

# Sherar Falls

Story and photos by Shannon Keaveny

## ancient mecca of fish tradition

Warm Springs native, Mark Johnson, gingerly bobs his trigger string at the edge of a 15-foot scaffold.

As suddenly as the string jerks and pulls down, he is on his feet.

Feet planted firmly and rope around his waist, he bristles the 20 foot pole and, with swift steady movements, raises his net out of the bubbling, churning waters of Sherar Falls.

Inside the homespun net flops a good catch—a 35 lb fall chinook salmon.

"That felt good," said an elated but winded Johnson, wiping the beads of perspiration from his forehead.

"The whole scaffold shook on that one," chimed in his cousin, Julian Scott.

Both men were taught how to fish by their grandfather atwai Elmer Scott Sr. The Scott family is one of many families who have fished Sherar Falls since time immemorial. They lay claim to a fishing hole accessible only by a precarious platform built over the tumultuous water "just right."

A family that's fished that hole for generations can tell from as far as 200 feet, whether its angled correct," says Terry Courtney Jr., tribal traditional fisherman and scaffold builder.

Elmer Scott Sr., mentor to Terry Courtney Jr. as well, grew up on the Deschutes River with his family. He told his protégés, that his father knew every fishing hole in that area from high water to mid-water to low water. Like his father before him, he taught his sons.

"We used to live here from spring to fall," reminisces Julian Scott.

Julian Scott and Mark Johnson have taught their boys too.

"I started teaching my son around nine," said Julian Scott.

"My son," said Johnson of his 16-year-old, "is better than me now."

### A slippery situation

It is said that at one time Indians of the Columbia Basin didn't bother with a scaffolds. Instead, they balanced barefoot on the slippery moss covered lava rocks overlooking the bottleneck water shoot of the falls with a net made from hide.

Terry Courtney, Jr. remains a bit skeptical. It is more likely, he said, that they had some kind of platform made from extra wood after building their homes.

"Back then," he said "those fish were 80-100 pounds. I've tried it and it's hard to just fish off the rocks."

They rigged hanging net systems too, he said, nets that crossed the river at the base of the falls. Fish who failed to climb the falls would fall back into



ABOVE: Mark Johnson shows off his 35 pound catch. TOP RIGHT: Julian Scott throws back a native catch. BOTTOM RIGHT: Mark Johnson pulls up his net after catching a salmon.



their nets.

Today, and since before Courtney can remember, scaffolds tower directly over the falls. Natives fishing there tie ropes around their waists, to assure hope if they fall in.

"We've been doing this our whole lives, we just know we're not going to fall in," explains Johnson.

The surprisingly sturdy scaffolds last about two years. Platforms are replaced when they start getting wiggly. Folks, like Courtney, harness themselves to the rocks along the edge and build the frame.

"Most of the time I'll build one by myself," he said. "One time I had to do it five times before I got it right. The family could tell from far away I built it in the wrong spot."

A difficult job didn't keep Courtney from coming.

"I enjoyed fishing so much, I packed my lumber [for scaffolds] all the way down."

### Legendary salmon

A good Warm Springs fish-

erman knows its not good to talk about the salmon fables during the fishing season.

That can wait until winter when we tell stories, said Courtney.

A twisted tongue or excessive eye blinking could be the outcome for a loose-lipped fisherman. As the story goes, the noble salmon offered themselves to the people as food. The deer and elk followed. Ceremonial feasts for the tribes revere salmon second only to water for their sacrifice.

Stories of grandeur by the elders are easy to doubt when you see today's fish. Elmer Scott, Sr. told Courtney that in a good night men used to catch 40-60 salmon. Now, says Courtney, fishermen consider it a good night if they catch 24. Spring chinook are rarely seen over 45 pounds.

"Gill nets on the Columbia upset everything," explains Courtney. The commercial fishing nets typically run 300 feet long by 30 feet high across the river. Fish are caught by their

gills and only the smaller ones escape through the holes of the net.

As a result, Sherar Falls sees fewer fish and smaller fish.

"The worst year was about four years ago," laments Courtney, "when the run was only 24,000 salmon in the whole year. There was a harvest cap of 300 for the whole Columbia River, where we get the majority of our ceremonial fish."

"That's what used to run in one day. Pre-1870s, before the dams, we had 8-16 million fish in a year."

Those were the days when stories like the one Courtney heard three years ago were true.

"I have always heard the stories but didn't know if they were true because no one actually had seen it. But this man saw it when he was a little boy. They had a creek where his family would spear salmon and drag them out with a horse. Well, he said, every once in a while they would catch one so big, well, that fish would start dragging the horse out."

