

Siletz tribe home after long struggle

by Marsha Shewczyk

The Siletz tribe is celebrating its restoration as a tribe along with the return of some of the lands that was once theirs. Their happiness and pride radiates from Government Hill in Siletz where the first powwow was held on their own land after many years without a home base.

But much of the Siletz story does not shine with pride and happiness. Many Siletz tribal members can recall sad times, there were many in the history of the Siletz people.

The ancestral land belonging to the Siletz people was rich in timber and natural beauty. With the coming of white settlers the coastal tribes were forced to move from the land they occupied for so long.

The superintendent of Indian Affairs in Oregon, General Joe Palmer, negotiated with chiefs and headmen of many bands to arrive at the settlement for the 1855 treaty. The bands agreed that their people would within one year move from the lands of their ancestors to a very rugged portion of the coast. The thirty-nine bands would occupy a 1.1 million acre reservation and would become known as the Confederated Tribes of Siletz Indians of Oregon.

The August 11 treaty gave the Indian people of the coast one year to move to the reservation. But because of skirmishes and insistence by white settlers Palmer was forced to order removal of the Indian people to the reservation in February of 1856. There was much loss of life along the way due to exhaustion, disease and attacks by settlers.

No one knew that the treaty would never be ratified by congress. Almost all Indian treaties were promptly approved by the Senate. History reports the failure to ratify the Siletz treaty as being "accidental and unintentional." The consequences to the Siletz tribe were nothing short of devastating.

Because there was no treaty no subsistence annuity came from the government. The rugged land the Siletz people occupied made it difficult to survive the way they were



Speeches and opening ceremonies were staged on a slab of concrete on Government Hill which was at one time the foundation of an old cannery where tribal members would can salmon, meat and vegetables for themselves and other tribal members. This will be the site of the new Siletz cultural and community center.

accustomed to.

General Palmer continued his efforts to get the treaty ratified. Pending ratification he asked for an executive order to protect the designated Indian lands from settlement.

The treaty was never ratified and the executive order guarantee gave no "vested" property rights. Executive order land could be taken without payment of full value. White settlers who saw the possibilities of commercial enterprises convinced the president to sign an executive order which cut the Siletz reservation into two parts. The middle section between the northern Siletz reservation and the southern Alsea reservation was opened to white settlement. This amounted to 240 thousand acres taken from the Siletz tribes without their consent and with no compensation.

The attractiveness of the coastal land owned by the Siletz Indians prompted the state legislature in 1870 to pass a memorial requesting that the federal government abolish the entire coast reservation and move the

surviving Indians east of the Cascades.

On March 3, 1875 Congress passed an act closing the Alsea reservation and reducing the Siletz reservation some 360 thousand acres. The act designated the Siletz reservation as a "permanent reserve." Not one Indian consented to removal. Despite that the land was opened to white settlement. Labors spent over the preceding 15 years went uncompensated.

Individual ownership was not a part of the Indian way. The federal government ignored this concept when in 1887 it passed the Dawes Act. The attraction to white settlers in the passage of this act meant that Indian land not allotted to individual tribal members would be declared surplus. The land would be opened to homesteading.

By 1892, 536 allotments had been filed on or in behalf of Indians. Before allotment the Siletz reservation contained 225,580 acres; after allotment the Indians held only 46 thousand acres. The Indians received 74 cents per acre for their land.

Another act of congress in 1910 authorized the sale of the reserved allotment lands. Much of the land then passed into non-Indian hands. By 1954 tribal lands had dwindled to 2,598 acres. Seventy-six individual allotments contained 4,390 acres.

In 1954 the most extreme policy in the history of Indian affairs, termination, completely severed the relationship between the federal government and various Indian tribes. Federal support and programs were cut off and all tribal land was sold. Only after it was realized that termination had almost completely destroyed tribal life among terminated tribes was the policy rejected and reversed. Termination was imposed on only three percent of all Indian tribes. The Siletz tribe was included.

Public Law 588, the termination act for the western Oregon Indians, resulted in the sale of the remaining tribal lands. Thirty-nine acres in the city of Siletz known as Government Hill was donated by the federal government to the city of Siletz. This was once the headquarters for the coastal tribes. The tribes retained a small cemetery on the hill.

Individual allotment lands became subject to taxation. By 1960 many of the last lands that belonged to the Siletz Indians passed out of Indian ownership due to non-payment of taxes. Many Indians had no means of paying the imposed taxes.

The security of having a place to go home to was lost. Throughout the years many Siletz Indians dispersed to various places in Lincoln County. A great number went to larger cities such as Salem and Eugene.

Many leaders of the Siletz tribe saw what termination was doing to their people. In an effort to reorganize they filed as a non-profit corporation under state law in 1973. The Siletz Reservation Act was passed on November 18, 1977. The act provides that once again the Siletz tribe and its enrolled members are eligible for assistance and benefits that the federal government extends to all federally recognized tribes.

The tribe has regained its position as a sovereign people, providing services to its people and providing a sense of unity and identity for its members.

On November 28, 1979, 3,630 acres of land had been located which today composes the Siletz tribal lands. Plots of Bureau of Land Management land scattered throughout Lincoln County along with 39 acres on Government Hill in the city of Siletz were returned to the Siletz tribe.

Before a settlement was made the conflict concerning hunting and fishing rights for Siletz tribal members had to be cleared up. According to Siletz tribal council chairman Art Bensell, "We had been studying the fishing issue a long time."

Negotiations with the state resulted in the Siletz tribe's acquiring three sites on three streams off the Siletz river. "These streams are closed to everyone but tribal members," says Bensell. "Only cultural fishing is allowed, that is, with spear, gap, hook, basket weir and net. This way we can teach cultural fishing to the young," Bensell commented. "The number of fish we catch is limited," however.

Bensell pointed out that because there was not so much organized opposition to hunting, tribal members did better on the hunting issue. Tribal members may hunt for one additional deer and elk beyond state limits.

The Siletz tribe settled on these issues in a compromising manner because as Bensell states, "We didn't want to ask for too much. We might get nothing."

With the goal of getting a land base met new goals can now be set. A 10 year economic projection was developed to assist the Bureau of Indian Affairs and the Tribe which reflects the goals adopted by the Tribal Council.

The Tribe's chief goal according to the report on the proposed Siletz reservation plan is "to improve the lives of its members by meeting their pressing social needs and sustaining their sense of pride in being Siletz Indians."

The 1551 member tribe currently has a manager and small administrative staff as well as a staff that operates education, employment, health and housing programs.

Potential tribal enterprises were discussed and researched during the course of the reservation planning. They include timber sales, a commercial campground operation and a business loan program for tribal members.

Government Hill will become the site of a cultural and social service facility which will be shared with the community. A proposed site plan for Government Hill has been developed that includes a cultural and community center, tribal and BIA offices, medical-dental clinic and indoor and outdoor recreational facilities.

So now, after many years of struggling, the Siletz tribe can come together to develop plans for the future. The Government Hill site given back to the Tribe by the city of Siletz provides an ideal location to begin based on the Siletz people's history. It's home.



The cultural and community center to be located on Government Hill in the city of Siletz has recently been approved by the Siletz tribal council.