

## A Brief History of the Coos, Lower Umpqua & Siuslaw Indians

The Confederated Tribes of Coos, Lower Umpqua and Siuslaw Indians are made up of 3 tribes (4 Bands): 2 bands of Coos Tribes: Hanis Coos (Coos Proper), Miluk Coos; Lower Umpqua Tribe; and Siuslaw Tribe. Although both Coos bands lived in close proximity to one another on the Coos River tributaries, they spoke different dialects of the Coos language and had their own unique history and cultural differences. A days walk north from the Coos River, you found yourself in the Lower Umpqua territory with a much different spoken language that both the Lower Umpqua and Siuslaw bands shared; the Siuslaw language. The diversity of languages and cultures you can find along the West Coast attests to the longevity these bands sustained for hundreds of generations in the lands they call home.

The tribes trace their ancestry back to the aboriginal inhabitants of the South-Central coast of Oregon. Their historic homelands extended from the richly forested slopes of the Coastal Range in the East to the rocky shoreline of the Pacific Ocean in the West, a vast region of some 1.6 million acres. They lived peacefully in an area characterized by moderate temperatures and abundant natural resources, including fish, shellfish, wildlife, and a rich variety of edible plants. This was their land; the Coos cosmology states that:

*Two young men from the Sky World looked down below, and saw only water. Blue clay they laid down for land, and tule mats and baskets they laid down to stop the waves from running over the land. Eagle feathers they planted, and they became trees. As they were thinking, it was happening. All kinds of vegetation grew; animals came. The world became beautiful. The world became as it is now.*

The people lived in villages of cedar plank houses on the margins of the extensive estuaries of the Siuslaw, Umpqua, and Coos rivers. This is an area of rugged cliffs and open beaches, bordered by shifting sand dunes and steep, heavily vegetated mountainsides. Their villages tended to be autonomous to each other. Most people within a village were related to each other by blood or marriage. People often visited other villages for social occasions, and to trade. During the summers, they would move to hunting camps in the surrounding mountains. They also navigated the rivers, and mountain ridge trails, to trade with other villages or journey to the Willamette and Camas Valleys for certain prized foods.

The Tribes had a distinct social stratification based on wealth measured in quantities of dentalium shells, woodpecker scalps, abalone shells, grey pine seeds, and clam shell disk money. The chief of the village was the wealthiest man. He was obligated to his people to use his wealth to benefit the people, and people in turn brought him food and gifts. The men of the village hunted and fished, made projectile points, canoes, traps and house planks. The women picked berries, dug for roots and clams, helped fish,

CTCLUSI Aboriginal Ancient Boundary



wove baskets, processed hides, dried meat, sewed clothing and cooked the food. Those who were too elderly or ill to help in gathering or processing of food, were given food by everyone else in the village. Food was always shared, and no one went hungry.

The Coos tribe lived on the southwest Oregon Pacific Coast. The Hanis speaking Coos lived in Now day North Bend, while the Miluk speaking Coos lived on the South Slough. Several Oregon landmarks are named after the tribe, the Coos Bay, the city of Coos Bay, and Coos County. Most of them were hunters, fishermen, and gatherers. For entertainment, they held foot races, canoe races, dice (bone or stick) games, target practice, and also nauhina'nowas (shinny). The Lower Umpqua people lived within the lower reaches of the Umpqua River watershed. They spoke the Kuitsch dialect of the Siuslawan language. The Siuslaw people lived within the Siuslaw River watershed which is named after them. They spoke the Siuslawan language. All three tribes lived in cedar longhouses. Men hunted and fished; while Women collected berries, roots and nuts. In addition, their rich diet consisted of seafood, game, sea bird eggs and other delicacies. Deer and elk skins were fashioned into garments and blankets. Baskets were woven using a variety of materials, from conifers to grasses. Nearly everything was treated as having a spirit, and spirits could exert a positive influence on people's lives. Young people set out on vision quests, a rite of passage, to locate their spirit power. To become a shaman, one had to possess five powers.

## Some Significant Dates to the Coos, Lower Umpqua & Siuslaw Indians

On January 26th, 1700 a 9.0 Earthquake caused a tsunami that flooded the coastal communities. In 1791 American Captain James Baker entered the Umpqua Indians' lands and traded with the Lower Umpqua for about twelve days.

February 8th 1806 was the first time the Coos were mentioned by Euro-Americans. William Clark, wintering at Fort Clatsop near the Columbia with Meriwether Lewis and the Corp of Discovery, reported the existence of the "Cook-koo-oose nation". His journal entry says: "I saw Several prisoners from this nation with the Clatsops and Kilamox, they are much fairer than the common Indians of this quarter, and do not flatten their heads."

Trappers working for Hudson Bay Company made first contact with the coastal tribes in 1820. The first American fur trapper, Jedediah Smith and his men, followed in 1828.

In 1824 Smallpox had entirely wiped out the Hanis Coos Indian village at Tenmile Lakes. In 1836 A measles outbreak struck Indian villages on the Coos Bay reducing the population from 2,000 to 800. Such European diseases as smallpox arrived with the white man's penetration into the area and sickened the tribes.

