

Eliza Elkins Jones

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## Telling the History of a Shattered Culture

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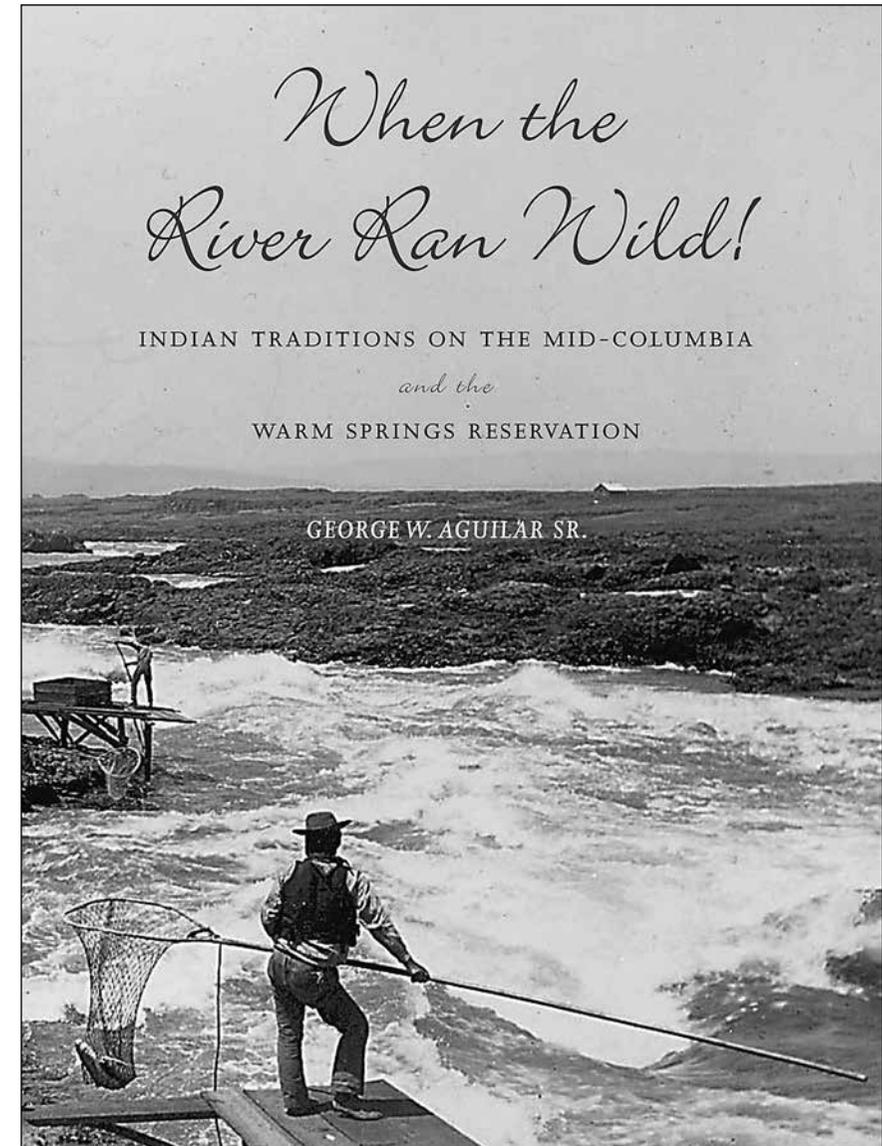
### An Interview with George W. Aguilar, Sr.

**B**LENDING RESEARCH AND RECOLLECTION, Warm Springs tribal elder George W. Aguilar, Sr., has written a history of his people. For over a decade, Aguilar — a man who has no formal training as a historian or writer — has spent hours researching, writing, and editing *When the River Ran Wild! Indian Traditions on the Mid-Columbia and the Warm Springs Reservation* (published in June 2005 by the Oregon Historical Society Press in association with the University of Washington Press). Aguilar's book is an exceptionally personal work of historical scholarship, written primarily to help his grandchildren understand where they are from. I recently spoke with Aguilar about how and why he wrote the book and what his hopes are for its readers. The stories he told reveal his desire that the book provide the next generations a continuity with the past, giving them a historically grounded identity like what he was able to develop growing up in Wolford Canyon on the Warm Springs Reservation.\*

Aguilar was born in 1930 and was raised by his grandmother, Hattie Polk, who taught him the traditional ways of his people, including the Klickitat

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\*The interview with George W. Aguilar, Sr., took place on April 9, 2005, at the KWSO radio station in Kah-Nee-Ta. Quotations in the introduction come from Aguilar's written responses to questions I sent him before the interview. The interview tapes and transcripts will be housed at the Oregon Historical Society Research Library in Portland.



