

## CULTURAL REVIVAL

*“The people are dancing again.”*

**I**N MARCH 1996, ROBERT KENTTA AND SELENE RILATOS OF THE Siletz Cultural Department traveled to the Bronx. They planned to meet with the curatorial staff of the National Museum of the American Indian, which had a number of Siletz artifacts in its collection, and they had a photographer in tow to create a formal record of these Siletz cultural objects. The trip came about because of the upswelling of cultural concerns among Indians nationally and at Siletz.

In the 1970s, outrage had spread in Indian country over the way archaeologists and museums treated Indian burials. Although state laws had long protected non-Indian graves, excavation of Indian burial sites was common, with tens of thousands of Native American skeletons stored in museums. In addition to human remains, museums were also well-stocked with Native American sacred and cultural objects, some purchased legally but many illegally excavated under federal laws.

A coalition of Indian organizations pressed for congressional action. Initially, the archaeology community was indignant, believing that restrictions on excavation and storage would impede their scientific research, but by the late 1980s many archaeologists came over to the Indians' side. The National Museum of the American Indian Act of 1989 created this museum as the sixteenth museum within the Smithsonian Institution, and its heralded main facility has since been constructed on the National Mall in Washington, D.C., opening in 2004. The NMAI legislation also required the repatriation, when requested by tribes, of the remains of some 19,000 Native Americans in the

Smithsonian Institution's collection. The law squarely acknowledged the core issues of morality and sovereignty by using the term "repatriation." Repatriation describes the return by one nation to another of human remains, prisoners of war, money, or cultural objects. Until this legislation, the United States had recognized repatriation with foreign nations, but returns to sovereign tribal nations also fit within the meaning of repatriation, and Congress so decided.

A year later, Congress responded to tribal and religious leaders and passed even more sweeping legislation, the landmark Native American Graves Protection and Repatriation Act. NAGPRA—followed by complementary state laws in some forty states—protected Indian graves on federal and tribal land. It also required, upon request of affected tribes, the repatriation of human remains held by all non-federal institutions that received federal funding. The 1990 statute went a step beyond the NMAI legislation—in provisions that gave cause for the Siletz to head back east—by requiring the museums to repatriate sacred objects and, broader still, cultural objects, not related to gravesites, that had been stolen or improperly acquired.

Out in Siletz, tribal members were just completing a project that cried out for access to the historic Siletz dance regalia in storage at the NMAI Bronx facility. Back in the 1870s, in that era when forcefully eradicating Indian culture was firm federal policy, the agent at Siletz ordered that all six of the traditional dance houses be torched. When any talk of building new ones came up, the BIA shut it down. By the time the Siletz group went to the museum in 1996, nearly two years of work had gone into building a new dance house at the east end of town, among tall fir trees along the river. Many volunteers pitched in, for there was a lot of heavy lifting. Three 60-foot fir logs, supported by vertical fir and cedar log uprights, lay horizontally as the main support beams for the roof. The walls of the house, 60 by 40 feet in all, are thick cedar planks.

Despite government suppression, the ancient dance Nee Dosh never died out. Siletz dancers regularly performed it at local social events such as county fairs, clam bakes, the Cherry Festival, and the Redhead Roundup. Nee Dosh also was done much more traditionally, underground, after the BIA crack-down on ceremonial dances. Spiritual dances were held secretly in peoples' homes in the Siletz area, at the risk of arrest by BIA police up until the 1930s, when Commissioner John Collier revoked the ban. Private-home dances continued into the 1980s.

But there had not been a full, formal Nee Dosh in a traditional dance house



Bud Lane, vice chairman of the Siletz Tribal Council and Language and Traditional Arts instructor, departing the dance house, which he helped to construct. *Photograph by Fredrick D. Joe; courtesy of The Oregonian.*

for more than a century. Now, in March of 1996, the new dance house, true to the old details, was almost ready for its first dance, on the Summer Solstice just three months away. Much additional preparation was in the works. In addition to a dance house, Nee Dosh needs singers, male and female dancers, and songs. The dance is also made up of regalia: feathered headdresses, basket caps, and dresses, pants, and shirts, all festooned with feathers, beads, dentalia, and seashells.

Many people had regalia, some of it old, and some new regalia was being made. But there was excitement about using regalia from deep antiquity, and the inventory that the National Museum of the American Indian had supplied in response to the Siletz inquiry showed that the NMAI facility in the Bronx possessed some very promising items. Formal repatriation of regalia would take time to complete—well beyond June—and, besides, the tribe did not have a suitable storage facility (though in time it would build one). Perhaps the museum would agree to a loan.

NMAI had never done a loan of a piece that would be worn in a ceremony



Robert Kentta, Tribal Council member and director of the Cultural Department. He is shown here demonstrating beargrass braiding during a traditional dress-making class. *Siletz Tribal Collection*.

and Kentta and Rilatos expected resistance. To their surprise, the people at NMAI were most forthcoming. “There wasn’t really any opposition,” Kentta recalled. “The only concern was that [the dance house dedication] was coming up so soon and we’d need to get the objects ready to travel.”

But NMAI got into gear. Working with the tribe, curators decided on six Siletz pieces, all ancient and delicate but able to be danced: a pine-nut-bead dress, a flicker-feather headband, a set of feather dance wands (called matish sticks), a woman’s hair plume (a cluster of feathers), a mussel-shell necklace/sash, and a collar-shell necklace (a dentalium collar from which hung a netting of crisscrossed glass beads and shells). Each object was wrapped in specially made packaging for transport. Then the museum, at its own expense, tasked a staff member to fly the objects out to Oregon and deliver them to the tribe’s doorstep.

