

The River Gives Us Our Way of Life

MARGO HILL

FEW PEOPLE UNDERSTAND THAT THE SPOKANE RIVER AND TRIBUTARIES were once among the most abundant salmon fisheries in the Northwest. The river's summer chinook salmon (kings) commonly weighed fifty to eighty pounds. My grandmother said, "The salmon hung from the horn of the saddle and stretched toward the ground." Tribes from across the West knew of the summer fishing camps at Spokane Falls. Some estimates put the number of salmon running in the watershed at a million annually, three hundred thousand of them harvested by the Spokane tribal people and the neighboring tribes.

Our people, the Interior Salish, engaged in subsistence patterns and maintained close relations with the ancestral homeland and culture, following seasonal food sources throughout the region and along the river. When the tribal people were restricted to the reservation and lost the use and control of these traditional places, it became difficult to maintain this connection. It is a continuing tribal hope that we will one day regain access to those places. Traditionally, we lived along the riverbanks, traveled in canoes, and used sophisticated fishing techniques to provide about half our food. We fished from canoes and even speared fish from horseback. We built weirs, nets, and baskets to snare the salmon, trout, and other fish. Then we dried them in the sun or by a fire to preserve them for the winter. We still observe ceremonies in honor of the first foods: berries, roots, salmon, deer, and elk. We thank the Creator for these gifts.

The Salish-speaking Spokan (Spokane) have traditionally been divided into the Lower Spokane (Spokane), the Middle Spokane (Spokane), and the Upper Spokane (Spokane).

w meney, “salmon-trout people”), and Upper Spokane peoples. According to historians, these three bands exercised exclusive control over fishing and camps along the Spokane River, although they shared some prairie lands south of the river for harvesting roots and some hills north of the river for gathering berries and hunting game. Tribal people lived and thrived at the falls of the Spokane River and harvested fish communally. The tribal groups followed a division of labor and an organized protocol. “The women of various tribes basically controlled negotiations among themselves for food—whether hunted/fished by men but later processed by women (such as dried deer meat or fish, including dried eel), and all materials women made, such as tule mats, bags, and tanned deer hides. Men traded horses and weapons.” So wrote the anthropologist John Ross of Eastern Washington University in 2011. Spokane and Coeur d’Alene people also traded as far east as Montana, exchanging fish for buffalo-hide robes.

A mutual dependence on trading helped to maintain peaceful relations between Spokane and Plains people. Some historians say there was such an abundance of fish that the Spokane people allowed neighboring tribes to fish the Spokane territory. The area known as Little Falls was a major trading site for the Coeur d’Alene, Colville, Nez Perce, Sanpoil, Nespelem, and Palouse tribes, who congregated primarily to exchange goods and fish. Spokane people traded with Blackfeet for horses and hides, meeting partway to ease the journeys. Western Plains groups wanted trade items such as wood bows and arrows, buckskin clothing, dried salmon, and eels from the Spokane.

The Spokane Indian people never took these gifts from the Creator for granted. I remember my great-grandmother praying and giving thanks. At all our gatherings, we give thanks. Whether it is a simple meal or a ceremony or winter dance, we always begin by acknowledging the gifts from the Creator and praying over them. Ross wrote, “A non-Indian observer may not understand how these people were able to flourish in an environment seasonally limited in key resources. One could not help but be impressed, even humbled, when older women, prior to digging roots, would acknowledge their physical needs, and, before any harvest, invariably first pray to

various spiritual powers for the rich harvest.” When my kids and I traveled to dig roots off the reservation at Coffee Pot Lake, we always stopped to pray. Sometimes when we said our prayers we would knot a handkerchief and leave it with our prayers. Ross observed of our tribal traditions that “they saw the ‘providence’ of nature as a complex combination of sacred beliefs and rituals acknowledging a special relationship with various powers and with an environment upon which they were totally dependent.” Today, providence still means the protective care of God, or nature as a spiritual power. It means spiritual care.

Tribal people had place-names for locations along the Spokane River occupied by a particular group during the fall fishing season or the winter. We named specific locations in relation to Coyote stories that explained natural events, which have been corroborated by geological evidence. One famous story from the Colville Confederated Tribes is “How Coyote Diverted the Columbia River.” The Columbia River once flowed through the Grand Coulee riverbed. Tribal legends say Coyote was responsible for turning the water toward the river’s present channel. These stories correlate with topographical features such as rock peaks. Our people also had special spots for deer hunting and campsites they occupied during the fall fishing season.

