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AFTER THE DELUGE:

Celilo Village Looks to the Future with Hope and Fear a Half Century After The Dalles Dam Destroyed the Falls, Flooded the Sacred Site and Left Only Broken Promises

By Kara Briggs

Like every other chief of Celilo Indian Village before him, Olsen Meanus Jr. grew up to be a fisherman.

Unlike all those other chiefs for thousands of years before him, Meanus fishes from a powerboat on the tamed Columbia River. He is the first chief born after the destruction and flooding of Celilo Falls behind The Dalles Dam. Nowadays, he tosses massive gill nets into the slack waters behind the dam during the few weeks a year that salmon and steelhead run.

Before the dam, Celilo men netted salmon from the slippery basalt ledges and wooden platforms leaning over the river that ricocheted past boulders and stone islands in the channel. The place drew Native people from as far away as the Great Plains and Vancouver Island. Season after season they came to fish and trade for hard-to-get goods at the village, which spread out on both sides of the river. Young women helped haul the fresh catch. Older women cleaned the salmon to dry, sell or cook for the masses that gathered when the fish ran.

The whole village came alive and smelled of ocean. "I always heard the old people say," Meanus says, "This is our center of the Earth right here."

Today, the chief lives with his wife and seven children in Celilo Village, which the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers compressed south of the railroad tracks, entirely separated from the river before damming in 1957 flooded the ancient village.

On this winter afternoon, sun lights the basalt bluff behind him, illuminating hints of the petroglyphs drawn by his ancestors. Meanus, 46, tells stories of Celilo from his grandmother: "You'd feel the thunder a long way off before you could hear the falls."

All Meanus hears today is the buzz of Interstate 84. Those four lanes of traffic, three sets of railroad tracks and the blacktop lot at the site of the original Celilo push the relocated village away from the river and up against the cliff, squeezed between a rock wall and the sacred place.

When Meanus was appointed chief two years ago, he inherited a village of 60 people, half of whom are younger than 18. Many are past 55; the oldest is 94.

Most live on dirt roads in run-down houses with unsafe wiring, undrinkable water and inadequate sewage treatment. Winter wind cuts through the walls. Families abandoned many of the houses, already used and rickety when the government provided them during the relocation. People moved away, or a few drove in mobile homes.

"It's like they wanted the village to die," says Clifford Bruno of Troutdale, who grew up on the river and had close family in Celilo.

Celilo Falls wasn't the first or the last tribal sacred site or fishing village drowned in the Northwest's thirst for cheap hydropower electricity. Nor are Celilo villagers the first to see the government break treaties and more recent promises.

As early as 1848, the territorial act pledged that no dams would be built that would impede fish spawning. The 1855 treaties with tribes in Central Oregon, Washington and Idaho affirmed the Natives' right to fish in "usual and accustomed places." Prolific government promises flew like fish over Celilo Falls during mid-20th-century dam building: a safe and habitable rebuilt village with free electricity and running water; free train rides for villagers; a gift shop and other enterprises to help residents replace lost revenues from their fishery. Most egregiously: the government's public promise that salmon would be even more productive after the dams flattened Celilo Falls.

"The promises that were made . . . that little village should have been healthy as can be," says Billy Frank Jr., the Nisqually fishing rights leader whose brother married into a Celilo fishing family.

But at last, the U.S. government is keeping one 50-year-old promise: 14 new homes will be built.

Better late than never.

Still, it's little wonder Meanus and his people worry. They remember the history. And those who were alive and who pass down the stories never will forget the dam that changed their future.

First, the corps of engineers moved the villagers from the riverbanks.

They chipped petroglyphs from cliffsides doomed to be underwater and carted them away.

They bombed the black basalt center out of the falls to carve a commercial shipping lane -- picture a beautiful woman with her front teeth knocked out.

And at 10 a.m. March 10, 1957, the inch-thick reinforced steel gates of The Dalles Dam crashed shut, forcing a ferocious backflow of the Columbia that in 41/2 hours flooded everything in its way.

"Get blankets, I'm cold," then-Celilo Chief Tommy Thompson reportedly said, 102 years old and near death in a nearby nursing home. "I can feel the water rising."

By the 1940s, Celilo captivated its share of tourists. They would watch salmon leap up the falls, flying through the air, 300 at a time. If two salmon -- each then averaged 50 pounds and 4 feet long -- landed in a fisherman's hand-held net, they might drag him into the falls' deadly swirl.

A visiting reporter for The Saturday Evening Post even posed the question in 1941, "If we take away even this from the country's original owners, what are we accusing Hitler of, anyway?"

That didn't stop the government. By the early 1950s surveyors had estimated compensation for flooding the falls, because another dam would be erected: \$26.7 million to the Yakama, Umatilla, Warm Springs and Nez Perce tribes. Those Celilo Indians not enrolled in a tribe were paid \$3,750 each.