Ever since June 1996, *Nee Dosh*—performed on the Summer and Winter Solstices—has been a major event at Siletz. But that first ceremony—reclaiming, as it did, 120 lost years—was bathed in an excitement, spirituality, and



In the women's dressing room, just before daylight, Arlissa Rhoan (*left*) prepares to dance in the final round of Nee Dosh on June 23, 1996. Her regalia include the pine-nut bead dance dress loaned to the tribe by the National Museum of the American Indian. She and the other dancers wear combinations of old and newer regalia brought by families to the dance and old regalia on loan from the Lincoln County Historical Society, Oregon State University–Horner Collection and the University of Oregon Museum of Natural History. To Arlissa's left are Sonya Moody-Jurado, Angeline Easter, Pria Shoemake, and Sasha Shoemake. *Siletz Tribal Collection.*

redemption like nothing else. The dance house was “jammed-full” and dozens had to stand outside. “It was really exciting,” Kentta remembered. “It felt good to dance with those great pieces of regalia that hadn't danced in a long time. So many people came. People who used to dance brought their kids and grand-kids who had never danced before.”



The Siletz, as with many other tribes, has two broad categories of dances. Pow-wows, important Native American cultural institutions, are upbeat, colorful social events, conspicuously intertribal and widely attended by the general population. Some are held in urban areas—universities are increasingly common venues—but most pow-wows are hosted by tribes in Indian country,



Pow-wow drum group. Bob Tom, center, wearing a dentalium necklace, was instrumental in creating the administrative structure of the restored tribe. After serving on the Siletz Tribal Council through the passage of the 1977 Restoration Act, in 1978 he became the first general manager of the tribe and helped in establishing the eight-county (later to become eleven-county) service area that reaches tribal members on the Coast and in the Willamette Valley. He subsequently acted as tribal education director for over seventeen years. *Siletz Tribal Collection*.

mostly in the summer. Drums, usually manned by eight or more drummers and singers, come in from other tribes in the region and beyond. Some of the dances are competitive, with monetary prizes for the winners in fancy dance, victory dance, grass dance, and others. The dances are done to the rhythms of the drums and high-pitched, electrifying songs, many of which originated in the Great Plains. These are the unique, haunting sounds most people identify as Indian music.

The largest pow-wows, such as Crow Fair, Oglala Nation Pow Wow and Rodeo, and Navajo Nation Fair, draw 5,000 or more participants and spectators. Siletz has two pow-wows each year, one in the summer at the Pauline Ricks Memorial Pow-Wow Ground on Government Hill, the other now held at Chinook Winds in November to celebrate passage of the restoration act. The Siletz pow-wows draw thousands of attendees.



Veterans leading the Grand Entry at the Nesika Illahee pow-wow at the Pauline Ricks Memorial Pow-Wow Grounds on Government Hill. On the right is Ed Ben, son of Archie Ben, distinguished council member and tribal leader during modern times, and expert drum maker. To the left, in the second row, carrying the eagle staff, is William DePoe. *Siletz Tribal Collection.*

Tribes also have internal dances that are deeply spiritual. These dances are for the tribal community, and most of the spectators and all of the participants come from within the tribe. They dance only their own songs and rhythms. While there may be drumming, they use flutes and other instruments, and usually the drums are not as dominant as at pow-wows. At Siletz, the traditional dance is Nee Dosh, when Siletz people go to “the center of our world.”

I went to my first Nee Dosh in 2005. By then, participation had mushroomed and so many people had learned the dances that it was hard to accommodate everyone. Young people as well as adults were participating: in grade school, even though some boys stuck to pow-wow fancy dancing, Nee Dosh was “cool.” At first, as the revival of Nee Dosh grew stronger after restoration, the cultural confusion of assimilationist pressures led some older tribal members to raise cautions, believing that Nee Dosh was anti-Christian. That attitude has dissipated and some of the families with initial concerns now strongly support the dance. Margo Hudson’s family experience is not uncommon. She never danced or followed other traditions when growing up because her mother, to protect her from discrimination, forbade it. She moved away during termination but has returned to Siletz. “It’s a loss for me, but now it’s completely natural for my kids—the dancing, the weaving—so I get that enjoyment from it.”

Nee Dosh, lasting for ten nights in the old days, now goes on for three nights, starting on a Thursday. Although some experienced dancers participate, the first and second nights are usually reserved for those who are still getting to know the intricate ceremony. The regalia is relatively simple and the dancers do just one round, fifteen to twenty songs lasting for an hour and a half or so. On Saturday, Nee Dosh runs from dusk until Sunday’s dawn and the dancers—now the most experienced ones—do five rounds, with the regalia growing more and more elaborate as the rounds go on.

The dance house, just north of the river, has a stolid beauty and craftsmanship and a rightness with the land. You enter through an oval door in the middle of the south wall. (In the old days, the entry door was a circle and it was smaller, lower, and located at the east side of the south wall. The change was made to make entry more convenient, especially for elders.) I turned around in a circle after entering, having been told of the custom, which demonstrates that people are leaving behind all the cares of daily life and entering the spirit world. The building, dug six feet into the earth, is more commodious than it seems from the outside.