Grand Coulee Dam

From time immemorial the salmon traveled up to the tributaries of the Spokane River to spawn. The tributaries were famous not only for their chinook salmon runs but also for two steelhead runs, a small coho run, and a huge population of cutthroat trout. Fish were smoked, dried, and traded. The Spokane River was the economic engine of the northwest. But that era came to an end when construction of the Little Falls Dam blocked the upper three-quarters of the Spokane River in 1910–11. Then the Grand Coulee Dam blocked the Columbia and the rest of the Spokane River in 1939. Both dams were constructed without fish ladders. The Columbia and Spokane

Rivers became the energy powerhouses of the Northwest, sacrificing the fish to provide other services and products.

When I was traveling to the Colville Tribe's powwow in Nespelem, I stopped with my kids for the laser light show at the Grand Coulee Dam. I started to speak up to say that the statements they made were wrong! I was saying things out loud, and my kids were getting embarrassed that the *suyapees* (white people) could hear me. The laser light show brags of the engineering feats of constructing the dam, a so-called manmade wonder of the world. In the soundtrack, the river speaks to the dam: "You did what I could not do. You provided the missing link. Irrigation. You made the desert bloom."

But what was so wrong about a river that flowed free and swam with millions of salmon? I told my children that maybe the desert was not supposed to bloom. When engineering changes the ecosystem, it is not always good for natural systems. It is not good for the river, for the fish, or for Indian people.

The laser light show has now changed, no longer pretending to let the river speak. It begins with a voice-over: "The Bureau of Reclamation and the Bonneville Power Administration proudly present 'One River, Many Voices.'" It tells the story of Grand Coulee—its geological beginnings and the story of Coyote. Then it tells the story of immigrants—farmers, orchardists, and ranchers—and how, in response to dry conditions in the West, Congress and President Theodore Roosevelt created the Bureau of Reclamation in 1902. The purpose of the BOR is to provide water to the arid West. Congress approved the Grand Coulee Dam in 1935, and it was completed in 1942, creating the reservoir called Franklin D. Roosevelt Lake. Dryland farmers discovered their need for irrigation after the dam was built. It is the largest electric power-producing facility in the United States. Power generated for farms and towns was meant to expand the economy and feed a nation.

But the creation of bounty for some took away the bounty of others. Salmon, steelhead, and lamprey can no longer swim to Kettle Falls in the upper Columbia or to Little Falls in the Spokane River, traditional gathering

spots where the tribes harvested fish. Mel Tonasket, a Colville Tribal Council member, said, “Salmon were our trading commodity and our major food supply. When they stopped the salmon from coming up past Coulee Dam to our fishing sites, it disrupted our whole system.” Homes, livelihoods, and fifty-six thousand acres of land were inundated by the construction of the Grand Coulee Dam. Colville and Spokane people had to move their houses or tear them down before the flooding of the lands. The Colville and Spokane tribes—mourning the loss of that source of vitality, natural balance, and cultural significance—have gathered for the Ceremony of Tears since 1940.

Our Way of Life

The Spokane Indians of the Interior Salish people inhabited northeastern Washington from the city of Spokane to the Canadian border. The traditional lifestyle of the Spokane people related closely to the seasonal rounds and the Spokane River. We called the river *Nx Wl Wl tsuten*, or “river gives us our way of life.” The name Spokane is believed to mean “children of the sun,” but there are different pronunciations and interpretations of the name.

My great-grandmother Sadie Boyd was born at the confluence of the Spokane and Columbia Rivers and was raised in a teepee near Davenport; she was one of the longest-living Spokane Indian women when she died in 1986. She had to move from the Spokane Indian Reservation to the city of Spokane so that she could feed her children. A land that had once been so plentiful for Native Americans was now a place of suffering, a city named after a people now forgotten. In Salish we say *tupiyé* for great-grandmother. My *tupiyé* sewed and did beadwork to support her children. She told of going to the Catholic school that we now call Gonzaga to ask for leftover food at the kitchen doorstep. They gave her scraps of vegetables, meat, and fruit. Every other day she drove with her horse team and buggy and made the rounds of meat markets that gave her scraps. This is how she kept her young children from starving. She spoke of our history, of Chief Spokan Garry and how the Spokane people did not want for anything before the *suyapees*

came. (In English, the word means “upside-down face,” which is what we called the trappers who had less hair on their heads than on their chins.) The Spokane River had provided food and a way of life for my great-grandmother and her family, but they could no longer rely on it.

