

A NEZ PERCE NATURE GUIDE



SALMON
AND HIS **PEOPLE**



FISH & FISHING
IN NEZ PERCE
CULTURE



DAN LANDEEN
ALLEN PINKHAM

Introduction

Nez Perce tribal elders believe that one of the greatest tragedies of this century is the loss of traditional fishing sites and chinook salmon runs on the Columbia River and its tributaries. They believe the circle of life has been broken and ask us to consider what the consequences of breaking that circle may mean for future generations. In many ways the loss of the salmon mirrors the plight of the Nez Perce people. The elders remind us that the fates of humans and salmon are linked.

Historically, the Nez Perce Tribe depended upon fish as a major food source. Of all the fishes, however, none was more utilized by the Nez Perce than the chinook salmon. Other fish were harvested—suckers, lampreys, whitefish, steelhead, chiselmouth, trout, shiners—but no other species compared with the chinook. Times of the year were measured by the chinook's lifecycle. Families gathered at traditional fishing sites on the Columbia and its tributaries to await its miraculous return. The religion of the Nez Perce—the stories, legends, and ceremonies regarding the fish and rivers—reflects this bond.



There was a time when the animals could talk and act like people, but they were still animals.

—Alex Pinkham (Nez Perce)

Our animal legends have a lot more truth to them than many think and there are a lot of lessons we can learn from our brothers and sisters who live on the land, in the air and water. It is important to observe animals and pay close attention to them and do things that will preserve them. If we lose the animals because of pollutions which we have made, we will be next.

—Leroy Seth (Nez Perce)

In Nez Perce lore the coyote is a mystical being who can change himself into anything he wants. He is a being who makes all the mistakes a human can make — and he has to learn.

—Ronald Pinkham (Nez Perce)

Figure 1. Facing page. Salmon catch on the Clearwater River in the early 1900s. Photo courtesy of Nez Perce National Historical Park.

Figure 2. Coyote is the main character in Nez Perce legends. Photo courtesy of Boeing Computer Services.

Figure 3. The Frog sitting on the hillside with his back facing the Clearwater River. Author photo.

Figure 4. Coyote's Fishnet on the hill next to the Clearwater River at mile marker 12 on U.S. Highway 12. The gullies that form the "net" converge in a V at the bottom left of the photograph. Author photo.

Because the Nez Perce have always revered water and the fish that reside in it, they are concerned about the future of the Columbia Basin's rivers and fish. It is not surprising that Nez Perce stories include accounts and descriptions of the region's flora, fauna, and geology. Fish and other animals are characters in many of these stories. Coyote, the main character in Nez Perce stories, exhibits all the good and bad traits of human beings. Many Nez Perce coyote stories begin with "One day Coyote was going up the river. . . ."

Stories were normally told by the elders during the winter months and during travel. These stories imparted basic beliefs, taught moral values, and helped explain the creation of the world, the origin of rituals and customs, the location of food, and the meaning of natural phenomena. Although some of the characters and themes differ slightly, many of these same stories are also held in common by other Columbia Basin tribes. Throughout this book we have included tribal stories that provide information about the Columbia River, some of its relevant geological features, and stories about the fish that reside in its waters.


The following Nez Perce story entitled "Coyote's Fishnet," for example, uses a fishing theme to describe the creation of two geological features along the Clearwater River near Lewiston, Idaho.

Coyote's Fishnet

One day Coyote made a net and was fishing for salmon on the Clearwater River. He had his net in the water when Frog came along and said, "What are you fishing here for? You aren't catching any fish." Coyote replied, "No, I'm not catching any fish." Frog watched a little while longer and said again, "You are still not catching any fish. The fish already went up the river. What are you doing here fishing? The salmon have already passed this way." Soon Coyote and Frog started to argue about where the fish were in the river. Finally, Coyote got mad and picked up Frog and threw him across the river where he was turned to stone. Coyote told Frog, "Because you argued with me, I'm going to face you away from the water and that's the way you will remain and people will know that when you argue something bad might happen." Coyote went back to his



fishing, but after a while he realized that Frog was right about the salmon because he wasn't catching any fish. This made Coyote mad, so he threw his net up against the hillside and went upriver to try and catch some salmon. Today you can still see Coyote's Fishnet against the hillside and Frog on the other side of the river.