The dancing on the first two nights was more intricate than I had expected. On Thursday, “practice night,” the children, teenagers down to three- or four-year-olds, were amazing. There were slip-ups but their skill level was high. On Friday, “prayer night,” before dancing started, people offered prayers for individuals, whole families, and the community. These many entreaties were heartfelt, this intimate place bringing out the slow, kind, sincere thoughts of the sort that we too often leave unsaid. The dancing, now with older dancers



and few children, was even more expert. Then, on Saturday evening, I, like I imagine all newcomers, was transfixed by the skill, attention to detail, and power of the dancers who had given so much time in preparing so that this ancient ceremony would be pluperfect.

Four levels of wood-plank, bleacher-style seating line the west, south, and east walls of the dance house, accommodating about 200 people, with more able to stand near the entry. The north end is a cedar wall with two dressing rooms beyond it, men on the left, women on the right. The dance floor is constructed of boards, and in the center of the dance area is a circular fire pit, a main element of Nee Dosh. The fire sends out burning cedar's sweet smell, but the house is not smoky: rather than a smoke hole, the roof has overlapping layers, creating openings so the smoke escapes but the rain stays out. The fire roars, letting us see the dancers and their regalia and giving life to the north wall, turning the cedar planks rosy and displaying the shadows of the dancers.

As darkness gathered on that June Saturday evening, the men and boys started to sing in the dressing room, a signal that the first round was about to begin. Then the men entered the main area of the dance house, walking along the west wall and coming into the dance area from the south. They formed a half circle around the fire. A few of the older men, and strongest singers, stood in the back. The lead singer tapped a staff against the floor planks to keep time and establish rhythm for the singers and dancers to follow.

Before the women entered, the men sang a full song. Then the men invited the women in. They came along the east wall and entered the dance area from the south. Thirty to thirty-five in all, the dancers formed a semicircle between the fire and the north wall—men facing the fire, unmarried females facing the man to their right, married women facing the fire. They were so calm, so accomplished, so proud, so beautiful. The women wore buckskin dresses and basket caps and carried matishes, feathered wands. They also wore necklaces made of many seashells, which would soon be music. Each had a cluster of feathers or a single feather centered in the back of her headdress or cap. With charcoal, they had drawn the traditional “one-elevens” (permanent tattoos in historic times) on their chins. The men were bare-chested, wearing buckskin wraps or kilts tied at the waist, two feathers on their headbands, and necklaces; they carried bows and arrows.

The singing began again, and the women swung into action with grace and energy, creating a brilliant music unique to Nee Dosh—“the song of the dress.” Each dancer's seashells, hundreds of them on her dress and necklaces, combined to make a single instrument. Sliding their feet back and forth, bouncing

and swinging their bodies, the women brought their regalia to life in a wave of melodic jingling. The dancers were all in unison. The individual instruments joined in concert and became a chorus of seashells, one great and joyous wave, rolling on, rolling on, rolling on . . .

The singing grew louder. A young man jumped out from the line toward the fire. Hopping, crouching, he pulled an arrow from his otter-pelt quiver, decorated with abalone. Athletic and nimble, he was hunting, pursuing his prey. His posterior was so close to the planks, and his movements so quick and strong, that every person over forty must have had a sympathetic reaction—I did—“Oh, my thighs, knees, and calves—they are on *fire!*” After dancing back and forth in front of the line at least three times, he settled back into his position in the half circle. The lead singer signaled that the song was coming to an end by hollowing out his voice and letting out the air in his lungs with a quavering sound. The women waved their feather matishes in tight circles. When the lead singer finished, the line went motionless.

Between songs, the lead singer offered a prayer to the Creator in Athapaskan. Nee Dosh is a World Renewal Dance, a ceremony practiced by tribes on the Oregon Coast and northern California. As the night progressed, the cycle of song and prayer continued—some originating deep in antiquity, some in the past few centuries, a few in recent years. Prayers thanked the Creator for all He had provided, asked for the continuation of these good gifts, and reminded the people of how these things had come to be. Embedded in the entreaties was a sense of responsibility that tribal people were reasserting that night: their obligation and determination to fix the world, to renew and repair it and make it as it is supposed to be.

Just as before, the lead singer began a song and the men all sang the first verse. This time, however, a woman glided out in front of the line, perhaps responding to a signal from a woman in the front row near the fire who has responsibility for taking care of the female dancers and calling out dancers to dance in the middle. This is new. Traditionally, women who have had children did not come out in this way but, just as new songs come into use, this expanded role for women has become an accepted part of Nee Dosh. Her dance, though, was very different from that of the young man who preceded her. She glided so smoothly that I found it hard to understand how she did it. Moving back and forth in front of the line and making at least three full passes, she then dropped back to her place. Later on, during other songs, two or even three women or men jumped out and danced at the same time. A man, in a sign of romance, may invite a woman out of the line.

The second round was performed by visiting dancers from the Siletz' sister tribe, the Tolowa from the Smith River Rancheria just below the Oregon line. They come to Nee Dosh at Siletz in some years and Siletz dancers sometimes travel south. The tribes have worked closely on modern cultural issues, exploring the Tolowa and Tututni varieties of the Athapaskan language and comparing notes on Nee Dosh protocols, songs, and regalia. Smith River also built a dance house in the 1990s, using three ridge poles donated by the Siletz. The men's and women's regalia are nearly identical, except that the Smith River women do not carry matish sticks. This tribe, 200 miles from home, had fewer dancers—just eleven—because of the distance, but the round had all the pageantry, precision, and uplift of the first.