The cover of Aguilar's book, *When the River Ran Wild! Indian Traditions on the Mid-Columbia and the Warm Springs Reservation*, is a photograph of "The Rapids, Upper Cascades, Columbia River, Oregon," taken by Carleton Watkins in 1883. It shows a place on the river where Aguilar's family fished for generations.

Sahaptin language. Through her experience and knowledge, including stories she learned from her own grandmother, Aguilar gained an understanding of his people's history. Aguilar lived in Wolford Canyon until he was about eight years old. He told me that his "inside world" in that remote place differed from the "outside world":

Inside world to me was living in a remote area of the reservation. The Indian dietary foods was my inside world. My pets, playing places on the hills, the small spring streams was my inside world. Accompanying Grandmother by horseback to the root-digging grounds and huckleberry fields in my very young years was my inside world. I had no idea there were other people. I thought we were the only people. . . . During my early childhood years, it was so isolated there was no electricity, running water, or inside plumbing. Almost every road on the reservation was just a glorified large trail used mostly by horse-drawn wagons. The only way of crossing to the outside world was crossing the Mecca Bridge.

To me, observing everything else out of the location of the Wolford Canyon was the outside world. In the outside world, I had no idea that there were so many people, towns, and jackrabbits. Everything was so new, like crossing the large river of Deschutes, the town of Madras. Soda pop, ice cream, and even candy was the outside world. Stepping into the outside world was a huge informative and cultural shock. Before my school days, the only avenue to the outside world was an observation of World War I photos from a magazine plastered all over the walls of our old house to keep the outside winter air from infiltrating.

In 1937, Aguilar moved to the Warm Springs Indian boarding school, where he and other students were not allowed to speak Indian languages and were not fed the Indian food to which they were accustomed. Gradually, Aguilar lost his knowledge of Klikitat Sahaptin. At school, he met other boys who knew their native languages, and sometime they would stay up late at night and sing traditional songs to each other. School was not Aguilar's "cup of tea," he says, and he left at age fourteen. He worked physically demanding jobs, including fishing at the traditional places on the Columbia River in the late 1940s, where his father and grandfather had fished before him. In the fall of 1949, after the salmon runs ended, Aguilar joined the U.S. Army. He served for over three years. A service-connected disability put him in the Tacoma Indian Hospital. There he met Ella Kurip, a Ute who worked at the hospital as a nurse. They married in 1955 and eventually had five children.

In the mid-1990s, Aguilar's grandchildren began learning the Kiksht Wasco language as part of a new school program at Warm Springs. This led Aguilar to think about his own past, and he began the arduous process of researching his family's history. When asked how he approached this task, Aguilar said:

The original intent for this project was to bring attention to Indian names, for my grandchildren. To do this, I diligently sought information from our Tribal Statistics Department. Some of the information was acquired from the BIA [Bureau of Indian Affairs] Realty Department, and some of the information was derived from an 1886 census stored in the library of OHS [Oregon Historical Society].

In the BIA Realty Department's records there is an allotment number and a transcript referring to relatives of [the person who received an allotment], and



*George W. Aguilar, Sr., and his grandmother, Hattie S. Polk, tanning a deerskin near their home in Wolford Canyon, on the Warm Springs Reservation, in the late fall of 1933. Aguilar explains that the skin is tied to the wooden frame with buckskin hide and that he and his grandmother are holding tanning sticks with stone heads.*

usually the transcript will reveal the Indian names of those individuals that fell into heir-ship of the individual [who received an allotment]. During my research, I came into possession of every allotment number on the Reservation, with all the Indian names and their tribal affiliations and so forth.

Courtesy of George W. Aguilar, Sr.



*George W. Aguilar, Sr., on a homemade implement for compacting dirt in his “inside world” of Wolford Canyon, about 1933.*

The Indian name and the allotment number documents were so garbled up it took me nearly a month to straighten and assign the proper lot numbers to the assigned individuals. I also learned most individuals had two Indian names, and some had as much as three names. The 1886 census, or the original assigned allotments, have approximately 800 assigned allotments; this means every man, woman, and child of that time was assigned an allotment number and placed in certain geographical areas.

All of this work was done on my own time and expense. I found a census record in the Oregon Historical Library that was dated from 1886 to the early 1900s and used it in acquiring some of the Indian names that I have documented up to this point.

