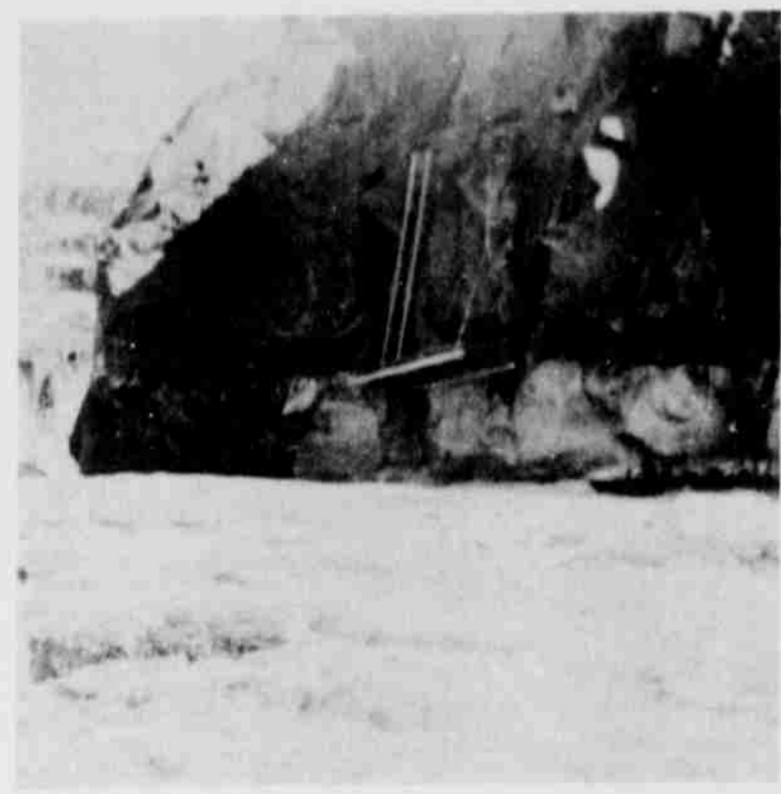


Life on the River : Fish, fear and freedom



A hanging scaffold at lower Tenino Rapids. The water would rise at least 30 feet during the spring runoff.

by George Aguilar, Sr.

With the advent of the spring runoff Chinook salmon near at hand, this writing will be directed at the harvesting of all fishing in the Columbia River and in the local tributaries of the Deschutes River.

In preparing this writing, some excerpts are from the book "The Indians of the Pacific Northwest" by Robert H. Ruby and John A. Brown. The journals of Lewis and Clark's expeditions of 1805 are used as well. Other information is from childhood recollection that was orally passed down to me by the elders of my family.

Salmon Feast:

Upon Lewis and Clark's return, they observed the Wishram (Wasco) celebrating the arrival of salmon by ceremoniously cutting the fish into small pieces that were given to the children. These natives of The Dalles believed that they should not take the first salmon running because those fish had been endowed by the Great Spirit with powers that made them bolder and better able to swim to the spawning grounds from which their fingerlings would return to the sea. Elsewhere on the Columbia and its tributaries "Salmon Chiefs" saw to it that rituals were rigidly observed with dances and first-run taboos to ensure good subsequent runs. The Chinooks believed that they should place a berry in the mouth of the first salmon caught to nourish it on what they believed to be its foodless journey to the spawning grounds.

In June 1855, there was an assembly of the Columbia River Indians. They were requested to meet at the Wascopum Springs, near the present day city of The Dalles.

The bands involved were the Dog River Wasco, Wishram Wasco, Tiaiau (Tenino) Tygh Shahaptain (upper Deschutes), John Day (Shahaptain) Wy-Am (Celilo) Cascade, Klik-kit-tat, Wai-il-lat-paun (Molalla), a few Whah-Lah-Whah-Lah (Walla Walla) and some Wa-Na-Pum (So-kulks). The gathering was for the purpose of signing the Treaty of 1855. For Joel Palmer, the representative for the whiteman, this was an opportune time to propel this Treaty for the United States. This was because the salmon run was now going full bore and some of the smaller bands had returned to the Columbia River to their usual and accustomed fishing places to harvest the salmon.