After the second round, at about midnight, I went out the oval door into the brisk, misty air. Volunteers gave out coffee from a small stand. I got a cup and stood off by the side, talking with a few friends. A large group of young people chatted and joked, some of them observers, some dancers. Here it is early Sunday morning and they are at Nee Dosh, not off doing the less honorable activities that I might have pursued on a similar night at their age.

Nee Dosh went to a new level in the third round. The regalia of the dancers was much more elaborate. The women wore dresses and necklaces with many more seashells, creating an even louder and more layered symphony. Most of the men had donned headdresses with large bunches of floppy feathers—the second and third feathers below the primary ones usually associated with eagles. These feathers—“it's a Siletz thing,” one dancer told me at the break—bounced and created a sea of movement. Also, more of the men were wearing on their headdresses the prized, glistening scalps of the red pileated woodpecker, large birds up to twenty inches from their feet to the tops of their flaming red crests. Compared with the first dance in the dance house in 1996, there is much more regalia available now. Building on the initial loan from NMAI, the tribe had repatriated some items from museums and had others on loan that were danced in the later rounds of the night. People brought family heirlooms out of storage and were making new regalia. New, that is, but old, their creations mostly faithful to the format of ancient designs and materials.

Late in the third round, a woman seated next to me whispered, “See those shadows on the back wall? Those are the ancestors, dancing with the people here tonight.”

All evening, people arrived and left. By the third round, no one was standing but the dance house was otherwise full. When the Smith River dancers



Nee Dosh dancers in the dance house at Siletz. *Siletz Tribal Collection*.

did round four, now way past the usual bedtime, the house was half full. Some people dozed on the benches. Attendance dropped off again for the last dance. The dancers, ever professional, brought out even more elaborate regalia for the last round and danced and sang as purposefully, energetically, and precisely as before, exhausted though they must have been. The last dance, performed as the early light nudged through the low fog and into the break between the double roofs, departed completely from the conventions of the long evening. As one, responding to the lead singer's signal, the dancers jumped out of line and danced individually and wildly, letting out yelps, howls, and screeches. Finally, everyone settled back into the line. The lead singer said a final blessing, *Huu-chan xuu naa-xutlh-xat-le*, "As you depart, may the blessings be with you." This Nee Dosh had drawn to a close, different in some ways from the dances of centuries past, yet the same, ever the same.



Reclaiming Native spirituality and traditional ceremonies is one aspect of reinvigorating culture. The term "decolonizing" is sometimes used to describe these efforts by modern tribal people to respond to generations of assimila-

tionist policy. In addition to Nee Dosh, the Siletz have moved on a number of fronts to protect and revive traditions. One of those is language.

Language loss is a global phenomenon. An estimated half of the world's languages have gone extinct, and linguists estimate that half the 7,000 languages still alive today will be lost by the end of the twenty-first century. Indigenous societies are especially at risk: "politically dominant languages and cultures simply overwhelm indigenous local languages and cultures, placing them in a condition which can only be described as embattled." As James Crawford pungently puts it, "Language death does not happen in privileged communities."

Language and culture are tightly bound together. Language is where a society expresses its worldview, values, and distinctiveness. Linguists and anthropologists, drawing an analogy to the loss of biodiversity, commonly make the point that language loss diminishes the world's intellectual and cultural diversity. Indigenous peoples, powerless as their cultures and languages were run over roughshod, have become keenly aware of the ramifications of language loss. "Language is part of us and part of our genetic structure," said Jessie Little Doe Fermino, a Massachusetts Wampanoag engaged in revitalizing her tribe's language. "Not to acknowledge a part of you is breaking a spiritual law. . . . language gives us a basis for why we view the world the way we do." Darrell Kipp of the Blackfeet Tribe of Montana explained why the tribe's ambitious language program enjoys such broad acceptance among the membership: "Same reason you don't burn down your libraries is why we keep our language. Our language is our library. And Blackfeet is totally unlike English, so it gives the child another thinking blueprint. For example, in Blackfeet, there is no gender, so the world can be suddenly seen in a different fashion."

Worldwide, the indigenous language revival movement began in the 1960s with the Maori of New Zealand. The Maori had one large advantage: although the number of speakers was dropping, 70,000 people still used the language. Today the Maori have an elaborate revitalization program helped by substantial government funding. Hawaiian Natives soon developed their own full-bore language restoration effort, and the number of speakers has grown from 1,500 to 6,000-8,000. As in New Zealand, Hawaiians have created immersion schools, where the native language is not just "studied" but is also the medium of instruction; in many cases, the parents participate and the native language is used at home. The state constitution makes Hawaiian one of the two official state languages.

By the 1980s, tribes in the contiguous states and Alaska had organized

to combat language loss and succeeded in 1990 in obtaining passage of the Native American Languages Act. There are now hundreds of tribal language programs, many with some federal funding. University interest has increased, with the tribal efforts contributing to and benefiting from the academic research. Many colleges and high schools allow native language courses to count toward requirements for foreign language. The tribal programs, where it counts most, range from immersion programs to language courses with written study materials to informal “meet and repeat” gatherings.