Historians often follow paths determined by names found in historical documents. Following the path of Indian names, many of which were lost during whites’ efforts to assimilate Indians, can be difficult. Aguilar explains that in implementing the 1871 Grant Peace Policy — which promoted assimilation of Indians by prohibiting the practice of Native customs and use of Native languages — U.S. government representatives gave Indians Euro-American names. “The earlier Kiksht,” says Aguilar, “placed great emphasis on the giving of Indian names and this was one of their most important and crucial customs. The giving of the white man’s names shattered the civilization of the American Indian, specifically the lower and coastal Chinookans.”

As he researched his people’s history and culture beyond the stories he had heard from his grandmother and other elders, Aguilar had to turn to sources written by whites. Anthropologists, linguists, and ethnographers — including Leslie Spier, Edward Sapir, Robert H. Ruby, and John H. Brown — recorded the language and customs of the people of the river, and Aguilar is grateful for that. He says he felt “exhilarated” upon finding records of the Kiksht language. In his research, Aguilar also used journals and diaries of early white explorers and settlers. In the course of his research, he also met scholar Jarold Ramsey, with whom he worked extensively during the writing process. He said:

I became aware of the advent of Lewis and Clark, who came to this area during the fall time 197 years before, and I wanted to experience the weather conditions of that date. And to create in my mind how it was for them to come upon our people, the Kiksht of those earlier years. In my mind’s eye and thoughts, I pictured the huge old-growth fir trees that clothed the steep mountainous hills of the surrounding area. High in the Hood River Canyon are several red cedars. An inquisitive person would probably ask, “Was there a tree large enough for the fifty-foot cedar canoes and boards for their houses, or did our people bring them in from the Willamette Valley?”

As I photographed the Labiche River (Hood River), I wondered if this is the river where the sea-run Dolly Vardon came to spawn. Were these species of fish there at this date? [Looking at] the sandy beach where the present boat marine is located, I wondered how many of the sleek Chinookan canoes were stored there this time of year. These and other thoughts of this local [area] misted up and cluttered my mind [so much] that I just had to make this trip to record what may have occurred 197 years ago, when Lewis and Clark documented the Chilluckittiqua People.

In conversation, Aguilar’s voice is surprisingly quiet, but he chuckles often and laughs loudly. As we began the interview, he explained how his historical knowledge allows people on the Warm Springs Reservation to understand where they are “coming from.”

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I was talking to a Kiksht person, that is, from the Kiksht-speaking people. And he was kind of wondering where he was coming from, and we spent a whole hour drinking coffee, just discussing his people, specifically referring to Indian names. And he had no idea of where he was coming from, and he had no idea the importance of the giving of the Indian names. And we discussed his people from the Cascades area, up from the time of pre-1800, we’ll say. His people are connected to that area. There’s a lot [of] background in their genealogy, and they have Indian names. There’s a little town over there, even, named after one of the people of his Indian name. I don’t think

he knows that, but his older brother carries the Indian name of Washougal. The small town of Washougal is actually an Indian name of an individual, [who was] probably born in the 1700s, or sometime that era. . . . All this individual wanted to find out [was] where he came from.

*And you knew where he came from because of the research you've done for this book, or you would have known that before writing this book?*

Well, I never knew of his people until I started doing the research. And these names are documented, like the Sla-kish, that name shows up in the Yakama treaty [documents]. It's definitely his people because [of] the tradition and custom of the Chinookan people: one name is assigned to each family member, and no other people can acquire that name. It's a distinct identity.

*How did you figure that out? How did you come to know that?*

Leslie Spier and [Edward] Sapir documented that in their ethnohistory, ethnography history [*Wishram Ethnography*].\* They documented that. They made mention [that] maybe, up in the eastern part, two could hold a name, but one definitely holds the name. And there's a lot of reasons for that.

*I'm interested in when you first started reading the Spier and Sapir. When did you first start reading that ethnohistory, and why did you read that?*

I read it because my grandchildren were taking the Kiksht language on the reservation, and they were real young children and I thought, because [they were] learning the language, they should also probably learn where they came from. And where they came from are all based on the Kiksht Chinookan Indian names. And when you know of an Indian name, then there is a story to tell, and that's how I started on the research of the Indian names.

*Is that how you started on the research that became this book? Was with your grandchildren?*

It's because of my grandchildren. I want them to have a distinct identity of, hey, I came from the Chinookan nation before the intrusion of the Euro-American. Perhaps when I'm gone, maybe fifty, sixty years from now, I want them to say — even though they aren't all Chinookan — they can say, "Well, my grandparents [were] these Indians." That was the purpose of the Indian name, to pass on the posterity through the Indian name. Oral history was kept by this method of the Indian name.

