

Chapter Ten

Celilo Falls: Parallel Lives Along N'Che Wana

Lani Roberts and Ed Edmo

The Oregon we know today has been shaped by innumerable forces, on her peoples and on her land; often these dynamics have profoundly impacted both. Careful examination of relationships resulting from the cohabitation of indigenous peoples, European immigrants and their descendants yields valuable lessons basic to understanding our contemporary Oregon experience, especially as it pertains to modifications of the natural world and the lived realities of her peoples.

The European Americans who sailed up the River or who moved west in the 1800s settled on land which "belonged" to everyone and to no one person in particular until that time. The parceling of this land through grants of homesteads resulted in the phenomenon of private ownership of pieces of the earth by specific individual people. This process involved conflict, cooperation and profound consequences for people and nature. The effects continue today as the descendants of Native peoples and immigrants struggle to live together in a depleted natural environment.

We grew up in the mid-Columbia River area, near The Dalles, on the border between Oregon and Washington.¹ Ed is Shoshone Bannock, Nez Perce, Yakama and Siletz and lived at the fishing village at Celilo Falls until its destruction in March 1957. Lani grew up just outside The Dalles, a descendant of an early settler family. Although we grew up in the same area and are the same age, our lives were lived in parallel fashion because of the differences in our ethnic heritage. Ed is Native American; Lani is European-American. Ed is a well-known storyteller, poet and author. Lani teaches philosophy at Oregon State University. Our worlds intersected some 10 years ago when Ed was an invited speaker for a conference on Environmental Justice sponsored by the Philosophy Department and then, again, when Ed's daughter, Se-ah-dom, became one of Lani's students. This provided an opportunity for us to

talk and to share stories of our childhoods growing up near The Dalles. It soon became painfully clear that our lives were divergent and at odds in ways explainable only by the racism and sexism the dominant culture imposes on Native peoples. We believe the alternative perceptions and experiences of our lives inform the tangible and actual harms done to some by the sheer blindness, ignorance and arrogance of others.

We have very different memories of growing up, living near the River, the destruction of Celilo Falls, the local city-owned swimming pool, the Granada Theater and The Dalles High School mascot. We grew up in the same geographical space but lived in radically different worlds. Ed, his family and other Native people have suffered profound effects of racism that Lani, her family and most of the white people did not comprehend.

WE LIVE TOGETHER YET APART. WE ARE ESTRANGED.

I grew up in a house built by my great-great grandfather in 1868. The land upon which the house and cherry orchard were located was deeded as a homestead. This acreage, like much of the North American continent, was considered empty and unused by the immigrating Europeans. I grew up with just this conception but learned later that the local Native peoples had ceded millions of acres in the mid-Columbia area in an 1851 treaty. In addition to the cherry orchard, the Roberts family had also homesteaded a wheat and cattle ranch running alongside the Deschutes River, lost to the family in the Great Depression. My great-grandfather served in the Oregon Legislature in the 1920s and the room at the back of the Congregational Church sanctuary, opened for overflow crowds on Christmas and Easter, is dedicated to him as well. I was the fourth generation of my father's family to graduate from The Dalles High School. My roots are deep in the mid-Columbia region.

I was born on the Duck Valley Indian Reservation in Owyhee, Nevada in 1946. My grandparents lived at Celilo, a fishing village located at the falls for about 15,000 years. Celilo was a central seasonal gathering site for tribal people throughout the northwest, walking in from what is now southeastern Idaho, the Spokane area, Burns and the Washington and Oregon Coasts to fish, trade and socialize. We traded dentillium shells, buffalo products, Wocas (roots) and stories. My Grandma was Nez Perce; my Grandpa was Yakama. I guess that Mom wrote Grandma and they made a plan that we'd all visit. It's been a long visit! We moved to the River when I was six months old.

My home is the river. The river was a welcome playmate which never had to be called in for supper. The sound of the river is soothing to my ears, like

a lullaby. The river was always a friend. We have been on the River for a long, long, long time, fishing, root digging, hunting and trading along "N'Che Wana," "The Big River," as we called the Columbia River. There were legends about white people coming.

In my youth at Celilo, my family would talk and talk around our dinner table with a warm wood-stove fire. When we ran out of food, we went to the missionary's house to eat! I remember that we always had a warm welcome fire at our house.

Our house was built out of discarded railroad ties my father had salvaged from the Union Pacific Railroad where he worked on the section gang. I remember being the three year old boy "straw boss," as my half-brother, "Frenchie," called me. I believe that I used my "straw boss" authority and fired my brother "Frenchie" a few times.