The mainland tribes and Alaska Natives face an uphill battle. Half of their languages have already been lost, and just thirty-six tribes have more than 1,000 speakers (with 150,000, the Navajo Nation easily has the most). A large percentage of the speakers are elderly or middle-aged, and nearly everyone—especially the youth—is bombarded by English and distracted by daily obligations from learning a “new” and difficult language. Documenting a language requires an enormous amount of time and expertise. The language must be heard orally through interviews with traditional speakers and then transferred into a written language that most can agree on, not just as to spelling but also grammar and nuance. At the same time, anyone who delves into the literature on tribal language revitalization or becomes familiar with individual tribal programs is struck by the earnestness and commitment of tribal leaders, language instructors, and tribal members. The future is unclear but Dr. Janine Pease of the Crow Tribe is right in saying that language revival is no passing fancy: “The work is much too difficult to be a fad.”

Linguists designate the Pacific Northwest as a “hot spot.” Most of the tribes are close to non-Indian populations as a result of opening reservations to settlement during the allotment era. Western Oregon is a particularly hard and sad case: despite the diversity of languages, nearly every one has gone extinct, or nearly so, through the relentless historical factors that gripped Indian communities for so long. The Grand Ronde Tribe has responded with an innovative language program based on the Chinook Jargon—the widely used language spoken historically by Indians and traders on the Northwest Coast—rather than a specific indigenous tribal language. Chinuk WaWa, as it is called, is taught as a course to adults and also learned by youth in an immersion program, the only one in Oregon.

The Coast Athapaskan language survives but barely, with just five to ten conversant speakers. The language is rich with words and phrases that link the Creator, the people, and the land. For example, *nvñ-nvst-’an* is the word for “the world.” Literally, *nvñ-nvst-’an* means “for you it is made,” but the

evocative word has much context and many layers. “It is made” means that the Creator tailored each place, each village area, to suit the peoples’ every need for climate, food, water, materials, medicines, and spiritual inspiration. This is the image, the place, that is so full as to mean “paradise.” There is no need for a separate heaven, and people simply remain in that paradise when they pass on. The people are endlessly grateful to the Creator for the privilege of living there. And this paradise is so fine that the people have many obligations to take care of it and fix it when necessary. It is that large bundle of gratitude, duties, wonder, and emotions that cause the people to hold Nee Dosh.

In 2003, the tribal council recruited Bud Lane to work in the Cultural Department and head up a language and traditional arts program. Growing up, Lane’s connection to Athapaskan was typical: he had heard older relatives using words and phrases but it was not the language of daily conversation. In the late 1970s, after restoration and with pride in being Indian surging at Siletz and nationally, he made up his mind to learn the language. He turned to an elder, Nellie Orton. Born in 1910, she grew up with the language but, trapped in the era when people concealed their culture, refused to speak it in public. At first, she declined to work with Lane, but in time she turned teacher and threw herself into it, methodically walking Lane through Athapaskan. By the 1990s, with the help of Orton and, after she passed away, other Siletz elders and Tolowa people from Smith River, Lane had become the Siletz tribal member most fluent in Athapaskan.

Lane holds classes at the Eugene, Salem, and Portland area tribal offices and teaches at the Siletz Valley Charter School. About twenty students attend class. The body of materials is steadily growing as Lane has recorded many Athapaskan-speaking elders. For an ultimate reference work, he has transliterated an Athapaskan-English dictionary, *Nuu-Wee-Ya’ (Our Words)*, with 12,000 words and phrases. With the dictionary as a base, Lane and a group of students are creating the “Siletz Talking Dictionary,” with keyboard-friendly, interactive audio files containing all 12,000 words and phrases that students can access on the tribal Web site and the Living Tongues Web site as well. Overall, he is cautiously optimistic about the survival of Coast Athapaskan:

Athapaskan is the last indigenous language still in use of the [ten] languages spoken here since our people confederated here in the 1850s. It is precious beyond description. Like most of Siletz culture, our language never completely left us, but has been greatly diminished by many different factors. It took 150 years to reduce the pool of speakers to what it is today. It will take

some time and effort to reverse that, but it is our determination that our language and all of the history, world views and lifeways it contains, not be relegated to the ash heap of history. So our vital work continues.

Saving a language is as monumental a task as one could posit for a small society. To be sure, over the past generation there has been a great deal of work at Siletz and progress of many kinds. The sounds of the ancient language can now be heard from numerous young people and newly involved adults as well. Important documentation, written and oral, has been done. Students are studying native languages in college. Still, the odds are against the Siletz reviving Athapaskan in the sense of reaching a stage where a substantial percentage of tribal members are fluent. Respected scholars are skeptical about small tribes maintaining their languages. Linguist David Crystal warns, for example, that “a language spoken by less than 100 is in a very dangerous situation.” Of all the indigenous languages in the United States, only one—Hawaiian—has shown a net gain in recent years in the number of fluent speakers.

Yet fluency is not the only way to measure progress. People can learn Athapaskan songs, prayers, and stories—and their *context*. Those people can participate as speakers and listeners in schools, public meetings, Nee Dosh, and gatherings to commemorate triumphs and pain. During the past generation the use of tribal languages in this sense has markedly increased across Indian country and at Siletz. It is profoundly rewarding. Tribal members feel it and so do we outsiders.

The language is sacred. It is in jeopardy. The Siletz could not let that lie. As a matter of duty, of honor, the old sounds need to be heard in some meaningful fashion. It is part of survival.