I have a real small, young, grandchild now that is probably around about eight or nine years old, and he is learning the Wasco, which is Kiksht, and Ichishkin Snwit, which is Sahaptin, and the Paiute all at once. But, he's not

\*Leslie Spier and Edward Sapir, *Wishram Ethnography* (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 1930).

even an enrolled [tribal] member, because he is three-quarters of an Indian, but his blood quantum is so shattered that he can't [enroll]. See, there's a certain degree of blood — of the Chinookan, or the Sahaptin, or whatever you're going to call them — they have to have to become an enrolled member. But, because his blood quantum is so shattered, they won't accept him. But here's a kid, now, down the line, I can say he'll be able to say, "Well, I came from Warm Springs and my great-grandfather was a Chinookan and we could trace our genealogy clear back to the 1700s." See?

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My blood line began to break up with me, because I'm only half. Ok, I married an individual from Utah. . . . My wife has Ute, and me I have the Konniack tribe, or the Skilloot. I have the Wasco. I have the Klickitat. I have the Tenino. And there's a Yakama and — see how shattered that has become?

*If I can ask — do you have an Indian name? Have you had one given?*

Yes. Well, I don't possess it now because I gave it up. I was given an Indian name way back in 1939. My great-uncle was on his death bed, at the time, and we — me and Grandmother — we went to visit him up there in Wolford Canyon, where we lived. [He] was an individual that I loved very dearly, because I used to follow him around as a youngster, and, you know, saw how he lived, where he lived, and he lavished a lot of attention upon me, and it was kind of sad to see him in his deathbed. But before he went, he said, "I give you my Indian name." And he always went by [that name]. He didn't go by John.

Most individuals, in that time era, they went by their Indian names, with the exception of a few. So he went by the name of Tanaxam (pronounced Tana-cum). Now, this Tanaxam comes from the Cascades area, and this links up with Ta-ma-coum. Paul Kane came by in 1847, I think, [and] he painted a picture of Ta-ma-coum, and this painting is displayed in the Toronto Museum in the eastern states of Canada. So, that name went down to him [my great-uncle], and he gave that name to me. So this is the third time that [name] has been used.

In my time era, that name is going to be passed on for the fourth time now, see? Now, as you look at that, it's been — he was born in about 1803, the main Ta-ma-coum, from the Cascades area. So, it's going to be around about two hundred plus years now, since that name has been known. Ok. What happened during Ta-ma-coum's era? I'll say, now, for historical purposes. Here comes 1830, here comes the malaria [epidemic], that wiped out 90 percent of the Indians along the Columbia River system. Finally, with all of the other epidemics, like the whooping cough, that came about someplace in that era, too: the cholera, smallpox. During that time, whole villages were wiped out. Somehow he survived up until 1847, and this is when the measles was introduced to the Northwest area, and 90 percent

Courtesy of George W. Aguilar, Sr.



*Aguilar and Hattie Polk, his grandmother, at Swim Indian Camp just south of Government Camp on Mt. Hood in 1939. Growing up with his grandmother, learning the history of his people through family stories, gave Aguilar a distinct identity in his childhood, something he is hoping to share with his own grandchildren.*

of the remaining 10 percent was gone. Here we have a population down to around about twenty-five hundred people during the time Lewis and Clark came to that area. There [were] only eighty survivors out of the whole big bunch that came to the Warm Springs Reservation in 1858.

So, we're reverting back to history through an Indian name that existed within that era. This Indian name now drops down into 1860s, or something around there. My great-uncle's era was 1860s to 1939, or something like that. Ok, what happened here? The giving of a white man's name. He lived within that era. Well, he probably was one of those that [were told], "Well, your name is no longer Tanaxam. Now your name is John, and your name is James. Your name is Joe Blow," or whatever, you know. So, this

happened, I think it was 1871, by A.B. Meecham. It was [part of] President Grant's Peace Policy.

The giving of the Indian name was the custom of the Kiksht, and the idea of the Grant Peace Policy was to break down the identity of the Chinookan system. The giving of the Indian name was a crucial custom of the Kiksht Chinookan, so if you break that custom of giving the Indian name, then you've broke, you've shattered — you're shattering the culture now. Through an educational system. Through Christianity. Through breaking of ceremonials and those customs of Indian name-giving.