I learned to read by coal oil lamp before I started the first grade in The Dalles, Oregon. My mom would get me the classic comic books. I broke my reading teeth on the classics!

The Destruction of Celilo Falls

Celilo Fisherman

You tested your knots, seeing that they held
Little did you know what was to hold you
After the sound of water falling
Over what used to be.

Without doubt, the single most tragic and traumatic wrong done to the mid-Columbia River and to the peoples who live there was the flooding of Celilo Falls. Although both of us still grieve this tragic loss, the direct impact and experiences were radically different, then and still today.

When the government man came, he seemed to be constipated all the time. He never smiled. It seems like that there weren't any children to greet him at the end of the day with a glad, "Daddy! Daddy." He sure was a sour puss. It was the attitude of the government man, the many government men who came, the same attitude the townsfolk of The Dalles, as they "threw rocks at us with their eyes," that attitude of racism I don't like.

My dad, Edward M. Edmo, Sr., saw the plans of The Dalles Dam at the Chamber of Commerce and tried to warn the Indians at Celilo. The Indians just scoffed at him and called him "Old Chinaman" because my father had short hair and didn't wear his hair in traditional braids like most of the men of Celilo Village. But when the workers began leveling the land for the right of way of the Union Pacific Railroad, they saw my dad was right. "We'll stand on our treaty rights," the Indian said. But many elders remembered when the

Bonneville Dam was built in 1938, the Herman Creek Indians were forced to move and were not given anything for their fisheries or houses. My father organized the Celilo Community Club to get monies and houses for our fisheries and homes.

I remember one of the meetings which were held in people's houses. Henry Thompson, Chief Tommy Thompson's son, told the government man, "You should give us fifty dollars for every board in our drying sheds, because this is our way of life." The government man got angry and shouted, "You Indians will take the government's fair offer. If you don't take the fair offer, I'm going to Judge Webber and condemn your land and you won't see a red cent." This white man who lived at Moody, owned the store and gas station. He held out for a higher price. It was announced that the bulldozers would come and take down his house and business. I remember that the white man was standing there, crying into a red bandana. The government made him an example, so we had to accept the "fair" offer.

It was a time when there were no hearings as to the environmental impact, cultural impact or anything like that. It was the "Red Scare" and the U.S. Government needed electricity to make aluminum to build ICBM missiles to point at the Russians. It was done in the name of "progress" and no one stuck up for us Indians except the Democratic Society of Wasco County, the local chapter of the Daughters of the American Revolution. We told the government man that we wanted to settle together by The Dalles Dam, to show people what the government did to us. The government man said we couldn't do that. We didn't know that the land was being looked at for development for hotels and gas stations. One of the agreements was that when the park was built, we were to have a curio shop there to sell beadwork, coffee and food to tourists. What happened?

When I was a girl, about 10 years old, my mom and dad took me to see Celilo Falls. I remember it well, mostly because the mood was serious and somber, almost spiritual, very much like it feels at a funeral. My parents explicitly told me that they wanted me to see Celilo Falls because it would never exist again. That impressed me. How could something as huge and powerful and magnificent as Celilo Falls cease to exist? The water roared, the falls were taller than any building I'd ever seen and the Indian fishermen dangled dangerously over the water, dip-netting salmon from the river. My dad explained that The Dalles Dam was near completion and when it stopped the flow of the mighty Columbia River, the backwater would flood the falls out of existence. This became an actuality in March of 1957.

I have mourned the loss of Celilo Falls my whole life. When I understood what had happened, I used to scare my parents by wishing that someone

would blow up The Dalles Dam; I doubt I am the only person who imagined such a thing. I also doubt that The Dalles Dam could be built today in the same location since an environmental impact statement would be required and I hope the utter destruction of such a magnificent natural wonder and an ancient fishing village would be unthinkable. The cost has been incalculable, both to the natural environment and the lives of the original peoples who lived there. Not only was a 15,000-year-old fishing village destroyed, but the salmon and steelhead runs have greatly diminished, to the extent that the federal government has proposed counting hatchery salmon in species populations. The dynamic flow of a living river has ceased and in its place is a series of manmade lakes behind the several hydroelectric dams constructed to provide cheap electricity.

It seems completely wrong, a mistake, to call the Columbia a river anymore.

It was a springtime day as Dad took me out of Wishram Elementary to go watch the flooding of Celilo Falls. It was a bad dream that something so big, so wonderful was flooded. I had watched my Grandpa, uncles and father fish, and I too believed that when I grew up that I'd become a fisherman. But my role model was taken by the flooding of the falls.

Nowadays, I tell legends from the river, tell stories about Celilo Falls and go fishing for an envelope with a check in it, to take to Fred Meyer's and get groceries. I'm a fisherman in a different way.