—Allen Pinkham (Nez Perce) 

Today, arguments just as heated as the one between frog and coyote are still going on over the presence and lack of presence of salmon in our rivers. In many instances, fish have been at the center of Threatened and Endangered Species legislation. It is difficult to forget the controversy that resulted from the snail darter being declared an endangered species in the 1970s. This single action curtailed further development of hydroelectric dams in one region of the country and had a major influence on our nation's environmental movement. The listing of the snail darter as an endangered species made many of us realize how powerful the Endangered Species Act really is. The listing of several fish species in the Pacific Northwest, including the sea run cutthroat, sockeye salmon, chinook salmon, steelhead, Pacific lamprey, and bull trout, are creating similar controversies today. The fate of many Northwest politicians may be dictated by their stands on Columbia River Basin salmon policies and fish restoration issues. State and tribal governments and federal agencies (U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service and the Environmental Protection Agency) spend large sums of money each year to document natural resource damage that occurs on the Columbia River and its tributaries, destruction that results in loss of habitat, reduction in populations, and fish kills.

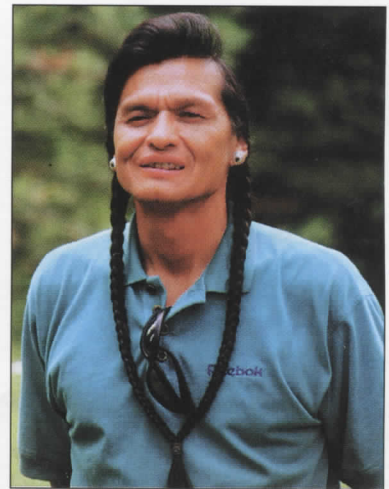
In 1997 the Affiliated Tribes of Northwest Indians and the Columbia River Inter-Tribal Fish Commission nominated the Columbia River for designation as an American Heritage River. Their letter written to President Clinton stated that the "Columbia River was vital to the history and culture of the tribes and to the well-being of the entire region. Recognition as an American Heritage River will help the communities in the Columbia River watershed work together to recover this magnificent national treasure for all of us and for future generations." The Columbia River is a life source for many diverse plants and animals that are associated with this system, including the fishes. The Columbia River System has always been known as the greatest salmon fishery in the contiguous United States. These fish have a life cycle that has been severely threatened by many other uses of the river. As smolts in fresh water, the salmon migrate to the ocean to live until they mature. Years later they return to their spawning beds to renew the cycle. Declines of these fish runs in the last several years have reached crisis proportions.

In 1997, Samuel N. Penney, Chairman of the Nez Perce Tribal Executive Committee, testified before Congress regarding the Tribe's commitment to salmon restoration:



We learn a lot of lessons from watching animals. The salmon are one of our best teachers. We learn from them that we have to do certain things by the seasons. We watch the salmon as smolts going to the ocean and observe them returning home. We see the many obstacles that they have to overcome. We see them fulfill the circle of life, just as we must do. If the salmon aren't here, the circle becomes broken and we all suffer.

—Leroy Seth (Nez Perce)



The tribes have always treated water as a medicine because it nourishes the life of the earth, flushing poisons out of humans, other creatures, and the land. We know that to be productive, water must be kept pure. When water is kept cold and clean, it takes care of the salmon.

—Levi Holt (Nez Perce)

For generations, our ancestors were the caretakers of the Pacific Northwest's salmon runs and treated them as a part of the world that our creator had entrusted to us. The decline of the Pacific Northwest's salmon runs is the most serious environmental concern in the region and is also one the Tribe must squarely face. The concerns we have with the declining salmon runs are shared by many of our neighbors in the Pacific Northwest who also share a connection with the region's signature resource.

From the Nez Perce Tribe's point of view, reversing the decline of Columbia Basin salmon is more than just a matter of professional interest, or a legal obligation, or a cost of doing business. The salmon are an integral part of our way of life. We recognize that we have more to lose than anyone if the salmon runs continue to decline. Thus, the Nez Perce Tribe is committed to doing everything we can to ensure that these declines are reversed and that all species and all stocks of salmon are restored. We know, in our hearts, that our vision and plan for salmon restoration will provide a sustainable fishery resource for the benefit of all peoples in the Pacific Northwest and Alaska.