Baskets were pervasive in Siletz traditional life. Some were practical, with day-to-day uses, and could be simple and utilitarian or finely twined and decorative: storage containers, eating plates, floor mats, and aprons. Small lidded baskets held personal items such as medicines and jewelry. Other baskets did heavy work as sturdy fish traps and large conical baskets, backpacks that transported heavy loads of deer and elk meat, shellfish, salmon, or eels. The weave could be so tight as to make a water basket. Cooking baskets with an impressively tight weave allowed tribal members to rustle up deer, elk, or seal dinners by putting water in the bottom and adding hot rocks while constantly





Culture Camp, held every summer. Gilbert Towner, dedicated to teaching the Tututni language to young people, is shown here passing on the technique for scraping a hide. *Siletz Tribal Collection*.

stirring so as not to damage the valuable basket.

The most prized of all baskets were the basket caps used by female dancers in Nee Dosh or by women and men on other important occasions. Small and delicate, these highly decorative caps, tightly and finely woven, were created by experienced weavers. Making a high-quality basket cap—a piece that rises to the level of fine art—takes 50 to 100 hours.

Carefully graded hazel sticks—the warp—give shape to the baskets. Spruce roots—the weft—are woven in, normally accompanied by overlay material such as bear grass, maidenhair fern, woodwardia, dyed porcupine quills, and other materials in a carefully developed and carried out plan for that design. A good basket can last for 100 or even 150 years if kept safe from bugs, out of the sun to keep it lithe and supple, and away from dampness to prevent mold.

Keeping up traditions takes time and commitment to the point of dedication, and basketry is no exception. Needless to say, the weaving requires patience, dexterity, and the teaching of an expert. Moreover, many days precede the construction of the basket. The plant material must be gathered and made ready for weaving. You have to know where it is, when to go, and how to gather, process, and store it.

#### **CULTURAL REVIVAL**

#### TIME TO GATHER BASKET MATERIALS

*May* – Hazel, willow, fir sticks

*June* – Hazel, willow, fir sticks (*until mid-June*)

*July* – Fir sticks, bear grass, maidenhair fern

*August* – Fir sticks, bear grass, maidenhair fern, hazel sticks (limited), willow sticks

*September* – Bear grass, maidenhair fern, woodwardia fern

*Year-round* – spruce roots

National forests hold productive gathering grounds, and logging roads provide good access, so Siletz basket makers may journey in the Coast Range to the Siuslaw National Forest, which closely conforms to the boundaries of the 1855 Siletz Reservation; travel farther south to the Rogue River–Siskiyou National Forest; or cross the Willamette Valley to Willamette National Forest lands in the Cascade Range. Hazel sticks need to be picked in the spring, just as the sap has begun to flow, and spruce roots are best dug (this digging is not easy on the fingers or the nails) in the late spring and early summer, when the roots are moist and supple and before the ground gets hard. Properly, bear grass should be picked from the middle of the plant, carefully selecting a few crowns from each clump. Ferns and bear grass must be picked at their zenith a bit later in the year before they become too brittle.

All the materials need preparation, but spruce roots require the most. They are boiled, peeled, and split the same day they are picked. After peeling off the bark, the root is split to create even-sized ribbons about three feet long. The result is strong, sinewy, smooth strips that are light tan with a shiny patina. All the materials must be carefully stored after the initial preparation work is done.

The number of master weavers steadily declined over the years. Although several people were doing some weaving in the years leading up to restoration, only a very few of the really old-time, experienced weavers remained—Ida Bensell, her two daughters Gladys Muschamp and Carrie Streets, Nellie Orton, and Ruth Watts-Umatata among them. With the culture at a precarious stage, all of them taught—or tried to teach—young people, but none came forward to practice the elaborate art. Then, in the 1980s, Gladys Muschamp began working with three young men to pass on the weaving, and it took. By 2010 about twenty tribal members were serious, producing weavers. To Bud Lane, Muschamp “is one of my greatest heroes.”



Renowned Siletz basketmaker Gladys (Bensell) Muschamp sits surrounded by some of her then most recent weaving (ca. 1980). She rarely agreed to have her picture taken, especially in such a posed shot, but a tribal member convinced her that the picture should be taken; several tribal members provided baskets that they had acquired from Gladys for the composed collection shown here. The technique regularly used by Muschamp's family and many other Siletz families is half-twist overlay, where split roots are woven over small hazel stick ribs, spiraling out and changing the number of strands for texture and strength at prescribed intervals. The main design element is made by weaving sun-bleached bear grass and split maidenhair fern stems into each stitch in the design area. The design material is generally softer, thinner, and less durable than the foundation of the spruce root, and so it lies over the top of the spruce root base strand. One contemporary weaver explained that "to appreciate fully the many diverse and beautiful techniques employed by the Siletz and their ancestors, you have to see the baskets and hold them, watch them being made, and observe the time, love, and labor that goes into the preparation of the materials and the weaving." Photograph by Terry Russell provided to the tribe by Gladys Muschamp's son, George "Woody" Muschamp Jr. *Siletz Tribal Collection*.

#### **CULTURAL REVIVAL**

Passing on traditions from one generation to another is a mystical process, part sense of community, part diligence of elders, part open-mindedness of youth. So it is with the spiritual art of weaving in the Pacific Northwest, where at Siletz and elsewhere in Indian country, “the basket is a song.” W. Richard West, former director of the National Museum of the Native American, told this story:

A northern California basket maker named Mrs. Mattz was hired to teach basket making at a local university. After three weeks, her students complained that all they had done was sing songs. When, they asked, were they going to learn to make baskets? Mrs. Mattz, somewhat taken aback, replied that they were learning to make baskets. She explained that the process starts with songs that are sung so as not to insult the plants when the materials for the baskets are picked. So her students learned the songs and went to pick the grasses and plants to make their baskets.

