Wakanish Naknoowee Thluma

‘Keepers of the Salmon’

THE NATIVE RIVER PEOPLE of the N’Chi Wana or Columbia River tell a story about the creation of humans. The Creator sent Coyote down from the top of the mountains to the river to ask the animals of the world for gifts in the creation of humans. As Coyote was walking down a trail to the river, he looked up and saw an eagle. He asked, “Eagle, Creator asks if you could give a gift to this thing called human that He is creating?” Eagle replied, “I will give some of my eyesight so humans can see the beauty of this land.” Coyote took Eagle’s gift and placed it in a medicine bag. As Coyote came through the trees of the forest, he spotted an elk eating in a meadow. Coyote called out, “Elk, Creator asks if you could give a gift to this thing called human that He is creating?” Elk walked over and said, “I will give part of my hide so the humans can cover themselves and have protection from the elements of the earth.” Coyote took this gift and placed it in the medicine bag. Coyote continued down the trail, and as he was leaving behind the tall trees of the forest, he heard the call of an owl. Coyote looked up into the trees and told the owl, “Creator asks if you could give a gift to this thing called human that He is creating; can you give something for this medicine bag?” Owl replied, “I will give part of my hearing so humans can hear the sounds of the wind, the birds, and other animals of the earth.” Coyote took owl’s gift and placed it in the medicine bag. Soon Coyote spotted a small river running into the big river. As he walked near the river, he saw a beaver building his home. He called out to beaver, “Beaver, Creator is making this thing called human and He wants to know if you can provide a gift to it?” Beaver told Coyote, “I will give a portion of my teeth so the human can eat and receive nourishment.” Finally, Coyote came to the edge of the N’Chi Wana just as the salmon were making their way over Celilo Falls. Coyote yelled out over the loud sound of rushing water and told the salmon, “Creator asks if you could give a gift to this thing called human that He is creating; can you give something I can place in this medicine bag?” Salmon replied, “Of course I will. I want to provide two gifts. One is my body, so the humans will have food that will make them strong and healthy. I will also gift to the humans my voice, completely, so they can talk with one another.” Coyote is very impressed with these gifts. Salmon calls out one last time, “With these gifts come a big responsibility, though; I ask that humans speak for me and for all the other animals and plants of the earth. The humans must promise to protect us now and for future generations.” Coyote took these gifts and returned them to the Creator for His use in creating the human.

This story was first told to me by Tessie Williams, along the banks of the Umatilla River in the 1970s. Not too much later, I was retold this story by my grandfather, Charles F. Sams, Sr., along the N’Chi Wana, while fishing near Cascade Locks. My grandfather wanted to instill in me the responsibility we, as humans, have to salmon and to the river that supports their life. You see,
since the beginning of time, it has and will always be humans’ responsibility to be the Wakanish Naknoowee Thluma or Keepers of the Salmon. By fishing in our traditional ways along the Columbia River, we continue to be nourished by the gift of the salmon. Prior to the inundation of Celilo Falls in 1957, Celilo was the heart of our fishing community and the economic center for the River People. For at least fourteen hundred generations, my family and my people traveled to Celilo to harvest the salmon we needed in order to maintain our life and our culture. Celilo was the center of our salmon culture and our traditional economy.

On average, over 16 million salmon returned through Celilo Falls each year prior to the dams. The salmon provided not only food for the River People throughout the year but also a resource for exchange between them and tribal people further inland. The salmon of Celilo returned each year to fulfill their responsibility to provide a gift of food to the humans. In turn, it was our responsibility to ensure we did not waste this gift and that we protected and preserved the flora and fauna that it depended on in order for it to return each year.

My grandfather, the late Charles F. Sams, Sr., made many trips to Celilo as a boy, young man, and adult. He would travel by rail or automobile to get to Celilo and would fish with his brothers and bring home fish for the family and community members who needed it. The only time my grandfather did not make the annual trip to Celilo was during the years of World War II. After serving in the Pacific campaigns with the U.S. Navy, he returned home to the Umatilla Indian Reservation in 1946. He also returned to the Big River and Celilo Village to once again dipnet for salmon. After the 1991 Gulf War and on departure from active duty with the U.S. Navy, I too went to the Big River, but I could not fish at Celilo. I did stop at the present-day park and walk along the bank, hoping to hear the echoes of the waterfalls, but I could not. The dams took away sounds of the river that had lasted for thousands of years. I traveled further on down the river and fished with my grandfather at Cascade Locks. After my first night sleeping on a fishing scaffold, I awoke to my grandfather checking the nets for fish. A salmon was in one of the nets. I asked if he missed Celilo, and of course he answered, “yes.” He explained that even though our fisheries at Celilo had been destroyed, it was still my responsibility to continue being a keeper of the salmon. Our covenant must be upheld.