Many books have been written about the Columbia River System. This book concentrates on the Columbia River as a life source for the region's tribes and as the most important river in the Pacific Northwest for salmon and steelhead migration. The Nez Perce Tribe is hopeful that this book will educate and inform people about the importance of maintaining and protecting the Columbia River Basin System by emphasizing the significance of fish and fishing in Nez Perce culture and by showing the diversity of fishes that reside in these waters. The Columbia River and its salmon people are legacies that should not die with us, but continue for the spiritual and physical benefits they can provide for all time.

The following Nez Perce creation story explains the origins of other geological features as well as the important reciprocal relationships the Creator established between the animals and human beings.

A Meeting Between Creator and the Animals

On one of the slopes of the Clearwater River near Lewiston, Idaho, there are a lot of rounded stones going up one of the draws. As you look along the ridgeline there are also other rocks of all different sizes and forms, but most of them are very large. Some of these are referred to by the Nez Perce as the "large animals." They are the remains of the large animals before there were human beings. The Nez Perces have always known that at one time there were large animals that inhabited this country because we find large bones in the ground between Clarkston and Pasco. The Creator called all of these large

animals together telling them that there was going to be a great change, and he said that some of them probably wouldn't survive. Many of the animals were late to the meeting that the Creator had called and as a result were turned to stone. So Creator called all the large animal people together and said there was going to be a great change and that he wanted all of the animals to qualify themselves for a new kind of human being that would be coming as a result of this great change. Creator wanted to know who was going to be qualified to help these new human beings when they came because those human beings were going to be naked, and they were going to have a hard time making a living. The Creator said, "I want each one of you to come forward and be qualified to help these new human beings when they come." So all the animals had to come up and be qualified.

The Nez Perce people could describe every animal including the birds, fishes, and insects that they knew of with this story. This is one story that they could relate for days and days to the young people and tell them how they used these species to survive.

So Deer, he comes out and says, "I want to have horns that come up and branch out, and I want to have big ears so I can hear well, and I want a little short tail with a black tip on it. These new human beings when they come can use my horn to make arrows and flint knives, and they can use my hide for clothing to keep warm, and they can use my hooves to make rattles to sing their songs with." So Creator said, "You act the way you want to act, and that's the way you will be," and that deer is what we call mule deer today.

Well, another deer came forward and said, "I don't want to be like that one. I want to have horns that come up a different way and then branch out. I don't like large ears and I want a tail that's longer," and so he described himself how he wanted to be, and he also said that the new human beings could use his body parts and also his brains to help them tan the hides and make them soft and white. That deer was called



Figure 5. Large rocks on the hill next to the Clearwater River, according to Nez Perce legend, are the animals that were turned to stone because they were late to a meeting called by the Creator. Author photo.

Figure 6. Mule deer are found throughout the Columbia River Basin. Photo courtesy of Corel Corporation.

Figure 7. Moose are one of the many game animals utilized by the Nez Perce. Photo courtesy of Corel Corporation.

Blacktail deer. The Creator said, "Okay, you are qualified to help these new human beings when they come."

Another deer came forward and said, "I don't like those horns that come up and branch like the other ones. I want them to come up and go back and go straight up, and I don't like large ears, but I want a long tail that will wave when I run, and it will give warning to others in the woods when I run." That was Whitetail deer, and he also said that the new human beings could use his body parts. Then Moose came forward and said, "I want to be bigger, I want to be black, and I want white feet, and I want my horns to be flat with points on them, and I want to have wide feet so I can wade around in the mud and eat those plants that grow in the water." Moose also said that the new human beings could use his body parts for clothing and food. Then Elk came forth and said, "I don't want to have flat horns like Moose. I want to have horns that come up and branch out and have points." Then he described himself, and Creator said, "Okay, you are qualified."

Then Eagle came forward and said, "I want to fly up high so that I can bring the messages to you from these new human beings, and they can use my feathers for ceremonies and symbols so that they know who the Creator is." Creator said, "Okay, you are qualified." Then Crow came out and said, "I want to be black and I'll be a warning to the other animals in times of danger." So Creator said, "Okay, you are qualified." Then another Crow came out and said, "I don't want to be that small, I want to be bigger, and I want a different sounding voice, but I still want to be black," and that bird was Raven. So Creator said, "Okay, you are qualified." Then another bird came out and said, "I don't want to be all black, I want a long black and white tail, and I'll also be a warning to the people." That bird was Magpie. Then Bee came forward and said, "I'll make honey that is very sweet, and they can use it for food, but I'll sting them to protect what I have." So Bee became qualified. Spider came forward, and he said, "I would like to give these new human beings wisdom.