THE NATATORIUM—COOL, CLEAR WATER ON A HOT DAY

It is really hot in The Dalles in the summertime. The hottest I can remember was 116 degrees and there are nights when it does not cool down below the 80s. Relief was available, though. Kids (some kids) could go swimming at the Natatorium, more commonly called the Nat. It is a city-owned and operated swimming pool just west of the downtown area. It is a concrete pool surrounded with a chain link fence which must be eight feet tall, to prevent access when the Nat is closed. There is a concrete building in which the changing rooms and showers are located. There is a little bit of lawn out front and around a wading pool, maybe 10 feet on a side, designed for parents with toddlers. Like lots of kids, my siblings and I walked to the Nat nearly every day in summer. As a child, I did not notice that the Indian kids weren't swimming with us, even on the hottest days. As is all too often the case, people of ethnic minorities are invisible to the dominant culture and my childhood was no exception. With shame as an adult, I recall that it simply did not occur to me

to even notice that "kids" meant "white kids" and no adult in my life pointed out this fact. I sometimes think I can remember Indian kids pressed up against the chain link fence surrounding the pool, looking in at us splashing around for hours in the cool water. I don't know whether this is actually a memory or the result of the guilt I feel.

For some reasons a five-year-old can't understand, us Indians were not allowed into the big swimming pool, with its deep greenish-blue water and the high diving boards. If we wanted to get wet at the pool, we had to go to the toddlers' wading pool – even grown men and women. I guess the white people believed a little of their white would rub off and we would experience some, but not all, of their privilege.

One time, the Boys and Girl's Club had a "Swim Day." My brother was a member, and we were to go to the swimming pool on Saturday morning. On that Friday night, the tension in the kitchen oozed out like the dull light of the coal oil lamp. Mom and Dad talked in hushed voices, and I could see the seriousness on Mom's face. She was straining to get her words out. Dad gestured with his forefinger extended like he hammered nails, and I saw him hammer nails a lot.

When we arrived at the swimming pool, we joined a long line of kids who were members of the club. Behind the counter, a young teenage white boy was red-faced mad. Mr. Warren, the flamboyant leader of the club, had a receipt in his hand and was waving it in the air like a flag over the top hat he wore on special occasions.

Finally, he phoned the new manager of the pool. Looking back at my brother and me, Mr. Warren said that the Boy's and Girl's Club membership was open to needy children. Well, I had Mom and Dad, and my grandma lived on the hill above me, we had a warm, welcomed wood stove. I didn't think that I was "needy." Sometimes we ran out of food, and then we just went to the missionary's house to eat.

Mr. Warren asked my brother and me when we last took a bath and we both answered, "This morning, sir!" He talked in a hushed tone. After a long time, he handed the phone to the hot-faced boy, who slammed the receiver down. There was a lot of cussing as my brother and I went up to get our baskets. "Dirty Indians!" one of the others said from behind the big desk.

I remember how glad I felt as we peeled off our clothes and put on brand new bathing suits Mom got us from the J.C. Penny store. Then we took our showers, not minding the cold water, and marched triumphantly into the "big" swimming pool. I went down to the shallow end and looked at the wide expanse of green-blue, and felt like I could walk on water.

Well, this worked pretty good, going to the swimming pool on hot days. But one time Mom was late picking me up after I got out of the pool. I was standing in the shade by the dressing room, when five white boys came up and taunted me.

"Go back where you belong, savage!"

"Stay in your village, war whoop!"

"We don't want you around here, you dirty little Indian."

They began pushing me, then grabbed my towel and threw it to the ground, and began hitting and kicking me. I covered myself and swung haymakers at them. A couple of my punches connected, which added to their hostility. When one of the blond boys grabbed my arm and pulled it around behind me and added pressure, I cried out in pain.

Just then my mother drove up with the car horn blaring. The white boys saw her and began running. I tried to run after them but Mom just held me. "Never mind. They've all got small hearts to pick on you."

I just wished I had the power to walk on water!

SATURDAY MATINEES AT THE GRENADA THEATER

Another form of entertainment when we were kids was the Granada Theater, downtown at the corner of Second and Washington Streets in The Dalles. It is a small theater by today's standards, with a sloping floor and a raised stage with the movie screen occupying the whole space behind the curtains. Upstairs there is a balcony, accessible by stairs at both sides. Because the girls' restroom was also upstairs on one side, I sometimes would climb a few extra stairs to look at the balcony. It seemed mysterious to me and someplace I always wanted to sit but never had the nerve to do. It is more than a little ironic that the balcony beckoned to me and I always wanted to sit there and didn't, yet it was the only place Native people were allowed to sit.