In 1846, Great Britain transferred sovereignty of the Oregon Territory to the United States. The Oregon Organic Act, which established the U.S. Oregon Territory, confirmed and guaranteed the Indians right and title to their lands and property, and stated: "That nothing in this Act contained shall be construed to impair the rights of persons or property now pertaining to the Indians in said territory so long as such rights shall remain unextinguished by the treaty between the United States and said Indians."

The Coos, Lower Umpqua and Siuslaw Indians maintained peaceful relations with settlers as they began to stream in from the East. In 1855, four years before Oregon attained Statehood, a treaty was drafted by the federal government to allow for the peaceful acquisition and settlement of the Confederated Tribes ancestral lands. The treaty provided for compensation to the Tribes in terms of food, clothing, employment, education and health benefits. The three Tribes agreed to the Treaty of 1855, and patiently waited for Congress to ratify it.

However, they waited in vain. The federal government chose to ignore the treaty, and it was never ratified by the United States Senate. Within a year of the Indians' signing of the treaty, and the beginning of the 1856 Rogue River War between the whites and Indians to the south, the Coos Indians were rounded up and forcefully marched to a military fort, Fort Umpqua, where they were held prisoner along with the Lower Umpqua to prevent their involvement in the war raging in the south.

In 1860, they were marched 60 miles up the coast to the Alsea subagency in Yachats, a reservation on the Yachats River. This long trek was their "Trail of Tears", and within a short time at the reservation, many died of hunger, exposure, mistreatment, and sheer exhaustion. Once there, they were imprisoned for 17 years and forced to give up their traditional culture for farming, on a coastal plain ill-suited to agriculture. Fifty percent of the Tribal members died during this period due to the deplorable conditions including starvation, mistreatment, and disease.

Along with loss of their homelands to white settlement, federal promises of just treatment were persistently broken over the ensuing 100 years. In 1876, the Yachats area was opened for pioneer settlement, and the Tribal members were released to return to their homelands that had been changed forever, or travel north to the Siletz Reservation. Indeed, they found that their homes no longer existed and they became wanderers, settling wherever they could fit in amongst the new pioneer homesteads.

Those Tribal members who stayed in the area found menial jobs or worked in the fields as harvesters. They kept their Tribal identity alive by meeting monthly and observing special celebrations through the year. In 1916, the Tribes established a formal, elected tribal government that they have maintained ever since. Then, in 1941, the Bureau of Indian Affairs (BIA) took a small privately donated parcel (6.12 acres) into trust for the Confederated Tribes in the city of Coos Bay. On this small "reservation", the BIA also erected a Tribal Hall that included an assembly hall, kitchen, offices and medical clinic. It is still in use today and is on the Register of Historic Places.

In the late 1940's, the U.S. government started action to withdraw recognition of some Indian tribes. The Coos, Lower Umpqua and Siuslaw Indians voted to strongly oppose termination. However, without their knowledge or consent, they were included in the Western Oregon Termination Act of 1954. The blatant lack of participation in the process is most evident among the Indians of Southwest Oregon. The Coos, Lower Umpqua and Siuslaw never passed a resolution in favor of termination, and were adamantly opposed to it. In 1948, the Coos, Lower Umpquas sent forty-eight delegates to the Siletz Reservation to express their disapproval of termination; but were not allowed to make their case, as they had been locked out of the meeting and were told the termination bill did not affect them".

Even though the U.S. government officially terminated them, the Confederated Tribes never sold their small reservation and Tribal Hall, and, instead, maintained it. During the Termination Years (1954 to 1984), the Confederated Tribes attempted to provide services to its members with the few resources that they had. They also continued to fight for restoration, and recognition as a sovereign nation.

Then, on October 17, 1984, as a result of a long moral, legal and legislative battle, President Ronald Reagan restored the Tribes to federal recognition by signing Public Law 98-481. The Tribes' sovereignty was once again recognized and funding was restored for education, housing and health programs. In 1987, the Tribe approved a constitution and began to lay the groundwork for a self-sufficiency plan.

Since this historic event, there has been a period of rapid growth, along with some political and administrative pains as a result. This internal turmoil has created impediments to progress in achieving self-sufficiency and cultural restoration. In spite of these obstacles, the Tribes have been continually building on the basic framework established by Restoration Act.

During the past several years, the Tribal Planning Department, Tribal Council and Tribal members have conducted and participated in studies to develop demographic data and determine socioeconomic needs of the tribal membership. Through formal survey, input has also been obtained from tribal members concerning priorities and needs relating to restoration of a tribal forest land base. Using information obtained from these studies and surveys, goals have been established for service delivery programs, forest land restoration, and other Tribal government functions to meet the needs of tribal members. These activities represent a major effort to plan for the future of the Tribes and establish the foundation for development of a Reservation Plan and Forest Land Restoration proposal.

Today we strive to perpetuate our unique identity as Indians and as members of the Confederated Tribes of Coos, Lower Umpqua and Siuslaw Indians, and to promote and protect that identity. It is our goal to preserve and promote our cultural, religious and historical beliefs while continuing to learn and grow as a part of the community we live in. We also work to promote the social and economic welfare of our members both inside and outside of our five-county service area here in Oregon. Our five-county service area is made up of Coos, Curry, Lincoln, Douglas and Lane counties.

Source: <https://ctclusi.org/history>