of The Dalles Dam.

"We predicted many years ago that the dams would kill the salmon. We were a voice in the wilderness. We were told by the government and everyone else to keep our mouths shut — we need the electricity," reads a caption attributed to Richard T. Pressey, a biologist who worked for both federal and state fish agencies.

On the morning of March 10, 1957, the massive floodgates on the newly constructed dam were closed. Within hours Celilo Falls, located approximately 13 miles upstream, disappeared beneath the rising water.

John Caldbick said the falls extended across the entire river. At approximately 40 feet high, he described the Columbia River as tumbling into a series of chutes, rapids, eddies and narrows through the basalt rock.



Part of the exhibit asks people to write their family names on a tag and place it on a map of the Columbia River where their families traditionally fished near the Celilo Falls area. Staff photo by E.J. Harris

Throughout the early part of the 20th century, American Indians used dip nets, gaff hooks and spears to catch fish at Celilo Falls. Later, the elaborate construction of fishing scaffolds — or platforms — were popular from the mid-1930s on. After a number of deaths as fishermen were swept into the churning water, the Bureau of Indian Affairs required the use of harnesses that secured fisherman to the platforms or the shore.

Dorothy Cyr, who attended the "Stories & Songs" presentation, said her father-in-law, Wilfred Yallup, described the sound of the pre-dam falls.

"He said it was like a freight train," she said. "It was really loud."

Hill and Morning Owl said many stories have been passed down about the day the falls went silent. Morning Owl said a lot of people, including some elders, didn't think it would really happen.

"When the falls died, the sound died," Morning Owl said. "You could just hear the wind and the sound of people crying. They wailed."

For thousands of years, Celilo Falls was a gathering place for the Plateau peoples — a place where they fished, traded goods and shared common bonds. In addition to seven species of salmonids, the museum display indicates Celilo was known for its lamprey, mussels, sturgeon and other fish.

Hill said his aunt Flora always shared stories about Celilo Falls.

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— Thomas Morning Owl

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Fred Hill talks about his family and their relationship with Celilo Falls during Pepsi Primetime @ The Museum Series "Stories & Songs" at the Tamastlikt Cultural Institute. Staff photo by E.J. Harris