In the 1950s, the Saturday matinee drew lots of kids. If my memory serves me well, most of the movies were westerns, with Roy Rogers, the Long Ranger and Tonto, and Hopalong Cassidy and others, replete with "cowboys and Indians" story lines. It was from these movies that we kids drew our inspiration as we played "cowboys and Indians" in the neighborhood. In retrospect, I can recall that no one wanted to be the Indians. The littlest kids had to be the Indians because the cowboys were always supposed to win. This kind of play was thought of as normal and harmless but, today, as an ethicist studying how we human beings organize ourselves to harm some of us for the benefit of others of us, I cannot help but think about how these games and the

movies we watched affected our perceptions of the Native peoples in our midst. How could it not have led us to view them as other-than-us in an irredeemable way?

The only movie house in The Dalles was the Granada Theater. We always sat in the balcony. When I was really young, I just thought that Mom and Dad picked those seats because they were the "bestest seats in the house." I looked around and there were the Navajos who worked on the railroad and the Japanese who grew the crops in Dallesport.

One time, my older brother Frenchie and I were sitting on the main floor. The usher growled at us. "You Indian boys have to go up to 'Nigger Heaven' to sit." My brother Frenchie pointed to his Army uniform. "See this uniform? I fought for this country! I can sit anywhere in this country I want to!" The usher's Adam's apple on his neck bounced a couple of times. The usher spun on his heels and went marching back towards the back. The manager came down, a large man, who always jingled change in his pocket to convince himself that he was important. "You Indian boys have to go up to 'Nigger Heaven' to sit," the manager said, jingling change in his pocket. "See this uniform? I fought for this country. I can sit anywhere in this country I want to," my brother Frenchie shouted at the manager. "I'm going to call the cops!" the manager threatened. "Go ahead. Call the cops. That cop has a uniform on, I've got a uniform on. Maybe we can talk man to man," Frenchie said. That manager never called the cops and ever since Indians have always sat on the main floor of the Granada Theater.

THE DALLES HIGH SCHOOL INDIANS

Sports teams uses of "Native Americans" as mascots is under consideration all over the United States and a lesson I use in my ethics classes. I have had to tell my students, with chagrin, that my own high school was The Dalles High School Indians and, worse, the mascot image was "Chief Wahoo," a grinning cartoon caricature of an "Indian" complete with feather. The *Portland Oregonian* newspaper stopped using such names in the early 1990s but my high school and others in the state of Oregon have continued to use Native names for their teams. Early in May 2005, the Enterprise High School student body voted to quit using the "Savages" as their mascot and the school board supported this change.

In the spring of 2004, the school board in The Dalles was busy combining two school districts. In 1963, the Chenoweth School District had opened its own high school, Wahtonka, and we students who had gone to school together

for years were split into two groups, the Wahtonka Eagles and The Dalles Indians. In the recent process of rejoining the two school districts, the name of the new high school and its mascot became heated topics of debate. I decided I had to enter this discussion so I wrote to the school board chair regarding my wish to have the high school stop using the name "Indians" and especially to stop using Chief Wahoo as the logo. I enclosed articles my students read in critically analyzing this debate and asked that he share my concerns and the reading material with the rest of the school board. The controversy raged on for months, with petitions both for and against the "Indians," polls of students in both high schools, public testimony from many interested townspeople and, apparently, a great deal of communication with individual board members, one of whom said he'd received more than 80 emails.

The central argument of those who wanted the school district to retain The Dalles High School Indians was to preserve a proud history. I am a fourth generation graduate of The Dalles High School and it was my expressed view that there was nothing whatsoever in the historical records encompassing the Indians in the community which was worthy of pride or preservation. To the contrary, the historical past was shameful. Several different decisions about names and mascots were made and rescinded. Only two of the board members ended up agreeing with the view that I and others held. In the end, on June 23, 2004, the school board voted to name the high school The Dalles Wahtonka Union High School. They adopted the Eagle Indian as the mascot.

My brother and I were mascots for The Dalles High School Indians basketball team. I'm not sure what all went into the arrangement of how we became mascots. I know that I can speculate that it was a way of my father and mother trying to gain some sort of acceptance with the white community in The Dalles. What I did was to wear my war bonnet and lead the team out on the court, dribble the basketball and shoot a shot at the basket, with the belief that if I made the basket, the team would win the game that night.

I got to go to Astoria, Oregon and really see the ocean as a mascot! I even got to stay in a hotel and be treated like a white boy. I remember eating steak in a cafe and not being asked to leave because I was an Indian. I believe now that people do strange things for strange reasons, looking back to my mascot days.