*You've become quite a knowledgeable historian of the past two hundred years of this area . . .*

From research. I received little things in my early childhood days [from] Grandmother. I first heard of the prophesy story in my earlier years, around about 1938, when Grandmother made mention about the coming of the people from the east, and what they would bring. She heard these stories from her grandmother and her great-aunt. They were sisters, and one of the sisters was married to Billy Chinook. They were in their mid-thirties when the 1855 treaty was signed. She experienced the coming of the pioneers and saw how the — I don't know — [the pioneers were] coming over in pretty tough shape, you know, after journeying over six or seven months or however long it took. Well, you know, their children coming in with raggedy clothes and barefoot and near starvation, some of them. She told of those to my grandmother, and my grandmother relayed them to me.

Of the prophesy story, the only thing that I can really remember was — at that time I didn't really care about all this — but the only thing that I can remember was the mention of the pots. I conversed with her in Indian, in the Indian language, all the time. She described a machine where you don't dare do wrong or they'll catch you with this machine, and that's the only thing that really burned in my mind all those years. And that's really looking quite a ways ahead, because there's no such thing as lie detectors or computers or electronic equipment like that [in] 1938. We didn't even have electricity at home, just coal-oil lamps and stuff like that.

*What other kinds of things did your grandmother tell you about the history of your people when you were growing up?*

She told about all the artifacts that became exposed year after year in The Narrows, arrowheads and little mortars and pestles. As the rain come by or the wind blew the sand away, a lot of this stuff became exposed, and she told of a lot of that stuff. And she kind of referred to it as Lch'achalima. That's Indian, and that's "ghost stuff." The ghost stuff. Don't bother with it.

She told of fishing places grandfather used, like in the Cascade Rapids — Coyote's Fishing Place, the areas where they camped and stuff like that. The Coyote's Fishing Place, that was the background — or foundation — of the whole Wascos, from the Coyote's Fishing Place all the way down to the Winq'at, what they call Winq'at, right there where the main Dalles is now. That was their trading place of the whole Columbia River system. Especially when the high water came in there. Water rose way up high, and it was a kind of landing place for all the people coming with canoes, and where they all traded.

*Why did you choose that title for the book?*

Because the river don't run wild anymore. Well, it had a character of its own. It is wild. But, to me, it's reminiscence. You know, we [are] never ever going to see that thing like that, in its grandeur, anymore. It's gone. It only lives in my mind of what it was like. We're talking since — it's almost fifty years now since they've obliterated that whole area. And, so, it's only people that's about sixty years old now can recall what it was like.

What I'm about to say here is going to be real sensitive to a lot of people. Some of my older relatives believe it the same way, and maybe the environmentalists are going to not like what I got to say about it, but the best thing that could ever happen to the fishery and the Celilo area is what happened.

*Why?*

Because the people were beginning to fight over fishing places because there was a lot of other tribal people intruding on family-owned fishing places, and there was fist fights. Some people got so greedy and selfish that they didn't even recognize their own people, at times, to give them a fish or give them the chance to fish at their place. This fishery was shattered by the court system and treaties of 1855. The population count was exploding, and this was turning into a real battleground for different tribal groups. It's a sensitive kind of thing because a lot of people eulogize and romanticize Celilo and the whole area. I'm glad, because of that, because I don't have to see my grandchildren go down there beating the living tar out of somebody to keep somebody out of their fishing place.

*Who do you really want to read this book?*

My children and grandchildren. Our people who are interested in it, in the Kiksht. The Kiksht speakers have just — the culture is just gone into extinction. I would say extinction, because most people my age don't even know about this kind of stuff. And this will [allow them to say], "Hey, I didn't know we buried our people this way, I didn't know that our trade system was this way." To this day, there are people here [who say] there were no such thing as



*Aguilar demonstrates the use of a traditional single-shaft harpoon spear that he made. When he was a child, Aguilar's grandmother explained how to use this kind of spear, which can either be thrown or thrust forward to catch certain kinds of fish, but, he says, he "couldn't comprehend what she was talking about until I saw it in my later years."*

slaves. And this was our culture, back in that time era. This book is to bring back this — I'll tell you the Indian term of *ána-ku íwachá mí-mi*, meaning "this is the way it was long time ago." That term. I'm not trying to say go back to the traditional ways, maybe the languages. And the name-giving. That's about all I would advocate to learn of. And the history, of course.

George Aguilar, Sr., wrote *When the River Ran Wild!* to help us know what the River People have lost on the Columbia over the decades, but he also gives testimony to what has been conserved and enlivened by a people who love the land and who honor tradition and those who came before. He takes us, perhaps better than anyone else can, back to a time when the river ran wild.

The author continues to research and document his people's history and to gather information on native plants and practices. *When the River Ran Wild!* will be published in June 2005 by the Oregon Historical Society Press in association with the University of Washington Press.