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When I make my webs they'll never know how I make the webs, and yet I can catch food. This will tell them that I have something that they can acquire, but it will take a long time for them to learn how to get that wisdom." So Creator let the Spider be qualified.

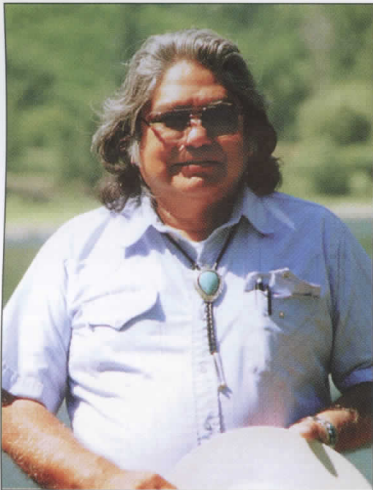
Salmon and Steelhead came forward and said, "We can help the human beings with our flesh." Salmon said, "When we come up the river we will die, so the human beings will have to catch us before that happens. I'll come up only on certain times of the year, and that's when they'll have to catch me." Then Steelhead said, "I want to come in the wintertime, but I'll give them something special. That will be the glue from my skin. This glue can be used to make bows and spears. I'll be in the water all winter long." So Creator let Steelhead become qualified. Sockeye Salmon came forward and he said, "I don't want to be big like Chinook Salmon and Steelhead, and my flesh will be red because I will eat different foods." Then Trout came forward and he said, "I am going to look like Steelhead, but I am not going to go down to the ocean. I'll just stay here in the waters even in the winter, and if these human beings can find me they can have me for food. But in the wintertime I will be down in the gravel and if they can find me that's where I will be." Then Eel came out and said, "I don't want to look like the Steelhead or Salmon or Trout. I want to be long, and when I rest I want to put my mouth on the rocks. But I'll come up the river every year, and they can use my flesh for food." So this is how the fish became qualified.

The last animal to be qualified was Coyote. Coyote came out, and he couldn't get qualified. He tried to be qualified to do something, but he couldn't do it. You know when you hear Coyote today, he goes yip, yip, yip. He couldn't even talk. When Coyote talks, it sounds like two or three coyotes talking at the same time. So he couldn't get qualified, and finally Creator said that he would take pity on him. He said, "Because you can't get qualified I'll give you special powers. When these new human beings come, you will have all the faults and all of the traits that this new human being will have. That's what you will be able to do, but I'll give you some special powers beyond that. You

Figure 8. Bald eagles winter along many of the rivers in the Columbia River Basin. Photo courtesy of Corel Corporation.

Figure 9. Chinook salmon preparing to spawn. Photo courtesy of Idaho Fish and Game.





Sometimes I try to get people to compare plant and animal species with their own body parts. For instance, the buffalo could be a finger, the passenger pigeon another finger, the peregrine falcon another finger; the wrist could be the sockeye salmon. If you relate these body parts to these species, how many would you eliminate before you would say, "Stop." You can get along pretty well if you lose a finger, but if you keep doing that, when is it enough? I learned this philosophy from my elders. Even Joseph himself said, "I am of the earth." Well, if you consider yourself part of the earth, you won't sacrifice those body parts.
—Allen Pinkham (Nez Perce)


Allen Pinkham, former chairman of the Nez Perce Executive Committee, is known for his stories, many of which he graciously contributed to this book.

Figure 10. Grizzly bears once inhabited many of the areas frequented by the Nez Perce. Photo courtesy of Corel Corporation.

will be able to transform and change yourself, and you will be able to get out of bad situations in order to save yourself. You will also be able to teach these new human beings many things." Creator said, "I'll make you qualified, but you'll get to be gray. You won't have any other colors." That's the way Coyote was created, and that's how Coyote became qualified to help the new human beings.

About this time Grizzly Bear spoke up and said, "What are we going to do about day and night? I want six months of night and six months of day." Chipmunk perked up and said, "We can't have that. I want one day and one night." So Chipmunk and Grizzly Bear started to argue. Grizzly Bear said that he wanted six months of day and six months of night so he could rest and sleep for half the year and work for the other half of the year. Chipmunk was adamant that there would be one day and one night. Finally, Creator told the two of them to go off to have their argument, and he told them that whoever won the argument would determine the way the new world would be created. So Grizzly Bear and Chipmunk went off and continued arguing.