Spokan Garry

The great leader of the Spokane Tribe was Chief Spokan Garry, the son of Chief Illeum Spokane, considered one of the best and brightest tribal leaders in the Northwest. Garry was born in 1811 and was selected by white civil leaders, along with Kootenai Pelly, to be educated in European ways at the Red River Mission in Winnipeg, Manitoba. Garry became fluent in English, French, and many Salish dialects. My great-grandmother married Thomas Garry, the adopted son of Spokan Garry, and she spoke of how important his influence was. Garry created the first school in the Northwest, a large lodge-pole and tule-mat structure near present-day Drumheller Springs. He taught his people to speak English and read the Bible. He enjoyed much respect. He was married and lived with some suyapee comforts, such as coffee and sugar. He always rode a white horse. Isaac Stevens, the first governor of the newly created Washington Territory, acknowledged Garry as a leader and went to his house to meet with him. That acknowledgment and meeting now both seem ironic. Stevens was appointed to negotiate the treaties in this region, but he failed to make a treaty with the Spokane Tribe.

Times were changing fast, and Indians were being accused of stealing from whites and killed on the spot. Yet the accusations of white men raping Indian women or stealing from Indians were never investigated, let alone prosecuted. War broke out in 1855, and although the combined forces of the Spokane, Yakama, Colville, and Coeur d’Alene peoples initially defeated the United States, more troops were sent. Col. George Wright’s troops had superior weapons, long-range rifles, and new types of bullets that had devastating effects. Garry’s own farm was simply taken over by a settler, Howard B. Doak, who claimed it while Garry was fishing at Kettle Falls. Garry was then

in his late seventies. The white man burned Garry's log house to the ground. Although Garry had served the government as a negotiator, translator, and Christian teacher, officials did nothing to help Garry keep his home. Chief Spokane Garry learned that he could not trust the *suyapees*, and he never again spoke the language of the white man. He lived out his final days in a teepee in what is now named Indian Canyon, on land owned by a friend.

The Spokanes traveled to the different fishing sites along the river to harvest fish. We harvested it, prepared it, and even bundled it into bales like hay to trade. It was devastating when the dams stopped the fish runs. Tribal leaders and grandmothers asked, "What about the salmon? How will we feed our children?" They were promised electricity and government rations. When the first wagonload of government rations finally arrived on the reservation, it was late winter. The Native people were starving. When they cut open the salt pork, it was filled with maggots. But their children were hungry. They had no choice. They scraped out the maggots, boiled the salt pork, and fed it to their kids.

Once, the Spokane Indian people had so much food that they could share it with neighboring tribes: they invited other tribes to come and fish along the banks of the Spokane River. The river was so plentiful, running with the salmon that made the people strong. The river bank was lined with racks of drying fish. Later the people were reduced to begging for scraps. Grandmothers like Sadie Boyd continued to do what they knew. After hitching her team of horses to the wagon, Sadie would load up her children and travel to fish markets. She dried the fish she got. The meat scraps she smoked, and the bones she dried to make soup.

I've listened to the stories of those who have traveled before me. My great-grandmother and other ancestors set an example of how to work hard, survive, and never give up. They lived off the river and land and provided for their families. Today we have lost our traditional opportunities for leadership as well as our way of life. Now my son will never be chosen to sing the Indian song that calls the salmon run unless salmon can be restored somehow to the Spokane River. For many generations our people have lost

their way. We are not only traveling the paths of the reservation: we are also finding roads to the city— just as my great-grandmother moved back to Spokane, which was the land of our ancestors, seeking ways to support her children and grandchildren.