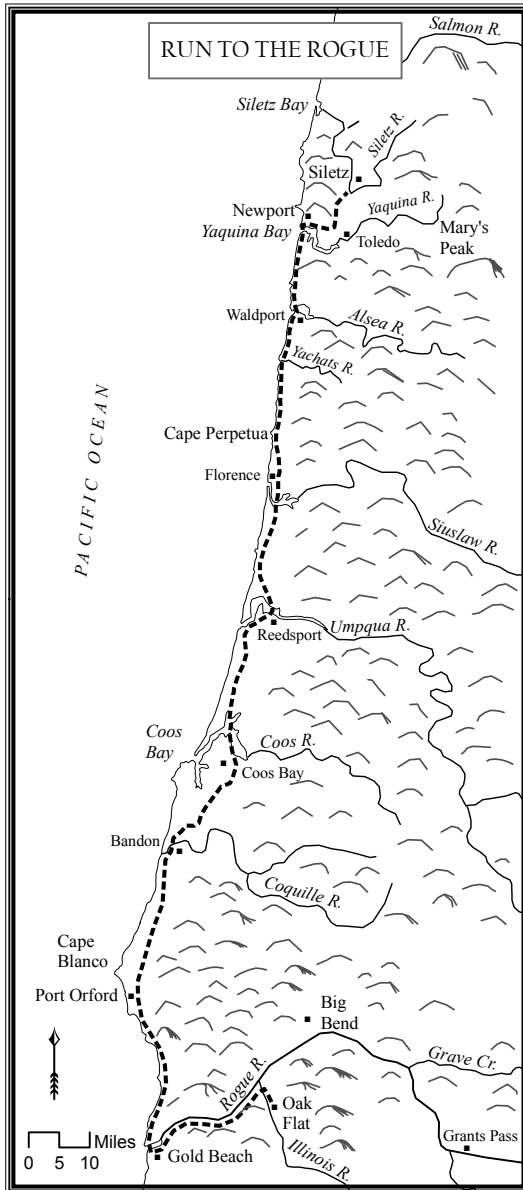
Upon their return to the classroom, however, the students again were dismayed when Mrs. Mattz began to teach them yet more songs. This time she wanted them to learn the songs that must be sung as you soften the materials in your mouth before you start to weave. Exasperated, the students protested having to learn songs instead of learning to make baskets. Mrs. Mattz, perhaps a bit exasperated herself at this point, thereupon patiently explained the obvious to them: “You’re missing the point,” she said, “a basket is a song made visible.”

I do not know whether Mrs. Mattz’s students went on to become exemplary basket makers. What I do know is that her wonderfully poetic remark—which suggests the interconnectedness of everything, the symbiosis of who we are and what we do—embodies a whole philosophy of Native life and culture and speaks volumes about the nature of Native objects to Native peoples themselves.



Most of Siletz culture—the basketry, Nee Dosh, the language, hunting, fishing, and gathering, and the family- and village-oriented lifeways—trace back into antiquity. But tribal cultures evolve, and at Siletz one of the most cherished traditions is of recent vintage. Yet it stands for the whole Siletz experience, from the revered old days through the bad years to the modern revival.

Each September, the Run to the Rogue, 263 miles in all, sends runners on a



long-distance relay from the town of Siletz, south down the Coast, and then up the Rogue River to its junction with the Illinois River. Hundreds of people run or walk, help organize, and serve as staff for the three days. Many others gather to watch. On the second night, down south, the people of Port Orford put on a potluck for the Siletz.

In a sense, Run to the Rogue is notable for its ordinariness. Yes, the run has an element of ceremony; it's an event to mark on the calendar and look forward to, but it is unremarkable in its simple logic. The Rogue River country still holds a place in the daily lives of Siletz people. That land and all the stories about it are part of the community. Going to the mouth of the Illinois is as normal and obvious as going across town to visit grandmother.

Still, a solemn mission permeates the run, which is timed to take place on or near September 10, which the tribal council has declared to be Treaty Day, a tribal holiday. Treaty Day is held on the

date of the first treaty at Table Rock, but the holiday commemorates all of the treaties, including the unratified Coast Treaty of 1855. The route—trail then, highway now—traces *in reverse* the infamous long march that many of the ancestors made in 1856. Returning by the same route can help salve the memories of the torment of the march and also assure the Coast, the forests, and the rivers that the Siletz have survived and remain loyal to their ancestral place. The destination point is Oak Flat, the meeting ground where

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Wilkinson, Charles, and Charles F. Wilkinson. *The People Are Dancing Again : The History of the Siletz Tribe of Western Oregon*. University of Washington Press, 2010. ProQuest Ebook Central, <http://ebookcentral.proquest.com/lib/multico/detail.action?docID=3444449>. Created from multco on 2022-07-26 23:49:53.



Traditionalist Craig Whitehead, in front, and Frank Petersen were critical organizers and participants in the early years of Run to the Rogue. This photograph depicts the beginning of the run, when many children and some adults gather on Government Hill and walk through town before the staff, carried here by Whitehead (with assistance), is turned over to individual runners and walkers. *Siletz Tribal Collection*.