June 1855:

The Columbia River this time of the year is slowly receding from the spring melt off. There are thousands, maybe millions, of blueback (sockeye), the now almost extinct salmon presently in the river. They were "knockin' 'em dead" (a slang term used by Columbia River fishermen in the 1930s and 1940s, referring to an abundant run of salmon). The early June hog Chinook also ran at this same time. This species of Chinook weighed as much as 100 pounds or more. This species is now extinct.

Fifty years had come and gone since the Lewis and Clark expedition. Excerpts are as follows: October 21, 1805: Lewis and Clark's observation enroute to the Pacific Ocean was: "We were received with great kindness. They examined everything they saw with much attention. The language (Shahaptain) did not differ much from the above Choppish (Nez Perce)." The two Nez Perce chiefs that guided the exploration party down river from the Idaho Territory stated, "These

are our relatives," referring to the people that dwelled on the Lower Columbia River. "Among other things, we observed were acorns....They all have pierced noses wearing a long tapered shell through the nose."

October 22, 1805: They observed inhabitants of an island, where 11 huts of Indians (Tygh Shahaptain) were at the mouth of the Towannahooks (Deschutes River). They were giging (spearing) fish from their canoes. Note: At this time of the year, all the fall Chinook salmon have passed this area. The only possible species at this time of the year (where they were spearing) is the silverside salmon (coho) and the steelhead. This late in the fall season, and in the earlier years, my grandfather caught the silvers at Tenino. Also, some of the other Wascos fished the Spearfish area. The last known silverside we caught was in the year of 1947 or 1948. From that time on, we never saw this species of silverside salmon in this area. Also, Lewis and Clark observed that most of the inhabitants lived on islands or on the north side of the river. This practice was from the upper Snake River to the Cascade Rapids. Upon inquiry, they were led to do this because this provided a barrier against the marauding war-like Snake Indians. It was noted that this area had many tons of processed salmon ready for trade.

October 25, 1805: Immediately upon passing the inhabitants of the Celilo Falls, the Lewis and Clark were now in the tribal territory of the Echeloots (Wasco). The Wasco dwelling is made of wooden boards, the language has changed drastically. In the journals of Lewis and Clark there is a long, elaborate description of the dwellings of the Wascos: "Which were almost equal in size of those left in Illinois." These inhabitants also received Lewis and Clark with kindness and invited them to their houses. After passing the Tenino and Spearfish area, Lewis and Clark came across a Wasco war party. The Wasco chief was dressed in a war jacket, leggings, moccasins, and a cap, possibly a ta-mun-na-wus cap. The Chief had encountered a war party of Indians from the Towahnahooks (high in the Deschutes River area). "All tribes in this neighborhood are now at war with the Snake Indians. During the trip down the river a great number of seals were seen," relates the journals.

October 26, 27, 28 and 29, 1805: Much time was spent in this area (below The Dalles) for observations, and determining the longitude of their location. A treat from the Wascos were fresh speared salmon trout (steelhead). Many trade items and articles of the whiteman are now showing up: blue cloth, a sword, jacket and a hat procured from a whiteman from below. The food of the Wasco was fresh and pounded fish, filberts, acorns, nuts, berries and white bread made of roots.

Upon visiting the Wasco Chief, the Chief brought out his bow and quiver (time to brag) and some war-like instruments. From the Chief's medicine bag came 14 fore fingers from the common enemy nations of the Wasco. The medicine bag is a foot long, containing roots and other articles. It is suspended in the middle of the house. No one but the owner has access to this bag. There is also a smaller medicine bag carried around the waist and neck used as an amulet. Note: The red medicine bag is possibly the nook nook, which is a conk knot off of a Pacific silver fir tree. In forestry

terminology it is called the Indian Red Fungus. It is processed by drying and scraping it to form a powder and it is mixed with an animal lard. I saw my grandmother use this nook nook as a cosmetic application on her face and neck.

