Oregon
Historical Quarterly

OHS neg. OrHi 70876

Summer 2006 / Volume 107, Number 2

WHEN THE RIVER RAN WILD! INDIAN TRADITIONS ON THE MID-COLUMBIA AND THE WARM SPRINGS RESERVATION

by George W. Aguilar Sr.
Foreword by Jarold Ramsey

Oregon Historical Society Press, Portland, in association with the University of Washington Press, Seattle, 2005.
Photographs, notes, bibliography, index.
272 pages. $22.50 paper.

When the River Ran Wild! George Aguilar's account of Columbia River Indian life and history, is a richly rewarding read for anyone with a foothold in this dramatic landscape. Aguilar, born in 1930, is an enrolled member of the Warm Springs Confederated Tribes, whose tribal "pedigree" is "1/8 Cascade, 1/8 Konnaack Tchunks, 1/32 Wasco, 3/16 Klickitat, 1/32 Tenino, and 1/2 Filipino" (p. xiii). His father was born in Manila and immigrated to the U.S. as a young man. Aguilar's mother, Evelyn Polk, traced her ancestry to Kiksht Chinookan communities along the Columbia River from The Dalles to the Cowlitz River, as well as to the Sahaptin-speaking Klickitat and Tenino peoples. Aguilar's father drowned in the turbulent Columbia River while fishing with his Indian in-laws, and his mother died soon after, leaving Aguilar orphaned before his second birthday. After fighting for and winning custody, Aguilar's maternal grandparents, James Jr. and Hattie Polk, raised him at their Wolford Canyon home on the Warm Springs Reservation. Aguilar thus speaks with the authority of a person who has lived the Indian life from his earliest years. He also demonstrates a solid command of the academic literature of non-Indian ethnographers, folklorists, and historians and writes clear and often moving English prose. This is a powerful combination.

Aguilar is at his best when recounting personal experiences. He is not sparing in his denunciation of the racism in white society that caused him and his fellow Indians suffering, but he is no romantic apologist either. In his account of "Life at Celilo, 1920s–1950s" (pp. 122–4), at the great Northwest Indian emporium at Celilo Falls before it was choked by the Dalles Dam, he relates:

> The older generation, who often romanticize Celilo Village, were accustomed to the living conditions there. To the first-time visitor, however, it could be a stomach-churner. . . . rotting fish guts were strewn over the rocks. . . . The flies may have out-populated the residents by about a million to one. . . .
>
> In the fall, Celilo was the gathering place for wandering drunks, bums, high-stakes gamblers, gambling sharks, alcohol bootleggers, and sexual predators, and there were brawls and beatings galore.

Through it all Aguilar maintains a certain wry humor:

> I was a 13 years old [*sic*] when the following happened. We were returning from the potato-harvesting fields of Powell Butte, and while stopping at Redmond [Oregon] my two uncles somehow acquired a couple bottles of whiskey. On the old

Culver road near Juniper Butte, we were pulled over by three police cars and about six police officers.

Uncle Henry was the driver and Uncle Alvin, who was holding one of his infant children, was told to get out of the vehicle. One of the police officers jerked the child from his arms and practically threw him into Grandma's lap, while the other officers began interrogating the brothers as to how they got the whiskey. With one of the police officer's frustration came an upper-cut blow to the stomach, and Uncle Alvin crumbled to the hard pavement. This was followed by several brutal whacks with a nightstick on his back. . . .

The uncles were taken to the cold concrete 10- by 12-foot Jefferson County jail, where they remained for some time. To get home to Warm Springs, I drove the 1938 Ford Tudor car about 25 miles in second gear. It was my first experience driving a vehicle. . . .

Aguilar admits that his first-hand knowledge of Indian customs and religious beliefs — such as those of the *Wáashat* or seven-drums — is limited because of the great loss of traditional knowledge suffered since Indians were removed to reservations. For these topics, he relies heavily on a rather select few sources, including Leslie Spier and Edward Sapir's 1930 *Wishram Ethnography* (University of Washington Publications in Anthropology 3:151–300; absent from his "Selected Bibliography"), Robert Boyd's *People of the Dalles* (which is based on the missionary Henry Perkins's papers), Robert H. Ruby and John A. Brown's several volumes on Northwest Indians, and the *Plateau* volume of the *Handbook of North American Indians*. He makes excellent use of several unpublished and largely unknown sources, such as the papers of H.C. Coe, who settled at Hood River in 1854. Coe's papers are preserved at the Columbia Gorge Discovery Center at The Dalles, Oregon.

Aguilar's insider account offers a uniquely valuable Native perspective on our region's history. It should be noted, however, that it is a particular Indian perspective. Although Aguilar's ties are about equally apportioned between the two dominant mid-Columbia Indian linguistic traditions, the Kiksht/Wasco Chinookan and the Sahaptin, and he is actually somewhat more likely to cite a Sahaptin name than a Chinookan one for a particular plant, animal, place, or activity, his allegiance seems to lean toward the Wasco rather than the Sahaptin. Aguilar paints a rather unpleasant picture, based on his early experience, of the Sahaptin traditional religion, the *Wáashat*, which perhaps reflects his particular position in Warm Springs Indian society. Helen Schuster's study of the *Wáashat* at Yakama paints a rather different picture ("Yakima Indian Traditionalism," Ph.D. diss., University of Washington, 1975). This is not meant to criticize Aguilar's fine work, but simply to note that there can be no purely objective account of anyone's history.

EUGENE S. HUNN
University of Washington, Seattle