After the inundation of fishing sites by The Dalles and other dams on the Columbia River, Native fishermen modified their traditional dipnetting into rapids to dipnetting along the shoreline. Today, you will see many of the same families who have fished along the edges of the Big River for thousands of years. You still see scaffolds that look like ones that were at Celilo but are now just a few feet above the slack waters of the interlocking reservoir lakes. The dipnets are made from large hoop frames and are set adrift in the currents that run up and down the river’s edge. In these currents, the salmon still make their migration up the river and still make their sacrifice by being caught by Native fishermen for food and sustenance. Once a salmon is caught in a net, the fisherman will pull the net up onto the scaffold and prepare the fish for transport either over the bank for sales or home for distribution to family and friends.

Tribal fisherman also fish in the main stem of the river by placing gillnets in the water. Many of the nets are hand-woven and tied in a manner that is distinct and taught from one generation to the next. The knots we use are so unique that Tribal fisherman can tell who owns a net by just looking at it. The adaptation of gillnetting in the lakes behind the many dams on the Columbia allow Tribal fisherman to continue subsistence fishing and to sell excess fish over the bank to non-Indians for consumption. Our traditional economy allowed for great trade between Native peoples from as far east as the Plains and from south into the Great Basin. The abundance of fish in the Columbia provided great wealth and stature among the many Tribes in the West. Today, though our catch is much smaller due to the dams, Tribal members can still make a small living from the salmon they catch and sell over the bank. Salmon restoration is necessary for Tribal communities to be able to reconstitute their traditional economies in the Columbia River Basin.

The federal government, through the War Department and later the Department of Defense, made a promise twice — once in 1939 and again in 1974 — to the Tribes of the Columbia River, ensuring that with the inundation of the river and the covering of traditional fishing sites, it would build

in-lieu sites for Tribal fishermen. The 1939 agreement, negotiated between the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers and the Tribal governments who reserved their rights to fish on the Columbia River (Umatilla, Yakama, Warm Springs, and Nez Perce), called for the Corps of Engineers to acquire four hundred acres for six sites along the Columbia River. By 1945, the agency had secured only forty acres and five sites. This obviously did not fully compensate for the loss of the sites along the river but would, at a minimum, provide Tribal fishermen access to the river. The Bonneville Power Administration and Corps of Engineers proposed in the late 1960s and early 1970s to raise water behind the dams for additional power generation, which would flood in-lieu sites and damage the migration of salmon up and down the river. The Umatilla brought suit, and in 1972, *Confederated Tribes of the Umatilla Indian Reservation v. Callaway* was settled by an agreement, which stipulated that the federal government, through the executive branch and with the Corps of Engineers, would build an additional twenty-three sites to compensate for the dams built after 1940. It was not until 1988 that Congress acted on the agreements by passing public law 100-581, which authorized funding and acquisition of in-lieu sites for Tribal fishermen.* Tribal fishermen went from having hundreds of sites along the banks of the Columbia River to having only twenty-eight designated sites, authorized and sanctioned by the federal government.

The treaties made in 1855 with the various tribes who fished along the Columbia reserved our rights to fish at all usual and accustomed locations. This right was reserved by us, for us, and was not granted to us by federal, state, or local governments. In return for granting the United States millions of acres of land in the Northwest, Tribes reserved a number of rights for themselves. These rights are not special and are not granted from the United States government. Our rights are those we have always had since time began. While there are federally designated sites, Tribal members can still fish along the river at their own usual and accustomed sites, just as we did for thousands of years above, below, and at Celilo.

Even though the salmon do not run at nearly the numbers they once did, we, the Native people, must still keep our promise to preserve, protect, enhance, and sustain the return of salmon to the Columbia River. Just as the Creation story calls out for us to keep our promise, the citizenry of the United States must keep their promise to the Tribal people of the Columbia River to respect our rights and way of life. By doing so, we all become Wakanish Naknoowee Thluma (Keepers of the Salmon).

*See history by U.S. Army Corps of Engineers, posted at http://windsurf.gorge.net/cgwa/sites/in_lieu_sites.html (accessed November 6, 2007).*