Stories from My People

The river that gives us life has been so degraded and changed from its natural course that it can hardly be considered that same “giver of life” we revered. When the US Cavalry battled the combined forces of the Spokane, Coeur d’Alene, and Colville peoples, Indian leaders were hanged, and their teepees and food caches were burned to the ground. Some seven hundred horses were slaughtered and left beside and in the river. The river ran red with their blood. Indian hostages were marched to Walla Walla, and the Indians were forced onto reservations. Today, tribes still live with the devastating consequences of the actions of the white man. Today we do not battle the US Cavalry: instead we battle the white man’s corporations. The United States military is not killing us; we are dying from contamination left by mining companies unfettered by federal laws. They are contaminating our rivers, our groundwater, and our land.

Up in Canada there is a company named Teck Cominco Metals, Ltd., that operated a lead and zinc smelter in Trail, British Columbia, from 1896 to 1996. The slag went right into the Columbia River. The Colville Tribe asked for the river to be listed as a Superfund site to make it eligible for federal funds for environmental cleanup. The Department of the Interior and the US Environmental Protection Agency long neglected to fulfill their trust obligations to the Colville Tribes or to the Spokane Tribe. Today, lawsuits by the Colville Tribes and the State of Washington against Teck continue, and yet the Columbia River along the Colville reservation connected to the Spokane River is still not listed as a Superfund site. The legal issue here, I know as a lawyer, is whether the Comprehensive Environmental Response, Compensation, and Liability Act (CERCLA) applies outside the United

States. Enacted in 1980, CERCLA is a US federal law that established the Superfund to clean up sites contaminated with hazardous substances and pollutants. For decades we have been awaiting an answer to that legal question.

The Spokane River is also polluted by sewage from the city of Spokane and several other treatment plants, and by thousands of tons of zinc, cadmium, and arsenic that Coeur d'Alene mining operations used to dump into the upstream rivers. Our people remember the Spokane as a free-flowing river. Now engineers control it. Grand Coulee Dam, Long Lake Dam, and Little Falls Dam block our river.

The Columbia and the Spokane River are part of one whole. The Columbia benefits farmers—irrigators primarily—and the Army Corps of Engineers. Both rivers benefit corporations: those that sell electricity and those that rely on subsidized electricity to make their profits. Today the Spokane River drains into Franklin D. Roosevelt Lake, behind the Grand Coulee Dam, and the reservoir stores industrial contaminants along with water. The *Nx Wl Wl tsuten*, “giver of life,” is now called the Columbia Basin Project by white engineers.

Tribal people still attempt to follow the routes of their ancestors. Even today, elders like Jim Sijohn tell us, “We fish the places where our grandparents took us.” In the olden days, along the Spokane River, near Blue Creek, there was what Indians referred to as the CCC camp. The Civilian Conservation Corps was a public work-relief program that operated from 1933 to 1942. It was a major part of President Franklin D. Roosevelt’s New Deal, providing jobs related to conservation projects and development of natural resources on rural lands owned by federal, state, and local governments. The tribal men earned about thirty dollars a month, of which twenty-five dollars was sent home to their families. The camp was located near a traditional spiritual spot where Spokane tribal people would go to sweat and pray. They would “finish off” (immerse in the water) in Blue Creek. People came from all over to go to medicine dances at this sacred location. Now a uranium mine contaminates this spot, and our tribal members can no longer bathe there.

The hydrogeologist Fred Kirschner has tried to explain to our tribal elders that there are lots of moving parts when it comes to the river ecosystem. One of those moving parts is the contamination from industry, mining, and urban pollution that taints the river water and everything that lives in it and near it, becoming concentrated in the bodies of living things. This affects all species of fish, including rainbow trout and kokanee salmon (an Okanagan term for landlocked lake populations of sockeye salmon).

The pollutants find their way into the bodies of the people who eat these fish. Tribal peoples traditionally ate up to two pounds of fish a day. The fact that we made stews and soups out of eels, which have even higher tissue and gut concentrations of contaminants, made them more harmful for us. My great-grandmother Sadie Boyd used to eat fish-head soup. I would walk into her house and check to see what was cooking on the stove. Quite often I saw salmon eyes staring back at me.