Tyee John refused Colonel Buchanan's order to surrender and move north and instead chose to fight the final conflict at Big Bend. Downriver is the myrtle grove where the 1855 treaty, never ratified and never honored except by the tribes, was finally signed on September 8. So the Siletz people hold Run to the Rogue each year to remember—and never to forget—the battles, the treaties, the marches, the ancestors, and the land.

The three days of the run, with people making their ways down in various vehicles, including the Elders Bus, are slow-moving and easy, with time for hikes and sidetrips to familiar spots and stories and reminiscing. The ancestors had one or several villages in every valley. Their life was stable and abundant. They had the salmon, eels, shellfish, seals, and sea lions. The thick, green, moist forests gave deer and elk meat, cedar for canoes, and spruce roots for elegant baskets. Picking berries up on the ridge tops, they could survey their vast, generous domain and with a wave of an arm tell their young people *nvni-nvst-'an*, “for you it is made.”



Siletz runners on the southern Oregon Coast toward the end of the second day of the Run to the Rogue. *Photograph by Jeff Foster.*

I heard many stories about the landmarks we passed on the times when I took part in the run. Big Stump, the much-weathered redwood stump, right out in the middle of the beach, the center of the world for the Yaquina, Alsea, Yachats, Siuslaw, and Lower Umpqua tribes. The forty-mile-long beach, broad with sand dunes from Heceta Head to Coos Bay and a national recreation area today, that, every bit as much as the big rivers and high cliffs, made the march north so brutal. Cape Perpetua, rising straight up from the waves more than 1,400 feet, where the ancestors built amazing trails into the sheer sides. Battle Rock, near Port Orford, the massive formation where the treacherous seamen fired their killing cannon into a cluster of local Natives in 1851 and where, five years later, Indian people were herded like so many cattle into pens, awaiting the steamers that would take them far north. Humbug Mountain—poorly named, it is no humbug—is another testament to the pain and indignities of the removal; on the coastal side, the goliath is more cliff than slope right down to the waves and so the soldiers marched their captives, most of them

barefoot, well to the east across stretches of shale scree to circumnavigate Humbug.

The open, inviting Sixes River Valley. “I never lived in Sixes,” one woman told me, “but my people came from there and I’ve heard so many stories. Whenever I come over that rise, I just feel something in my whole body. It’s home to me.” At the mouth of the Rogue, Frank Simmons looked back up the river toward his grandfather Hoxie Simmons’s home country and reflected on the ultimate meaning of the Run to the Rogue. “We think of our ancestors, of what they went through. Their tracks are still in the sand, their breath still in the air, their hope still in our hearts.”

The Illinois River empties into the Rogue about twenty-five miles inland, eight river miles or so below Big Bend, where Tyee John and his people almost won the final battle. On that last leg of the run, steadily uphill, young male and female runners chewed up the early-morning miles, proudly bearing the ceremonial staff—myrtlewood from the Rogue country, embroidered with doe hide and eagle and flicker feathers—as they headed up the Rogue, place of so many good years and then the wars. The canyon tightens. A light rain came in and mist rose up from the river, the white playing off against the bold green that comes down to the banks. Glorious though the landscape is, if you know Siletz history you can’t help but feel the presence of the ancestors. The Rogue country is thick with nature, thick with history and humanity.

Two hundred people or so waited at Oak Flat, a level meadow up above the Illinois River. The staff was late by more than two hours but no one seemed impatient. The Run to the Rogue is informal in some ways, ceremonial in others, but it is also a complicated enterprise requiring precision. The organizers have to register sign-ups for 263 one-mile, mostly single, segments and then estimate arrival times and be sure that drop-offs and pick-ups are in order. The people at Oak Flat appreciate that. Another part of it is cultural. No one is in a rush. It’s a chance to talk with people and both joke around and feel the larger meaning of the moment.

When the final runner broke into view, he was greeted with smiles and gestures of satisfaction rather than noise. After passing the staff to an elder, he and the other tribespeople walked down a rocky jeep trail, talking quietly, to a wide, rocky beach on the edge of the surging Illinois. A return to a place that once was theirs, a place to stun you with its beauty, a place to break your heart. A commemoration, not a celebration.

The group formed a circle. There was no dancing. A good-time dance would be done later, after the salmon dinner. After a prayer, the tribal chairman



welcomed everyone. Some of the elders spoke briefly, honoring the ancestors and talking about how this big-river, big-tree country would always be home. Then the group lapsed into a long silence, awash in thoughts of the ancestors and the land.

The tribal chairman had asked if I would read Tyee John's speech to the gathering. I was glad to do it. When I began this book, I thought I knew the history pretty well. I didn't, and the learning has become a satisfaction of a lifetime. I didn't know of Tyee John when this began. In time he captivated me, partly because of his military skills, more broadly because he was indomitable, because he embodied the staying power of the Siletz. Yes, I was definitely glad to do it.

Now, in the quiet of the group, she said that I would be reading the speech. Choked up, I paused. The people, who felt the same emotions and more, were still. Even the river ceased its rumbling, rushing sounds, the better to hear the words of its old colleague.

You are a great chief; so am I a great chief; this is my country; I was in it when these trees were very little, not higher than my head. My heart is sick fighting the whites, but I want to live in my country. I will not go out of my country. I will, if the whites are willing, go back to the Deer Creek country and live as I used to do among the whites; they can visit my camp and I will visit theirs; but I will not lay down my arms and go to the reserve. I will fight. Good bye."

The people were still and so was the river. They remained so. Not having planned it, I asked in a low voice whether I should read it again. People nodded in silence, and I did.