

Remembering Celilo Falls

(Continued from page 1)

As a result of the massive migration of whites into the region during Chief Thompson's youth, Celilo Village had changed dramatically by the time he assumed the chieftainship. What had been a community of 600 to 700 people, and host to thousands more who came from all over the region to trade and visit, had shrunk to less than 200. While most of the Indians moved to one of the region's reservations, many of the river people remained by the banks on the shores of the Columbia.

The Wyams and other river Indians adapted to the new economy the whites had developed, working in the orchards and on the railroads, and selling fish to the canneries that cropped up along the Mid-Columbia in the last two decades of the Nineteenth Century.

Celilo was the center of the Indian contribution to the commercial fishing industry. The miles of rapids, eddies and narrow channels leading up to the great falls concentrated the migrating salmon, making them easy targets for experienced dipnetters.

The fishery at Celilo became especially important during the Twentieth Century due to the gradual destruction of traditional fishing sites and salmon runs in tributary streams like the Yakima, Clearwater and Umatilla.

Chief Thompson struggled to maintain traditional management of the fishery at Celilo where, by the 1940s, dipnetters scooped more than 2.5 million pounds of salmon out of the river every year.

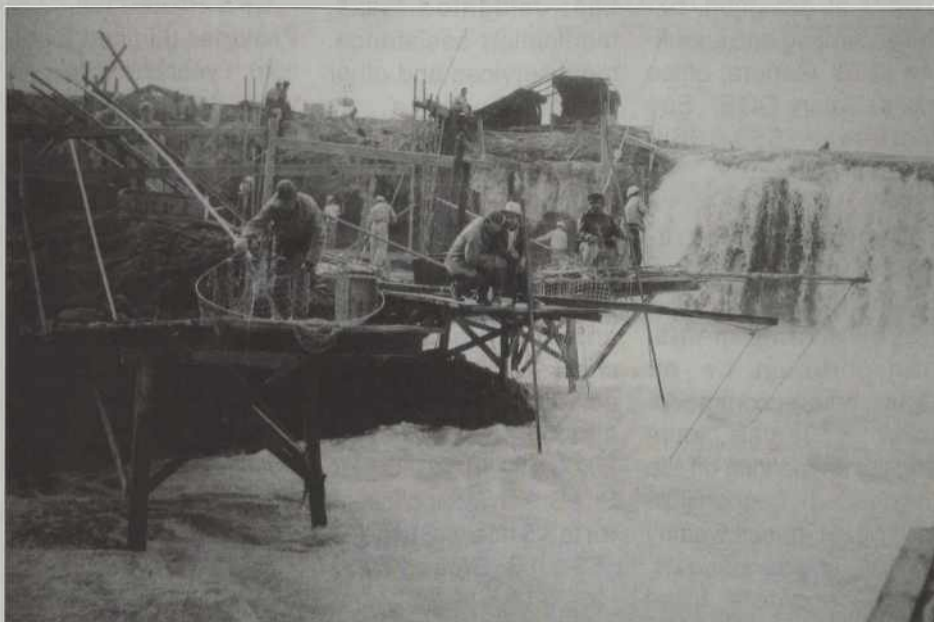
In addition to determining which families had rights to specific fishing places, as Salmon Chief, Chief Thompson opened and closed the fishery on both an annual and a daily basis. However, as Columbia River salmon runs declined and increasing numbers of both Indians and whites came to Celilo to fish, traditional management practices became harder to enforce.

In 1934, several dozen Indian leaders from the Warm Springs, Yakama and Umatilla reservations met to discuss the conflicts over the Columbia River salmon fishery between whites and Indians, and between Indians themselves. Chief Thompson urged the attendees to fish in harmony, and to heed fishing traditions as handed down by their ancestors.

