

Who is Chuck Sams?

His tribe and history put him into context

By ANTONIO SIERRA
East Oregonian

MISSION — In an announcement setting a date for the confirmation hearing for President Joe Biden's nominee for National Park Service director, the Senate Committee on Energy and Natural Resources referred to him as Charles F. Sams III.



Chuck Sams

But to the people he's worked with over several decades in Oregon and on the Umatilla Indian Reservation, he's just Chuck.

On Tuesday, Oct. 19, Sams was scheduled to begin his public quest to convince at least 50 senators to confirm him to the U.S. Department of Interior position. If the Senate obliges, Sams will become the first American Indian to hold the job in the service's 105-year history.

While Sams, an enrolled member of the Confederated Tribes of the Umatilla Indian Reservation, built his local reputation as a leader in tribal government, he will be managing an agency that operates on a much larger scale. The CTUIR encompasses three tribes, a 172,000-acre reservation, more than 3,000 members and as recently as 2018 employed nearly 1,800 people. In comparison, a 20,000-person workforce staffs the park service, which spans 423 locations and 85 million acres.

But to those who grew up and worked with Sams on the reservation, his appointment to a top position in a presidential administration came as no surprise.

Sams climbs the ladder

CTUIR Education Director Modesta Minthorn is only a few years older than Sams and remembers him as a young man. While his youth may not have presaged a future in a presidential administration, Minthorn said he was known for being smart and having leadership qualities.

As an adult, Sams started working



Kathy Aney/East Oregonian file photo

Chuck Sams, then the communications director for the Confederated Tribes of the Umatilla Indian Reservation, gives local high school students some insight on tribal history and beliefs in 2018. Sams now is President Joe Biden's nominee to direct the National Park Service.

for tribal government before leaving to start a new career in environmental nonprofits. His resume includes stints at the Earth Conservation Corps, the Community Energy Project and The Trust for Public Land. When news broke that Sams had been nominated for the National Park Service position, the latter sent out a statement celebrating his achievement.

After Sams decided to return home in 2012, it was Deb Crosswell who made the decision to hire him as the tribes' communications director. Crosswell had known Sams long enough that both had worked in a tribal recreation program together as teens.

The deputy executive director at the time, Crosswell said Sams had the necessary qualities to be the public voice of the tribes.

"He's a good communicator, he's very articulate, very insightful (and) thoughtful," she said. "He's a good supervisor, he's a good manager of people and really cares about people and their needs and wants to help people learn and grow and do their jobs well. So those are all things that contributed to him being a good communications director for the tribes."

Those qualities seem to help Sams climb the ladder of tribal government, eventually earning him a promotion to deputy executive director after Crosswell moved over to Cayuse Holdings, a tribal enterprise, and two stints as interim executive director.

As a colleague, his former peers described Sams as being collaborative and well-prepared. As a supervisor, CTUIR Finance Director Paul Rabb was clear about his expectations while remaining fun and approachable.

"He wasn't this dictator of a boss," he said.

Rabb, who succeeded Sams temporarily as the interim executive director, said Sams would've been in-line for the permanent position if he had stayed.

But in a March interview, Sams said he told the CTUIR Board of Trustees he was looking at other opportunities and wasn't interested in staying on long-term.

By then, Gov. Kate Brown had already appointed him to the Northwest Power and Conservation Council and wrote a letter to Biden recommending Sams for a much bigger position.

The tribal spokesman

When "racial incidents" roiled local schools, students from Pendleton, Echo and Nixyaawii Community School joined several other Eastern Oregon schools in taking a trip to the Tamastlikt Cultural Institute, where Sams was one of the featured speakers.

He spoke about the law that required American Indians to notify state government of their presence if they were traveling through Salem, a law that wasn't struck from the books

until the early 2000s. He explained the difference between Western and tribal values. The former holds that a person has unlimited wants and limited resources while the latter holds that a person has limited wants and unlimited resources.

As the communications director and later as interim executive director, Sams was often tasked with being the public face of the tribes and the region. Sams was on-hand when the CTUIR and several other Northwest tribes buried The Ancient One, 9,000-year old remains that were the subject of 20 years of scientific study and legal challenges.

When Pendleton's sister city, Minamisoma, Japan, wanted to welcome Pendleton students back to the city after a 2011 earthquake and nuclear disaster, Sams was a part of the 2014 contingent the city sent to ensure it was safe.

When the tribes started a land buy-back program, Sams wrote an editorial explaining how the Dawes Allotment Act of 1887 led the reservation to be subdivided and sold to white settlers.

"It seems strange that we have to buy back our own land," he wrote in 2014. "We did not create this problem. Our ancestors signed the Treaty of 1855 in good faith, convinced that exclusive use meant the land was ours forever. Though it is true we were dealt a poor hand by history, we can make a new start. We now have a chance to restore our land base, and

with proper oversight and use, we will begin to make ourselves whole again."

He also was appointed to various committees and commissions throughout the tribes, city and state. One of his most recent appointments before joining the Northwest Power and Conservation Council was a spot on the state's Racial Justice Council.

A historic appointment

When the National Park Service commissioned an article from historian Mark David Spence, he wanted to start the run-up to the establishment of the national park system at 30,000 years ago when the land belonged to America's indigenous peoples.

Spence, author of "Dispossessing the Wilderness: Indian Removal and the Making of the National Parks," said the federal government used a mechanism similar to the one that subdivided the Umatilla Indian Reservation on land they intended to use for national parks such as Yellowstone, which intersects with ceded lands that belonged to the Crow, Shoshone-Bannock and Blackfoot tribes.

Those policies continue to reverberate today. While the government will open federal land to tribes to exercise their treaty rights, Spence said national parks remain off-limits to tribes looking to engage in the traditional hunting, fishing and gathering activities that have defined their people for generations. While he thinks communication has improved between Indian Country and the park service, Spence said Sams has an opportunity to push it further because of his own lived experiences.

"There is an undercurrent or maybe even overcurrent right now, where ... a broader public is more amenable to seeing native peoples as managers of their own lands, as opposed to props in a national park," he said.

Back home, several of Sams' former colleagues described the feeling of pride that one of their own is now in position to become the next park director.

"It's one of those things that we're going to talk about for generations," Minthorn said. "I can see (myself), talking to grandkids, telling them, 'Be more like that guy.'"



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