The Molalla Tribe: 'a nation of good hunters'

Most tribal members know that the Confederated Tribes of the Grand Ronde Community of Oregon consists of five separate tribes whose members lived in the western part of the state. The five tribes that make up the Grand Ronde Confederation are: Rogue River, Kalapuya, Chasta, Umpqua, and Molalla. Each of these tribes were made up of many different "bands." (The Mary's River band of the Kalapuya Tribe, for example.) Members have often expressed an interest in learning more about their specific tribe and its history, how their ancestors lived, and how they came to Grand Ronde. In this issue of *The Review,* we have begun a five-part series of in-depth articles on each of the tribes — Part One: the Molalla Tribe.

By Oscar Johnson, Staff Reporter

IN THE BEGINNING . . .

From a place near the summit of Mount Hood, Coyote scattered the heart of Grizzly Bear whom he had just willfully slain. To what would become Molalla Country he threw the heart and said, "Now the Molalla will be good hunters; they will be good men, thinking and studying about hunting deer."

Grizzly's demise, and hence the birth of the Molalla Nation came about when he met Coyote who was on his way to "make the world," according to an old Molalla story. The Great Bear demanded a fight but Coyote cunningly challenged him to a red-hot rock swallowing contest instead. But Coyote cleverly swallowed strawberries while Grizzly gulped down hot stones that burst his heart. After much thought Coyote skinned and cut up Grizzly and while scattering his body to the winds he foretold that the Molalla people "will think all the time they are on the hunt."

Much has transpired amongst this nation of good men and thinking hunters since their emergence from the land where Grizzly's heart was sown; to a mid-19th century treaty with the U.S. government; and their relocation to a reservation in the Grand Ronde Valley.

By the time Stephen Lambert Pasis Savage was serving as Grand Ronde legislative representative in 1876, the Northern, Upper or Valley Molallas, as the band is intermittently called, had winter villages from their legendary birthplace near Mount Hood to present day Oregon City and just east of Salem to the foot of Mount Jefferson.

During the warmer months, these mostly nomadic people left their mud, cedar and hemlock bark homes to freely roam parts of the Willamette Valley. Like their neighbors to the north, the Upper Chinook, the Upper Molalla used dugout canoes and were also using horses by the early 1800s.

While the Northern band shared hunting grounds and other similarities with northern bands of Kalapuya (Calapooia), the Southern, Lower or Mountain Molalla lived east of present day Eugene and Roseburg in what is now the Umpqua National Forest. When combined with their early neighbors, the Cayuse Tribe, they were estimated at 500 in number, according to a 1780 census report.

Both the Molallas of the mountains and the valley also had strong ties with the Klamath peoples who they regularly traded with and who it is said, called them "People of the Serviceberry Tract."

Despite the distinction between the northern and southern bands of the Molalla Nation and the scarcity of information on the latter, the general history and culture are more similar than different, says Grand Ronde Cultural Resource Specialist, June Olson.

"The general difference was more regional than anything else," explains Olson. "All Native people adapted to the region they were in. Molalla of the mountain region adapted to hunting the larger game of that area and those in the valley were more similar to the Kalapuya people who primary diet was roots and small game, common in the valley."

Whether hunting large or small game, the prowess of Molalla hunters, as foretold by Coyote, was duly noted by Savage who was also an ardent Native culturalist. In addition to mastery of the bow and arrow, he details rope traps used by Molalla hunters to catch deer in small passes along the trails.

Hunters also camouflaged themselves with dear heads while stalking their prey and were renowned amongst neighboring tribes for their use of skillfully trained dogs for tracking and hunting.

Molalla expertise also extended to fishing salmon and steelhead. The tribe developed a tradition both of spear and basket fishing. The latter used 10-by-12 foot vine baskets suspended on poles to catch fish under waterfalls as they were herded into the baskets with brush fences or by throwing stones.

The Molalla emphasis on hunting skills was also embodied in competitive target practice games such as Kakalinpasa where the object was to hit a rolling wheel of maple bark and grass with an arrow. Like a number of other traditional Molalla games, Kakalinpasa involved betting with stakes such as money, skins or slaves, according to Savage.

THE ARRIVAL OF WHITE SETTLERS

By the mid-1800s the Molalla tradition of hunting and fishing became seriously threatened by encroaching white settlers and it would not be long before their very lifestyle was under siege. As more pioneers pushed westward, Native hunting grounds began shrinking causing Indian/settler tensions to mount in Molalla Country.

Dwindling Native resources combined with settler prejudice and fear of Indian retaliation further escalated the strain and in 1846 the peace between the two communities was nearly lost. It was preserved only by last minute negotiations.