After a long time, Grizzly Bear started to get tired, and he was trying not to go to sleep but Chipmunk was still going strong. Finally, Grizzly Bear got so tired that he went to sleep. Chipmunk yelled, "I won, I won, there will be one day and one night when those new human beings come." Creator replied, "That's the way it will be from now on, one day and one night." Soon, Grizzly bear awoke and found out from the other animals that he had lost the argument. This made him angry and he started chasing Chipmunk. As Chipmunk was trying to get away, Grizzly Bear put out his claws and scratched Chipmunk on the back, and that is why today the Chipmunk has black and white stripes on his back.

—Allen Pinkham (Nez Perce) 



Chapter 3

A Brief History of the Nez Perce

The following Nez Perce story explains how Coyote created human beings, including the Nez Perce people.

Coyote Creates the Human Beings

Some time after the animals had been created, along came Coyote. Coyote had all the emotions and problems that humans have today. Everything that the human being was, this is what Coyote was. He was traveling one day when his brother, Fox, stopped him and told Coyote that a great monster was devouring all the animal people. Fox told Coyote that he had to save the animal people. Coyote gave it some thought and decided that maybe he would have to kill this monster. He got five flint knives all sharpened and shaped and put them in his belt. He had a little pouch and he put soot and pitch and rope in it. Then Coyote went to look for the monster.

He came across the prairie where Grangeville is now, and he hollered over toward the Clearwater Valley. The monster at that time was laying in the valley devouring all the animal people. Coyote hollered, "Monster, here I am! I am right here! Come and get me! You can't eat me like you do those other people. Come and get me!"

So the monster raised his head over the edge of the canyon and looked out across the prairie towards the place where Coyote was hollering at him.

Coyote said, "Oh, there you are monster. I've come here to see what you are doing to the animal people."

The monster looked over and said, "I am going to eat you, too."

The monster devoured the animal people by sucking them into his stomach with his breath. Coyote knew this, so he tied himself to the mountain on the other side. So when the monster would suck in his breath, Coyote would come to the end of his rope and stop. He teased the monster saying, "You can't get me." And then the monster would try again, but Coyote would stop at the end of the rope. The monster did this three times.

Coyote finally decided to go inside the monster so he could rescue the animal people. He reached around behind him and cut the rope and went in the monster's mouth. When he was inside Coyote looked around until he could see the animal people. Some were already devoured, some were half dead, and some were still alive. As Coyote was walking among them, Rattlesnake shook his rattle and struck out at him and Coyote said, "What are you getting mad at me for? I came here to save you, and here you are striking out at me." So Coyote stepped on Rattlesnake's head, and that's why today Rattlesnake has a flat head. Coyote went a little further and Grizzly Bear roared and growled at Coyote. Coyote said, "What are you getting mad at me for?, I came here to rescue you." Grizzly Bear growled at him again, so Coyote pushed his nose, and that's why Grizzly Bear has a flat nose. Coyote then told all the animal people that he was going to rescue them and that he was going to kill the monster.



Figure 56. Facing page. Jackson Sundown was a famous Nez Perce rodeo performer. Photo courtesy of Allen H. Hilton, Nez Perce National Historical Park.

Figure 57. Nez Perce family. Photo courtesy of Nez Perce National Historical Park.



Another version of the “Coyote Creates the Human Beings” story tells how Coyote makes ropes out of vines, which he attaches to the three mountains (Mount Adams, Mount Hood, and Mount Rainier). In his backpack he also put roots and fish and other things. He taunts the monster who tries to suck him in. As the vines break and as Coyote is drug along, he throws out the roots and food so that they will be there when the Human Beings are created.

—Alfred Pinkham (Nez Perce)

Our traditional relationship with the earth was more than just reverence for the land. It was knowing that every living thing had been placed here by the Creator and that we were part of a sacred relationship . . . entrusted with the care and protection of our Mother Earth. We could not stand apart from our environment.


—Elsie Maynard (Nez Perce)

Figure 58. Heart of the Monster in 1905 at Kamiah, Idaho. Photo courtesy of Washington State University Archives.