After World War II and the Korean War, there was large-scale industrial production in the region. Upriver from Spokane we had Kaiser Aluminum; farther up were the mining companies in the Silver Valley of Idaho. Before 1981 it was legal to discharge contaminants into the Spokane River, and many companies took advantage of the opportunity. Elders recalled that the Spokane River ran milky back then. The Spokane tribal elder Vi Seymour recalled how the wolverine disappeared after the waters began to be polluted and the Grand Coulee Dam was built. Vi recalled, “The fish we caught were edible and good in the 1940s. We smoked the fish, and now I tell my kids not to fish and swim in the river.” She remembered a time “when our men were away at war and we would go out to pick berries. The river was clear, and we swam in the river. Now the water quality is so bad—it has changed from long ago. You can see places on the river where there is black sand. The Indian people didn’t know what it was—black sand—but they didn’t like it. So the tribal people would go inland to the lakes.” As it turned out, that black sand was polluted residue from the Teck smelter.

Vi Seymour also told me, “We used to camp and fish at Blue Creek in the 1930s and 1940s. We would fish for steelhead. Margo’s grandma said

salmon came up all the way to Idaho before Grand Coulee. We would camp and gather our berries and roots along the river—it was our sanctuary. We would rest at these places on our way to the big salmon runs at Kettle Falls! We had a salmon chief, and everyone was given salmon in the same amount. We used to gather shellfish and mussels, too.” Today we can still see crayfish in the rivers, but no more mussels.

Buzz Gutierrez talked about his mother, Sally Moses. She said, “We’re not going to eat this fish.” The Moses family had taken fish from the Spokane and Columbia Rivers for as long as anyone could remember. “We would smoke it, can it, and dry the fish that had migrated up from Coulee,” she said. “Fishing was our livelihood—our life blood.” Buzz also heard Swanatee or Bigfoot stories from his selah, or grandpa, when they went hunting. Buzz remembered being told. “They said Swanatee would come down and steal the fish from the Indians in the 1880s when they were harvesting and fishing. Every weekend our families would go fishing. Sometimes we’d pass the Germania Mine—in the 1930s we’d grab blankets and towels and go down to the rocks along the Spokane River. We’d travel to the Columbia River and fish for rainbow and whitefish. We’d camp at Blue Creek or McCoy Lake and then travel over what is now Peters Road. We’d can the fish and deer meat. Our grandmothers and mothers had root cellars” instead of freezers. Buzz also told about being with Bill Matt Sr. and the Moses sisters at Starvation Flats, digging roots with their petsa, or root digger. One day the boys accidentally rolled into red ants.

We talk about the Columbia River and the Spokane River as one river, because the fish swim from river to river. Our Spokane Indian people would fish at Blue Creek. Then, beginning in the 1950s, our tribal elders Ignace and Salena Pascal told us, “You can’t eat them.” The fish had worms. The river could no longer provide us with healthy food. Now we tell our kids we can fish, but we cannot eat too much. Buzz is more cautious. “I tell my grandkids they can’t eat any fish. Last May I was down on the river fishing with my grandkids. We are so conscious of the pollution that we release most of the fish we catch and take only a few home to eat.” Buzz said of the river as a

kid, “It was our store.” The Indians didn’t have grocery stores. “We fished for rainbow trout and eastern brook trout.”

Today contamination in the Columbia and Spokane River continues, but it is not as bad. Teck Cominco put in a new smelter that pollutes less than the old one. In 1992 it shut down a fertilizer plant that was processing batteries, computer waste, and electronics, whose waste went right into the Columbia. Scientists say that the water today is much cleaner. It is hard for my tribal elders to accept this, but they listen.

Under the Clean Water Act, tribes can set their own water-quality standards for the river. Even though the Spokane Tribe now has standards for the Spokane River, it is still contaminated, and mercury and other toxins are still present in fish tissue. The scientists explain that the contaminants are absorbed from the water by the plankton—the microscopic organisms drifting or floating in the water—and then by the fish that we are used to eating.

When I was working in the Spokane tribal attorney’s office, I found a quote by Alex Sherwood, the Spokane tribal chairman, in a 1973 legal file. Alex said, “I find myself talking to the river. I might ask, ‘River, do you remember how it used to be? The game, the fish, the pure water, the roar of the falls? You fed and took care of our people then. For thousands of years, we walked your banks and used your waters. You would always answer when our chiefs called to you with their prayer to the River Spirit.’ Sometimes I stand and shout, ‘River! Do you remember us?’”