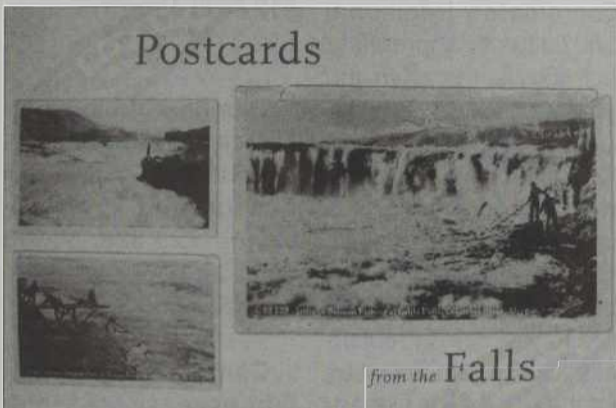
He lamented the fact that fishermen at Celilo were exhibiting selfish attitudes, claiming priority of rights to productive fishing stations.

He declared that he was often troubled to maintain peace and a cooperative spirit among the growing number of Indian fishermen.

The gathered elders decided to form an inter-tribal fishery management agency, the first of



Celilo Falls photos on display at the museum.



its kind. They dubbed it the Celilo Fish Commission, and elected Chief Thompson as the first chair. Though the members became embroiled in a bitter debate over whether the Nez Perce had rights at Celilo, the commission's primary objective was to promote and protect Indian fishing rights.

The tribes' right to fish at off-reservation fishing places like Celilo, a right they reserved in the treaties of 1855, was threatened on two sides. The fish and game agencies of Oregon and Washington saw the Indians as competitors in a zero-sum game, and used discriminatory regulations in an attempt to minimize Indian harvest. More alarming, however, was the federal government's plans to dam the Columbia River, which threatened to destroy entirely the river people's most sacred resource, the salmon.

Upon learning of the Army Corps of Engineers' plans to build Bonneville dam 54 miles downstream from Celilo, Chief Thompson urged the U.S. Attorney Carl C. Donough to protest the dam as a violation of Indian fishing rights.

Despite firm tribal opposition, the Corps commenced construction of Bonneville in 1934, using Public Works Administration funds meant to help ameliorate the nation's dire economic situation. In addition to interfering with salmon migration and destroying important mainstream spawning habitat, the dam flooded numerous Indian homes, as well as the great Cascades, an important Indian

fishery. A few years after the Corps finished Bonneville, the state fishery agencies attempted to close the river above the dam to commercial fishing. Though they claimed it was for conservation purposes, it was clear they were targeting the Indians, who made up the vast majority of commercial fishermen above Bonneville.

Chief Thompson voiced his opposition to Congress and stated a petition campaign against Washington Gov. Mon C. Wallgren's scheme to buy out Indian fishing rights. The chief argued forcefully in a statement to Congress, translated from his native Sahaptin, the tribal fishing rights successfully stopped the states from closing their commercial fishery, but only temporarily. Only the U.S. v. Oregon (1969) and U.S. v. Washington (1974) decisions would come close to addressing the problem of discriminatory regulation of the salmon fishery, which still occasionally occurs.

The greatest challenge Chief Thompson faced in preserving salmon and Native fishing rights came in the form of The Dalles dam, a power and navigation project that destroyed the Celilo dipnet fishery in 1957. The tribes of the Warm Springs, Yakama, Umatilla and Nez Perce reservations, as well as unaffiliated river people like the Wyams, fought a long and ultimately unsuccessful battle against this dam.

Chief Thompson testified numerous times in opposition to the project. He conducted a

prayer and song ceremony in a final attempt to save Celilo Falls, reminding Congress that "The Almighty took a long time to make this place."

When other Indian leaders finally relented, accepting a \$27 million settlement, Chief Thompson adamantly refused to "signature his salmon away." His life was the river, the great falls, and the salmon. He neither knew nor wanted any other.

On March 10, 1957, the Corps of Engineers filled the reservoir of The Dalles dam, flooding Celilo Falls and old Celilo Village, resulting in the dispersal of more than half the residents. Indians gathered around the region to mourn the loss of their most important fishery.

The elderly chief was confined to a nursing home, however, and did not witness the destruction. He died on April 12, 1959. Flora, his wife of 20 years, was convinced the loss of Celilo Falls killed him.

More than a thousand people came from around the region to pay their respects to the great chief. He was survived by his wife and many children, grandchildren and great grandchildren. Despite their loss, many of Chief Thompson's people continue to fish for salmon, and Celilo Village, though much reduced, still sits by the side of Neh'Wana.

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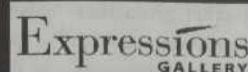
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