Coyote built a fire from the pitch in his pouch, and he used the fat from the monster to keep the fire going. Then Coyote told the people, “When the monster takes its last breath, you all escape by running out of the holes of the monster. Wait by the holes and when the monster takes its last breath, run out. That will be your last chance to escape.” Then Coyote started working. He started to cut the heart away. While he was doing this, sometimes his knife would break, and he would get another knife and keep going. In time he was down to his last knife and the last piece of flesh that was holding the heart. Coyote then told the animals to get ready because the monster was going to die. The animals were waiting by the holes in the monster: by the nose, by the ears, by the mouth, and by that hole underneath the tail. When Coyote made the last cut, the heart came loose. When the monster took his last great breath, all the animals ran out. The last one out was Muskrat. He ran out the hole where the tail was and the hole closed on his own tail while he was getting out. That’s why Muskrat’s tail doesn’t have any hair.

When the monster was dead, Coyote came out and said, “This place should have some human beings in it. It is such a beautiful place to be. I am also going to create other people, too.” Coyote started cutting the monster up, and as he did this he would throw pieces of the monster in all directions, and he would create tribes out on the Plains and to the south and east and north and west. So Coyote did all that. He scattered the body parts to the four winds, and that’s where the different tribes came from.

Then his brother Fox said to Coyote, “You forgot to put human beings here. You have to create people here, too.” Coyote replied, “What I will do is create people this way.” Coyote washed his hands in water to get the blood off and scattered the blood droplets on the ground. When those drops of blood hit the earth, human beings sprang up as Nee-mee-poo, the Nez Perce people. That’s how we were created: from the blood that hit the earth. Coyote said, “These will be a special kind of people in this valley. They will have strong hearts and strong minds and they will live well here in this valley. That’s how the Nez Perce people came to be. To this day you can still see the heart of the monster where Coyote cut it out at Kamiah, Idaho.

—Allen Pinkham (Nez Perce) 



and the water would boil up and above the flooding river. Sometimes the boiling river was five or more feet higher than the surrounding water. Huge back eddies would form along the shore, and would actually rush upstream. The current must have been rushing downstream at least twenty miles an hour.

Coyote Breaks the Fish Dam At Celilo

Once Coyote was walking up the river on a hot day and decided to cool himself in the water. He swam down the swift river until he came to the waterfall where the Wasco people lived. Five maidens had dwelt there from ancient times. This was the place where the great dam kept the fish from going up the river.

While he was looking at the great waterfall, Coyote saw a Maiden. Quickly he went back upstream a ways and said, "I am going to look like a little baby, floating down the river on a raft in a cradle board, all laced up." As Coyote was drifting down the river, he cried, "Awaaa, awaaaa." The Maidens, hearing this, quickly swam over, thinking that a baby might be drowning.

The eldest Maiden caught it first and said, "Oh, what a cute baby."

But the youngest maiden said, "That is no baby. That is Coyote."

The others answered, "Stop saying that. You will hurt the baby's feelings."

Coyote put out his bottom lip as if he were about to cry.

The Maidens took the baby home and cared for it and fed it. He grew very fast. When he was crawling around one day, he spilled some water on purpose. "Oh, Mothers," he said, "Will you get me some more water?"

The youngest sister said, "Why don't you make him go and get it himself? The river is nearby." So the Maidens told Coyote to get the water himself.

He began to crawl toward the river, but when he was out of sight, he jumped up and began to run. The oldest sister turned around and said, "He is out of sight already. He certainly can move fast."


"That is because he is Coyote," the youngest said.

When Coyote reached the river, he swam to the fish dam and tore it down, pulling out the stones so that all the water rushed free. Then he crawled up on the rocks and shouted gleefully, "Mothers, your fish dam has been broken!"

The sisters ran down and saw that it was true. The youngest Maiden just said, "I told you he was Coyote."

Coyote said, "You have kept all the people from having salmon for a long time by stopping them from going upstream. Now the people will be happy because they will get salmon. The salmon will now be able to go upriver and spawn."

This is how Celilo Falls came to be, where the Wasco people are today. As a result of Coyote tearing down the fish dam, salmon are now able to come up river to spawn on the upper reaches of the Great Columbia River and its tributaries.

—Allen Slickpoo Sr. (Nez Perce) 

My dad told me a humorous story about an old man at Celilo who had fallen in the water. He was carried a long ways and was swept under water several times. Many feared that he was going to drown. Someone was finally able to help drag him in with the aid of a dip net. He appeared to be unconscious and several people kept asking him how he was doing and whether or not he was all right. Someone asked him if he needed anything and with a great effort the man finally replied, "Water, I need water." Everyone laughed. We were glad the man was all right and still able to have a sense of humor.

—Wilfred Scott (Nez Perce)