One other item my grandmother made mention of in my preteen years was the arrow that the Wascos used. For those that are interested, you may go down to The Museum At Warm Springs and look at the pictures of old. You may soon discover that no flint heads are upon those arrows in the pictures. Those arrows are burned and sharpened at the tip and poison is applied. The bow was made of yew wood, which was easily accessible to the Wasco since the tree grew in the Cascade Mountain range.

"The poison was from rattle snake venom. It was the elderly woman's duty to collect the venom of the rattle snake. This poison was also prepared for inducement of abortions." The ta-mun-na-wus hat was usually the head caps of animal pelts, whose powers they believed would shield them from any form of harm. The word ta-mun-na-wus is a Shahaptain term meaning great supernatural power. I was told by my grandmother a ta-mun-na-wus was acquired by a spiritual quest by fasting and a trip into the wilderness.

The gig Lewis and Clark saw

When the spring run Chinook was over, there was approximately a six-week wait for the next salmon run to start their journey to their spawning ground. In late May or early June, the blueback (sockeye) and June hog Chinook made their first appearance at the Cascade Rapids. There was one fishing site at Tenino that was a very high producer for the blueback. Put the set net down and it would have to be pulled up immediately with two to four fish at a time. The bluebacks' method of running was from 4:30 a.m. to 7:30 a.m. Fishing for the blueback after 8 a.m. was just a waste of time. During the daylight hours, the June hog salmon start to be caught until the night hours set in. It also must be noted that the Chinooks were not caught at night at Celilo Falls. Steelhead could be caught in daylight and night hours.

By August, the Columbia River flow level is now stabilized. No more snow melt runoff. The late summer Chinook salmon and steelhead runs are beginning to take place. This is when many people arrive at the Celilo Falls to harvest this late season run. The season lasted nearly a month. By late September all the Chinook salmon run has gone by. Another run of steelhead appear in mid-October. The silverside are also caught during this time. (This run is now extinct.) About this time, a species arrived at Underwood

the water. With much respect and cowering, the guilty party complied with the elderly Chief's request and removed the salmon from the river.

Robert H. Ruby, MD and John A. Brown, professor of Wenatchee Valley College wrote of conflicts of the Columbia River tribes. Especially disturbing in their writings was the introduction of the salmon trapping devices, specifically the fishwheels.

The traps were introduced in about 1879. In 20 years' time, there were 76 of these fishwheels in operation. IN 1894, one wheel reported a catch of 250,000 pounds between May 17 and July. This was the June hog Chinook and blueback runs. Using this one unit as a rough estimate, if the catch was all sockeye, this harvest of the blueback would have been approximately 4,750,000 taken in one season for all fish traps. If these fish were laid from nose to tail, they would stretch about 1,800 miles. (The estimates are just suppositions for the sake of illustration).

The traps were installed where the Indians dipped and speared. The crowded the Indians out and restricted them from the area, telling them to fish elsewhere. The fishwheel owners were brought to court and argued on April 3 and 4, 1905. The court ruled in favor of the Yakamas on May 15, 1905.

By this time, the fishwheel owners ruined the accustomed fish areas by blasting different channels and using concrete to alter the fishing areas. One of the photos shows an example of such a practice by the fish trap owners. The channel was also blasted and altered to divert all fish to the trap.

Other methods of harvest by the whiteman was beach seining by the use of boat and horses. Tons upon tons of the fall run salmon were taken in the early 1940s. No more June hog Chinook were caught at our fishing sites in the Tenino area. In the early 1990s, only a few, as I recall from the Oregonian newspaper, reported three skeye made it to the Idaho Lake where their spawning areas are located.

Instead of Salmon ceremonies of old, the modern salmon feast should be called a ceremony of tears at the Cascade Rapids, Tenino and Spearfish Rapids, Celilo Falls and all other fishing sites along the Columbia and its tributaries.

After relocation and settling on the Wam-Sprin Reservation in 1866, the local tributaries provided some sustenance but never equal to that of the fresh run of the Columbia River. The early spring Chinook run arrived at the mouth of the Warm Springs River in about mid-April to early June. By mid-June all spawning areas, namely Beaver Creek, Mill Creek and the Warm Springs River were teeming with salmon. Elders of the earlier era told of the salmon streams of being so abundant that one could

Shitike for the huge native rainbow trout which came by in April. I would always make an attempt to sneak up on the logs and the overhanging brush to sometimes see the caudal fin of the steelhead.