After the dam flooded us out, we moved to Wishram, Washington (across the river from where Celilo Village used to be). The basketball team's name was the Indians too so I was a mascot at Wishram also!

I was chosen to go to Boys' State in Washington from 1963-64. Quite an honor. Well, when I got to the campus, the rich white kids decided to make me a mascot! I was to sit cross-legged on a table on stage while they were

learning how government laws were passed. I didn't get a chance to participate. "Sit like an Indian," was mentioned with quite a bit of laughter from the rich white boys.

RACISM

Children are defenseless in terms of the social messages they receive from family, friends, entertainment. I never noticed that "kids" mostly meant "white kids" when it came to the swimming pool or the theater. Even though I was raised to not judge others by the color of their skin and my parents forbade, in no uncertain terms, the use of racist words, I grew up smack dab in the middle of toxic, cruel racism directed toward the Indians with whom I lived. And I didn't know. How is this possible? In my classes, if I describe a town in which people from an ethnic minority could not sit on the main floor of the theater or swim in the swimming pool and the signs in stores said, No Dogs, No "Coloreds," they do not hesitate to name the Jim Crow South. When I tell them this is my hometown, The Dalles, Oregon when I was a kid, they are shocked.

I remember seeing the signs in the windows of most of the store in The Dalles, Oregon. "No Dogs or Indians Allowed!" I couldn't understand it. I was raised in a good Christian home, taught that love would overcome all, but when we went to town the white people would "throw rocks at us with their eyes." You can't see those rocks, but it sure hurts and the bruises last a long time. That's what it seemed like to me when I went to town; I felt like I didn't belong or was not good enough. I remember buying candy bars in the alleyway at the back door of the store because we Indians were not allowed in the store.

Toward the end of my dad's life, after I had been teaching about the dynamics of racism for several years, I tried to very gently pry some information from him about his awareness of the racism in our hometown. I asked about who my ancestors had hired to work for them, how they were treated, and other leading kinds of questions. My dad sincerely and completely maintained the worldview that the Indians in The Dalles were not subjected to racism.

There was a vicious prejudice against Indians in the small town near the fishing village where I grew up. The stores in The Dalles, Oregon had signs displayed in the windows stating "NO DOGS OR INDIANS ALLOWED."

These signs were in most of the store windows, not just a few stores. Indians were only allowed to eat in one café and that was on the east side of town where the winos, prostitutes, and bootleggers hung out.

I remember one time, it was a sunny warm late afternoon, the clouds seemed to be dropped by God on the twilight scene. I was about six years old. Me and Mom were sitting in the car in front of Johnny's Cafe. That's what we did in those days, "watching people" as Mom called it. Well, it was at that time Mom gave me instruction on which stores I could go into by myself and which store I could go into only with another adult with me. Then she pointed with her lips to the dress shop right across the street and said, "That's an 'upper crust' store. Even I don't go in there." Mom used the term "upper crust," meaning the rich people in town.

When Mom wanted her hair done, she'd have to go to the home of the beautician and she wasn't allowed into the beauty parlor. I remember that when an Indian went into a store, we'd have to wait and wait until all the white people were waited on and then the clerk would wait on us. Then when a white person came into the store, the clerk would stop waiting on us and wait on the white person. I remember we weren't allowed to try on clothes either. We would have to look at the shirt and guess if it would fit.

How it is possible I did not notice any of these wrongs? Why didn't my parents tell me about the injustices towards the Indians right there in our town and warn me not to ever treat another person like that? They told me explicitly to be fair and kind to African-Americans (at that time, Negroes) and Mexicans. Why is it that the wrongs most present in our everyday lives are the very ones most difficult to see? Is it because they are so ever-present everywhere that they become like the air we breathe, invisible? Is it because I am European-American, "white," so that my privileged place in my Oregon hometown meant I didn't have to notice, that those of us who do not receive the cruelty of racism, even those of us who are the perpetrators, are oblivious?

I can't go home to the small-minded society in which I couldn't find a girlfriend. I remember that I liked this white girl, and I believe she liked me. When I came back to her house, she went inside and her mom looked out the window at me. Then she said that we couldn't be together because I was an Indian. I remember walking and crying all the way from her house on the hill to downtown. Just walking and crying and feeling less than.

*I can't go home
over where my*

*house used to stand
where my house
used to stand
there's a freeway*

NOTES

1. The Dalles, Oregon is approximately 80 miles upriver, east of Portland. Celilo Falls was another 20 miles or so further upriver from The Dalles, and Wishram, Washington is approximately across the river from where Celilo once was.