

## The Lost Map

*A story of the Coquille Indian Tribe and a document that changed the course of their history*

### **"They Lost the Map"**

Jason Younker and his brother, Shirod both of the Coquille Indian Tribe were born and raised in South Slough, a small suburb of the Oregon coastal town of Coos Bay. As an adolescent Jason grew up as a terminated Indian. One day he when he was a child asked one of his elders why they couldn't be Indians "Because they lost the map" was the answer Jason would receive whenever he would ask why they couldn't be Indians. "And you knew from the sorrow in their tone, you just didn't ask again. So I just stopped asking," he said. This was the answer the Coquille people gave one another for almost seven generations.

Jason and Shirod were born after the Indian Termination Act of 1954, an act that nullified federal protective responsibilities guaranteed in the 374 U.S Indian treaties ratified back in the mid 1800's. The act stripped Indians of their identity as part of the process to assimilate them into American culture. Oregon tribes were some of the first ones up for termination. On August 13, 1954 the Siletz, Lower Umpqua, Grand Ronde, Coquille, Coos, and other tribes were terminated with their reservation lands sold off to timber companies and cattle grazers.

In the 1850s the Native tribes of Southwest Oregon were facing hardship adapting to white settlers who recently moved into the area. Skirmishes over land, crops and livestock were frequent between settlers and tribes. In 1855 a white general named Joel Palmer in charge of the colonial military at the time signed his second treaty with the tribes — after his first one in 1952 failed — stating that in order to protect the Indians from the settlers they must relocate to a coastal reservation where they would receive government provisions and be taken care of.

The treaties were sent to Washington D.C to be read into congress. Accompanying these treaties was an important map of the areas ceded to the Natives. Though when the tribes relocated to the reservation, the provisions promised to them never showed up. The map had been reportedly lost in transit and therefore the treaties were never ratified. No ratification meant no provisions for the Natives at the new reservation.

As the Coquille people and other Western Oregon tribes starved at the reservations and grew destitute over their treaties remaining dormant the government only offered one explanation, "They lost the map." The map was found again 30 years later in 1882. But most of the Native's had already died or run away to South Slough near Coos Bay, Oregon. The treaties were then read into congress, but they still remained un-ratified.

### **The Indian Termination Act**

The native people of Southwestern Oregon lived illegally outside the reservation for several decades until June 2<sup>nd</sup> 1924 when American Indians gained citizenship and sued the government over their stolen land rights from the 1850s. The Coquille, who was the only tribe to have a white man represent their case, happened to be the only tribe to win their lawsuit. It was a bitter victory however. In 1945 all but a few tribal members sent their \$1000 checks back out of anger over the petty sum for all they'd been through. "Things that were taken from us were not just land. It was memory, and culture, and pride and all of these different things that matter to us," said Jason.

The Termination Act was reversed during the human rights movement in the 1970s. In 1989 senator Mark O. Hatfield pushed the Coquille Restoration act and they became the last tribe to be re-recognized by the government.

### **The Beginning of SWORP**

Six years after the act was revered, Jason Younker entered a Ph.D. program through the Anthropology department at the University of Oregon where he launched the South West Oregon Research Project (SWORP), a research effort that led to one of the largest orders of documents ever produced at the National Archives in D.C. He joked about only being a six-year old Indian at the start of SWORP.

The objective of SWORP was to uncover as much historical legislation about the Coquille and other Southwestern Oregon tribes as possible. Jason flew out students and staff from the University, fellow members of the Coquille tribe as well as his brother, Shirod. They would pull records dated from the 1850's era and work in an assembly line filtering out documents less relevant to others until they narrowed in on anything that contributed to the history of the Native tribes of the Pacific Northwest. On this initial trip they went through over 60,000 documents. "We would be there everyday from open to close," said Shirod.

Clawing tirelessly through records, bribing archivists with beer and working until they were kicked out each night, Jason, Shirod and their rotating crew continued to develop their library of indigenous history. At one point however, Jason uncovered a document he had been hearing about his entire life. Rolled out in front of him was an enormous map illustrating locations of all the native territories and reservations across Oregon. "We looked at each other and said, 'Is this the map?'" said Jason. They had uncovered the once lost document of the Southwestern Oregon treaties. They had found the lost map.

Jason and Shirod photocopied the map along with the rest of the relevant documents they had dug up. The Coquille tribe had sponsored the whole six-week-long trip. When Jason got home and the elders asked him what he had brought back, he pulled the map out from under the table. He rolls it out in front of them and says, "Here is our lost map," and then they wept. These elders had been told the same story of the lost they had passed on to Jason as a child. This sorrowful mantra was finally broken.

### **Giving Back To The Tribes**

The discovery of the lost map was just another piece of the cultural puzzle for Jason. In 1997 he organized a potlatch in the Willamette Science building on the UO campus to distribute all the information he had collected to the tribes whom which it held relevance to. It was the first time many of these tribes had been together in the same room since the reservation era in the 1850's.

In 1999 Jason remotely orchestrated a second order from the National Archives totaling up to 50,000 documents bringing SWORP's final order total to 110,000 records. In 2001 he potlatched more of his findings out again, this time to 52 different tribes, many of which, had never, knowingly been in the same room together.

For Shirod, the archival research and knowledge helps orient the history accompanied with the art he replicates. The recovery of the lost treaty map is a symbol of the healing

work the Coquille and many other tribes do to recover from the generational trauma of their past. "Making these things do not make me more Native. Looking Indian does not make me a better Indian," said Shirod, "but the lessons that you learn from your heritage will hopefully make you a better human being as we understand it as indigenous people."

Two Coquille Indian brothers took a journey supported by their tribe to recover the stories of their past. For Jason, SWORP was about healing ancestral trauma and reclaiming Native heritage to give back to the people it belongs to. He explains how though digging up the documents made up most of the work, distributing back to the tribes was where he felt a real sense of fulfillment. "Coming back with that stuff was only a little part of the healing process. It was really Potlatching it out," said Jason. He went on to teach other tribes to do their own SWORP style projects. Today he still gets requests from tribes to "SWORP" them again. "They don't forget," he said, "Tribes don't forget."

-Jake Bevis