In her book "Death of Celilo Falls," Katrine Barber writes that when divided, the onetime payment equaled the annual income of an average family in The Dalles. The scant settlement hardly compensated for the tremendous loss.

But no one, not even Celilo Chief Thompson, could do anything about it.

He did not go down quietly, though.

Born around 1855, the year the U.S. government signed treaties with the tribes along the Columbia River, Thompson at age 20 became chief of the Celilo community. He lived to see what he considered the ultimate breach of those treaty promises -- Celilo's destruction in 1957. In the last decades of his life, Thompson grew skilled at using the media to galvanize popular support like no other Northwest tribal leader before.

He fought The Dalles Dam to save his people and the salmon. Thompson compiled the names of close to 100 fishermen who owned specific fishing sites at Celilo Falls, typed in his native Sahaptian. He implored the state to regulate its fishermen for the sake of the salmon, as he and the Celilo Fish Committee regulated

their people. He advocated that archaeologists, who'd made one Celilo resident's grandparents "site 14," stop digging up graves.

"I have not signed my salmon away," Thompson told The Oregon Journal in 1957.

Portland and Yakima newspapers carried stories with his message of enduring strength of the Celilo Wyam people. In the picture with one story his face is unlined, his white hair is swept up, and his braids hang down his chest. His wife, Flora, looks stressed as she holds a copy of the 1855 treaty.

Thompson didn't change the minds of enough white people. On the damming day in March 1957, thousands watched or listened as radio stations celebrated the sacrifice of Celilo as a tribute to progress. Television broadcast the flooding.

Thompson never met his grandson, Olsen Meanus Jr., the current chief of Celilo Village. Meanus never heard the echo of water falling from the basalt boulders. He only heard of the history and the broken promises from his grandmother, Flora Thompson, who always wept over what she called "white man's progress."

Mona Meanus, 4, tosses the ball high into the air, and it misses the hoop. The basketball court, lit by a streetlight and disappearing daylight, grows dark at Celilo Village.

Her father watches from courtside. As chief of Celilo Village, Meanus is committed to her survival and to the village, even if at times he feels unprepared for both his lifetime appointment as leader and for all the problems. A governing board -- leaders from the village and the tribes of Umatilla, Warm Springs and Yakama -- meets monthly to help. Where once governing the salmon harvest dominated, now the comparatively mundane work involves writing a law-and-order code for the village, overseeing the corps of engineers' construction and dealing with the Bureau of Indian Affairs, which holds the village land in trust.

At their meetings, some of same questions keep coming up:

What will happen to the new houses the corps plans? With only two bedrooms, when current occupants pass on, where will their children and grandchildren live? And what about emergency services, blocked from the only road in when the Burlington Northern trains stop there?

And on the river memories stretch long, so there are other questions among Native people connected in some way to Celilo:

How deep do roots go? Who has the right to speak for Celilo? Does a business and a Southern rock band

have the right to appropriate its name? Even this: Is it appropriate that renowned artist Maya Linn -- not of the people or of the place -- be the one to design art for placement at Celilo as part of the riverlong Confluence Project?

The truth is that only Celilo Village and its chosen leaders can decide for themselves and speak for themselves.

For now the talk at the village is about the commemoration in March. It's brought together people who as children lived in Celilo Village while their parents fished. They reminisce about their childhood in English, but when the conversation turns to the sacred falls, they speak only in Sahaptian. And their children, who are no longer children but who were born after the dam, catch meaning in the faltering voices.

Many who no longer live in the village remained part of it. Because fishing at the falls in the 1950s sustained an estimated 5,000 tribal families, far more families and descendants feel connected than ever will be able to live at Celilo again. People like Amber Schulz, who lives in Portland. The 28-year-old great-great-granddaughter of Chief Thompson plans to cut her long brown hair on

March 10, her sign that she still is tied to the place and still mourns.

The anniversary offers an opportunity for healing. While it's 50 years too late to debate The Dalles Dam itself, it's not too late to speak out about the terrible cost of cheap electricity, the silent river and the diminishing fish.

The \$15 million Congress funded for reconstruction will help the healing, too. In addition to new houses, the money will bring electrical wiring, sewage and water treatment systems up to current building standards. Two years ago it paid for the construction of a new longhouse, which has become the center of the community. This is fine. But it doesn't come close to making good on all the promises of the past, most particularly that the Native people of the Columbia always would coexist with the salmon.

On a winter afternoon Chief Meanus, who has a day off from steelhead fishing, watches the children play after the bus ride home from school in Dufur. "It's about the children living here, being happy here," he says.

"As long as there are children here, Celilo will live."

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