But two years later inevitable violence broke out near Abiqua Creek, in present day Silverton. Although falsely called a "war" by many non-Indian historians, Native peoples have a different story to tell.

"The real story," says Olson, "is that during that same period — 1848, it was about six months after a Cayuse attack on the Whitman Mission and the settlers in the Willamette Valley were afraid there would be an Indian uprising."

She says that when a horseback mailman happened across Klamath travelers camping with their Molalla hosts, he sounded the alert that the group was preparing to attack.

But Olson says what pioneers thought was an army of male warriors "was really a group of women, Elders and children." She notes the mailman probably thought he saw a band of Indian men because Molalla men, women and children traditionally wore deer-hide trousers.

(Savage's records also confirm that while Molalla women occasionally wore hide skirts, they most often wore buckskin pants and shirts distinguished only by the beads that might decorate the female attire and the feathers that might be donned for ceremony or by chiefs.)

Blinded by fear and ignorance, the settlers took arms and attacked the group killing about 13 and wounding one. Olson says the Elders, women and children fled as the aggressors pursued them to the Abiqua Creek.

Before dying a warrior's death, "one of the women defended the group with a bow and wounded a soldier in the shoulder," narrates Olson. But when the attackers caught up with the band at the river, she says "they realized what they had done and were so ashamed that they rode off leaving the women to care for the wounded."

Molalla Kate dressed in full regalia.

Olson offers an interesting addendum to this so-called war. She says the Daughters of the American Revolution, a group that commemorates pioneer patriotism with on-site monuments, honored the alleged "battleground" with a plague on a stone marker. The farmer who owns the land says that after the stone was rolled into the creek a number of times by vandals, it seemed pointless to return its place on the bank. Olson says, "In my opinion, it was not vandals at all, but the spirit of the woman warrior who continuously pushed the stone into the water. Eventually the plaque was removed from the stone and the rock was left to rest in the creek bed. The plaque is housed in Silverton's museum and hopefully the spirit of the woman warrior is at peace.

STRIKING AN AGREEMENT WITH THE U.S. GOVERNMENT

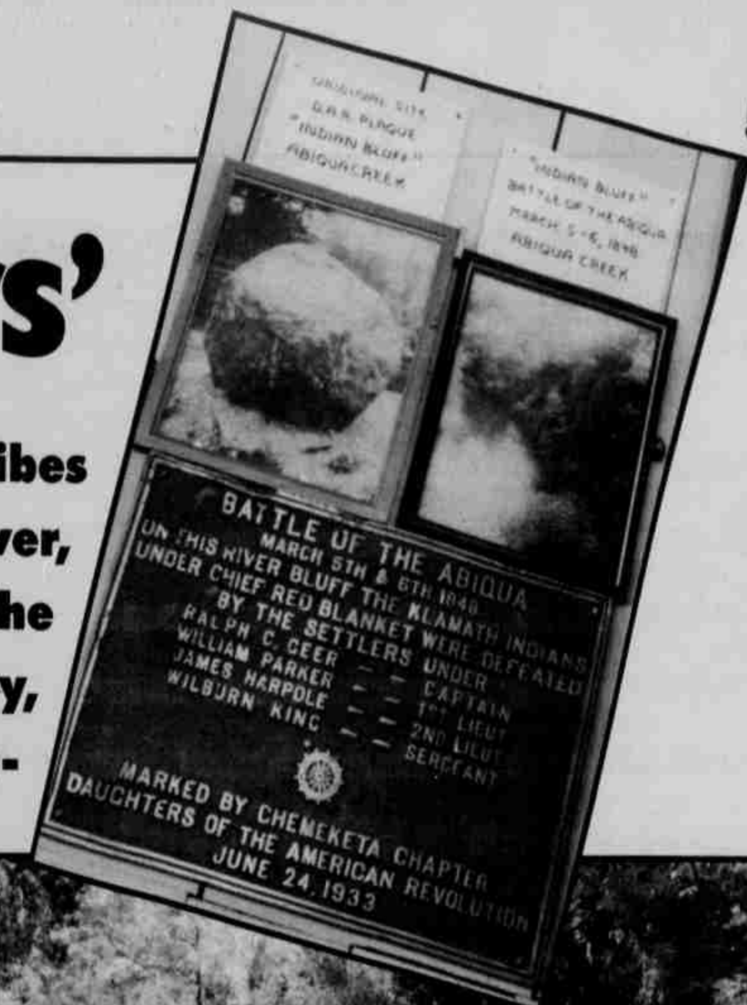
On May 6 and 7, 1851 Indian Affairs (IA) Superintendent, Anson Dart, secured treaties with the Northern Molallas (10 Stat. 1143, ratified March 3, 1855) at Champoeg, Oregon as part of a U.S. campaign to acquire the entire Willamette Valley. The original intent was to relocate all Native tribes east of the Cascade Mountains but Molalla peoples, like many other Western Oregon nations, refused to move so far from their traditional homelands.