During the winter smi (whitefish) dipnetting in the Deschutes, a steelhead was sometimes caught. Smi dipnetting went out of use upon the construction of the Pelton and Round Butte dams. During the construction of the Pelton Dam, about 1958, hundreds of the spring run Chinook could be seen off the high rock bluffs below Pelton. The fish could go no further because the dam restricted passage to the Metolius River spawning grounds. The Metolius River is now desolate of the one majestic Chinook salmon that caused a stench along the head of the river of what the river was named after. (Metolius means stinking dead fish). In earlier years, thousands of the Chinook could be seen rotting and stinking up the head of the Metolius.

It was sometime in the mid-1940s when the Jefferson Creek J-100 road was being constructed. We camped at Jefferson Creek. We would fish the Metolius for the huge rainbow trout. In about mid-August, schools of steelhead could be seen in the cold, pristine, crystal clear waters. The caudal fins of the Chinook were also seen under log jams. The ancient foot trail we descended down to the stream on was perhaps hundreds, even thousands of years old, and was used by our ancestors.

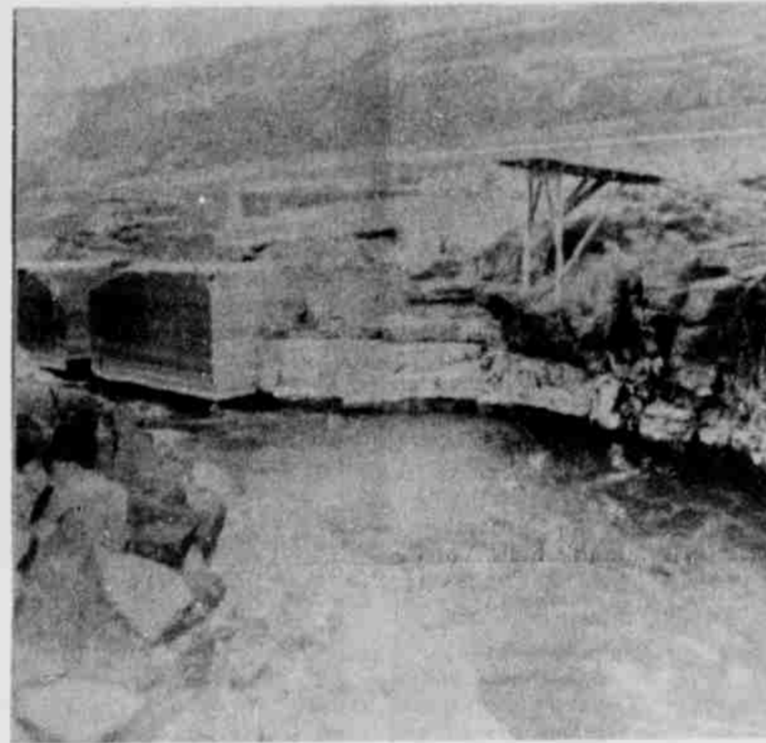
The only thing that lives is an old Indian legend of the once great salmon spawning river where the mighty Metolius River originated. I heard the story in the Shahaptain language and I comprehended it in this manner.

Black Butte and Green Ridge were newly weds. While walking once day, Black Butte stopped to urinate in a squatting position. Meanwhile, Green Ridge laid there waiting in a pouting mood because Black Butte had refused sexual advances (holding out...hahaha).

The urination represents the flow of the Metolius River, which came from a spring out of Black Butte. So, if you ever look upon Green Ridge, you'll see a ridge that runs from south to north portraying Greed Ridge, pouting in a laying back turned position waiting for his bride.

I have fished the salmon in a variety of ways, from Indian traditional set nets, roping, dipnetting, gaffing, spearing, gillnetting and deep sea trolling. Salmon played a very important part of my early life. My thoughts sometime drift into the past of harvesting this once awesome anadromous species. It was at one time, the very essence of my being.