Legitimate efforts by the

tribes, the state of Oregon and the federal government throughout the nineties have started to bring salmon counts back up.

The years of 2000 and 2001, said Mike Gauvin, Warm Springs fisheries harvest manager, were good and this year is looking good too.

Gauvin and employees with the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service base their predictions on fish returns to the Columbia River.

"About 17 percent of the fish from the Columbia River go to the Deschutes," he said.

Biologists also can tell by the jack salmon returns. A jack salmon is a salmon less than three years old and often male.

"If we see a large jack return, we'll have large run in the following year," he explained.

A lot of the returns are based on cyclical weather patterns. For instance, ocean conditions, production, and drought cycles will affect salmon populations.

Other hindrances for salmon runs are dams, grazing and logging. Dams just block the way and reduce water for salmon.

"Getting the fish through the main stem of the Columbia River is always a problem. Fish need water and they need it cold," said Gauvin.

Cattle eat riparian vegetation that provides shade and keeps water cool. Smaller fish, which are food for salmon, can hide behind roots and grasses ensuring a better chance of survival. Logging creates similar problems and high levels of silt in the water can smother redds (spawning beds).

This year, due to conservation efforts, the Sherar Falls harvest cap is up to 500.

"It's not a restrictive measure because tribal members won't reach it," explained Gauvin.

The years when the tribes don't have enough fish for ceremonial purposes are hopefully over.

"Just take what you need. No matter what happens we still need to follow our traditional ways. It's not just about full bellies, it's about honoring the fish. When times are tough we need to adjust," says Courtney of the people's responsibility towards preservation of the salmon.

### The catch

"For a long time I heard Indians were like wolves. It took a while but I finally understood why," explains Courtney.

"You see wolves chase their food until they get tired. Then the ones that slow down first, the sickened and the weak, those become their food. We do that with fish."

The salmon run up the middle of the river, especially the strong and big. As they try to jump up the falls and rapids, some grow tired. They start pulling into the banks. At Sherar Falls, they rest and hide in the many holes and caves under the pounding falls. That's where Columbia River basin Indians jab their nylon nets into their family fishing hole.

"That's when we get'em. It is survival of the fittest, only the strong ones that don't rest make it through," says Courtney. "We do just like the wolves."

Dusk and dawn are the best times to fish. A good season will keep Natives under the harvest moon all night catching fish. A community tent, belonging to the Scott family, is open for use to those fishermen who want to stay.

The black lava rocks echo of fishermen come and gone. As dusk settles in and shadows move over the hills, the silhouettes of propelling salmon jumping over the white foaming falls make words like Terry Courtney's resinate.

"I am so lucky to have this reserved right to fish by my own methods and it is an honor that I can not abuse."

## Howlak tichum

### Elmer Scott

Elmer Scott has passed away at the age of 97. He is survived by spouse Goldie Wainanwit.

Other survivors include children Daniel Scott, Gordon Lee Scott, Delsey Marie Scott, Elmer Scott Jr., and Rosemary Scott Smith.

### Chris Waylon Suppah

Chris Waylon Suppah passed away on September 21. He was 20 years old.

Mr. Suppah is survived by his mother, Wanda Suppah Van Pelt. His father, Christopherson Matilton Sr., passed away in 1982.

Other survivors of Mr. Suppah include brothers Craig

Matilton, of Texas; Christopherson Matilton Jr., of California; and Michael S. Kalama, Chet Ralph Van Pelt, Roger Amos Simtustus, and Stanley Simtustus Jr. of Warm Springs.

Favorite hobbies of Mr. Suppah were hunting, fishing and drawing.

He also loved his cats and

dogs, and watching movies.

Dressing was held Wednesday, September 25, at the Simnasho Longhouse.

Burial was September 26 at the Simnasho Cemetery.

### Walter Roland Payne

Walter Roland Payne passed away September 27.

He was 37 years old.

Mr. Payne is survived by his spouse Willette Vernita Payne.

Also surviving Mr. Payne are his father, Richard Wayne Payne, and children Dora Flora Payne, Ariel Vernita and Walter Roland Payne IV.

Surviving brothers are Owens James Yahtin, Virgil Evans Meanus and Richard Wayne Payne Jr.

Surviving sisters are Linda Marie Meanus and Josie Ann Payne.

Dressing was Monday, September 30, at the Agency Longhouse.

Burial was Tuesday, October 1, at the Simnasho Cemetery.