The treaty shows that Chiefs Quai-eck-ete, Yalukus (Yelkis) and Crooked Finger signed on behalf of the 58-member Molalla River band and Chief Coast-no signed for the 65 members of the Santiam River. These were two of six treaties signed at Champoeg that comprise 19 pacts initiated by the U.S. government with Willamette Valley Tribes that year. Four years and a new IA superintendent later, Congress finally acknowledged the agreements.

However, Congress was quick to recognize and spur-on white settler land-grabs by passing and upholding the 1805 Northwest Donation Land Act. The act doled-out 'free' acreage to westward-bound pioneers decades before formal treaties were signed with the aboriginal inhabitants. A policy that Olson says heightened tensions between Indians and their new non-Indian neighbors.

These tensions prompted the new immigrant government to create more legislation that favored settler fears over the aboriginal rights of Willamette Valley Tribes. In 1854 the Oregon Territorial Legislature enacted a ban on the sale of firearms to Indians — thwarting the capacity of the Molalla and other Tribes to hunt competitively with their new neighbors for scarce game on rapidly shrinking hunting grounds.

The following year an 1855 Oregon proclamation sought to confine Willamette Valley Indians to temporary reservations, charging them to account for their whereabouts at all times or be imprisoned.



Top: The Daughters of the American Revolution mounted this plaque near the site of the Battle of the Abiqua. Now it is on display at the Silverton museum.

Bottom: A recent photo of Abiqua Creek.

By November of that same year diminishing resources and mounting conflicts helped IA Superintendent, Joel Palmer, persuade Southern Molalla tribal leaders to move to the Umpqua Reservation where treaty negotiations began.

One month later a treaty endorsed by Chiefs Steencoggy, Lattchie, Duggins and Counisnase (12 Stat. 981, ratified March 8, 1859) ceded Mountain Molalla lands to the United States and the band of about 30 Molallas agreed to relocate, along with the Kalapuya and Upper Umpqua Tribes, to the Grand Ronde Valley.

Some Molalla Indians, unhappy with their new life on the reservation, tried to return to their traditional lands near the Molalla River only to find the landscape so changed by the fences and ploughs of white farmers that they could no longer call it home.

On April 3, 1950 the Court of Claims awarded the Southern Molallas $34,996.85 for reservation lands the 1855 treaty mandated they would share with the Umpqua. The amount was awarded, but the Molallas only lived there for two months before being removed to Grand Ronde.

MOLALLA COUNTRY TODAY

Despite a May 1955 federal register showing that 141 of the 882 members then enrolled in the Confederated Tribes of Grand Ronde were of Molalla decent, by the middle of this century non-Indian sources began proclaiming the near extinction of many smaller tribes and the Molalla were no exception. It was not uncommon for photos such as one of Fred Yelkis, nephew of famed Molalla Kate and grandson of treaty signing Chief Yelkis, to appear in newspapers like the July 1957 *Portland Journal* captioned as one of 'the last Oregon Tribesmen.'

But despite the lack of complete data on the Molalla people in non-Indian sources, Grand Ronde community members such as Esther LaBonte (b.1895 d.1987); great nieces of Molalla Kate — Culture Board member, Marie Schmidt and Council Chair, Kathryn Harrison; and many others testify to some of the countless Molalla links in Indian Country.

Harrison's rich memories of her great-aunt include Molalla Kate's remarkable proficiency in making baskets, stringing bead necklaces and baking bread — in spite of her near blindness in old age. But what Harrison says she remembers most about her name sake was how she made her feel as a young girl.

"She was so interested in us kids. When we would visit her, we used to have to line up so she could feel our faces because she couldn't see us," recalls Harrison. "She always made us feel kind of special. It gives you a lot of self-confidence."

In addition to living links to Molalla history and tradition in Grand Ronde and throughout the Northwest, there are also a number of historical points of interest. Some of these include the McLaughlin Museum in Oregon City which houses a few items crafted by Molalla Kate; the site of the Abiqua Massacre on the banks of Silverton's Abiqua Creek; and cultural artifacts that may some day soon be displayed at the planned Grand Ronde Cultural Center/Museum.

As members of the Confederated Tribes of the Grand Ronde Community of Oregon, the Molalla, 'a nation of good hunters,' has taken part in today's successful hunt for tribal survival, restoration and resources.

They continue to use their hunting prowess to secure a better tomorrow for the children of Grand Ronde and of all Native America. Because, as Coyote declared, they "will think all the time they are on the hunt."

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