Thank you. I have enjoyed telling you my fish stories.



Fishwheels were common on the Columbia. Fishwheel owners displaced Indian fishermen with the wheels. Their efforts took precedence over Indian rights.

was a spear. The spear is comprised of bone or antler for the head. The shaft was of hardwood. The pole is a well-seasoned fir sapling. The spearhead was attached to the rope made of natural hemp or elk sinew from the backstrap. For a long time, the construction of this spear was a mystery to me because trying to comprehend this description from the Indian language by my grandmother was a little confusing. In 1949, I finally saw one of the spears in use at Underwood near White Salmon, Washington. It was at this time I was staying with my distant cousin Johnny Queampts. Johnny's father, Robert Queampts, made these spears. However, they were made of contemporary materials (steel and modern rope) for practical use. Johnny Queampts is the only one I know of who can construct this ancient spear that was used so long ago. I will attempt to construct one of these spears using the primitive methods and no contemporary material. Hopefully, it will be displayed at The Museum.

Fishing the Columbia River prior to the construction of the hydroelectric dams early March: Grandfather commuted by horseback to the Cascade Rapids near the now Cascade Locks. The purpose was to prepare for the spring run Chinook salmon. The spring snow melt runoff is now starting to take place. Sometimes, if the spring snow melts came too early, the scaffold would have to be rebuilt and placed at a higher position. The river rose as much as 20 feet or more than the winter flow. When this salmon run was over, a quick trip up river to the Tenino area was made. When the fish arrived at Tenino, the river is still rising. Grandfather had a fishing site at every level of the snow melt runoff. Every fishing scaffold had a distinctive name, like Coyote Hole, Cement Roping, Resting Hole, etc. He had approximately 13 fishing sites in this area. The location of these fishing sites was directly across from Spearfish.

called Dog Salmon that weighed about 25 to 40 pounds. It resembled the majestic Chinook species. Its flesh was white (mun-tul-lah). The caudal fin of this species is square, like a steelhead. The Chinook's caudal fin is a 'V' type.

In my childhood days 63 years ago, I used to sit by and listen to my uncle Henry Polk's fishing adventures while he was making dipnet hoops made of a local wood shrub. Most of the time it was late into the night by use of a primitive coal oil lamp, since he was busy during the daylight hours.

I recalled this fond memory when I happened to be at Sherar's Bridge one time when I ran into a young man who was fishing with modern equipment (made of steel). I encouraged him to use the wood hoops to improve his catch, but he just insolently laughed in my face I believe hat wood dipnet hoops have a very slight advantage over the steel hoops because they don't clang when a rock is touched.

The Chinook salmon and other waterborn inhabitants are very sensitive to any alien sound or scent in the water. My aunt had demonstrated this to me once by using a small stone with human saliva on it and throwing it well above an area where eels were hanging. As soon as the rock landed above the eels, they picked up the foreign scent and dispersed immediately. It was not the splash or impact of the rock, but the saliva that scared the eels. A similar example would be elk—if they smell your scent, they'll leave for cover. The situation is exactly the same for Chinook salmon.

One other thing that will quickly arouse the anger of an elder: No fish are to be stored in the river. They are very strict about this. The blood of the salmon was sensed and it made them detour away from the fishing area. In 1946, I saw Chief Tommy Thompson, of the Celilo Wyam, on Chiefs Island at Celilo Falls. He was ranting and raging about salmon strung up on rope in



Huge boulders had to be blasted annually from fishing sites.

almost walk over the top of them. A sack-full could be gotten in a matter of a few minutes. The Shitike Creek was not a Chinook salmon spawning creek. However, the roar of the Shitike Creek Falls is where my Grandfather James Polk taught his sons how to spear and gaff during the February and early March steelhead run. The Shitike Creek brought abundant runs of steelhead and Bull Trout (Dolly Varden). An example of size for the bull trout had various ranges from 18 inches to four feet in length. Between 1939 and 1944, as a youngster, I would fly fish the

(Photos provided by George Aguilar, Sr. Taken in 1951 by George's uncle Leonard Polk.)