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*Fishers work with a back set net at Downes Channel in about 1930.*

## Remembering Celilo Falls

*guest editors*

*Katrine Barber and Andrew H. Fisher*

## Sk'in

### *The Other Side of the River*

IF MEMBERS OF THE PUBLIC know anything about Columbia River Indian life, they most likely have heard of Celilo Falls — the crossroads of the Columbia Plateau at the greatest Indian fishery on the continent — and of Celilo Village, which sits on the Oregon shore of the river. Hardly anyone has heard of the village of Sk'in on the opposite shore. Yet, at the opening of the nineteenth century, Sk'in was likely the largest settlement at Celilo Falls, though today few traces of it remain. Memories of Sk'in from the testimony of early eye witnesses and contemporary elders who lived there before the falls were flooded allow us to reclaim the history of that place.

On the south shore of the Big River at the Great Falls today, one finds the contemporary Indian community of Celilo Village, cut off from the river shore by four lanes of heavy traffic on Interstate 84. Here a collection of trailers and shacks cluster about the Celilo Longhouse, and here a handful of River Indians cling stubbornly to their last toehold on the Big River. Celilo Village is celebrated in photographic and historical essays, in large part a consequence of the construction of the Columbia Gorge Highway past the village along the south shore of the river. The highway, completed to The Dalles in 1922, drew crowds of the curious to witness the emblematic Indian carnival until The Dalles Dam silenced the roaring falls and cut the heart out of the Indian lives lived here for millennia. Documentation of Celilo's history also includes evidence of Sk'in.

The name "Celilo" is of uncertain derivation, whether traced in the indigenous Sahaptin language of the people who had lived at the mid-Columbia River or in the English of the early travelers and settlers. Perhaps it was derived by phonological manipulation from "Tenino," a Sahaptin village downstream, immediately opposite the Chinookan village of Nixlúidiχ, also known as Wisham or Wishram.<sup>1</sup> But this is by no means certain. The recognized Sahaptin name for the Celilo Village site is Wayám, literally 'above,' a



William Clark's map of Great (Celilo) Falls of the Columbia River, Washington and Oregon, October 22–23, 1805, shows twenty-one small triangles under the heading "E-nee-sheer Nation" on the north shore just above the falls. The accompanying text, however, mentions seventeen lodges above and five large lodges below the falls on the north shore. A second very similar map, apparently prepared first, shows the proper number of lodges above and below the falls (See Moulton, *Journals*, 5:322).

From Hunn, Nch'i-Wána, "The Big River", © 1990, reprinted by permission of the University of Washington Press



This map is based on 1987 testimony of James Selam. Seventeen fishing sites named in Sahaptin are mapped, including the three falls villages. These are a small fraction of the sites known to local Indian fishermen. The dense concentration of named places underscores the value of the Celilo Falls fisheries for Columbia River Indians and suggests the complexity of negotiated rights and procedures involved in Indian management of the resource.

site that was heavily occupied in summer and fall by the local Wayam-lá-ma 'people of Wayám' and hundreds of visitors who came to trade, gamble, and socialize. The people of Wayám likely wintered six miles upstream at the mouth of the Deschutes River in a village known as Wanwáwi or Tq'uχ.<sup>2</sup> As William Clark noted, the Corps of Discovery saw women digging a species of root near the winter village as they passed in October 1805.

Capt. Lewis joined me having delayed on the way [to where Clark waited at the first rapids above the mouth of the Deschutes River] to examine a root of which the natives have been digging great quantities in the bottoms of the river.<sup>3</sup>

Perhaps these were Wayam-lá-ma women foraging near their winter village, digging wild chives (*Allium schoenoprasum*), which were known to occur "between low and high water levels along the Columbia R. . . ., but perhaps now [are] largely exterminated by impounded water behind the Columbia R. dams."<sup>4</sup>

Lewis and William Clark soon arrived at the head of what they called The Great Falls — Celilo Falls, or simply k'up 'falls' in Sahaptin — and Clark recorded the villages found there:

6 miles below the mouth of the *Towarnehiooks* [Deschutes] River the commencement of the pitch of the Great Falls, opposite on the Stard. Side [north] is 17 Lodges of the natives. . . . At the lower part of those rapids we arrived at 5 Large Lodges of natives drying and prepareing fish for market.<sup>5</sup>

It is puzzling that Lewis and Clark recorded no Indian houses on the south shore at the site of contemporary Celilo Village, home to the Wayam-lá-ma. Where were they at the time? Perhaps with kin on the opposite shore or upstream near the lower point of Miller Island, or at their winter village, hidden a short distance up the Deschutes.

Lewis and Clark referred to the Indians at the Great Falls as “Eneshur,” an enigmatic expression that corresponds in no obvious way with any Sahaptin expression that could apply to the people. Of course, Lewis and Clark depended here on Nez Perce guides, whose knowledge of the local Sahaptin dialects was likely limited. Gary Moulton, editor of what is now considered the definitive version of the Lewis and Clark Journals, surmises that the name *Eneshur* is a corruption of Chinookan *i-mi-shúxw* ‘he [is] your relative’, but that seems unlikely given that the Nez Perce guides feared the Chinookans immediately downstream and certainly would have known nothing of their language. On Lewis and Clark’s return upriver in late April of 1806, they found residential arrangements somewhat changed.

at present the principal village of the Eneshur is below the falls on the N. side of the river. one other village is above the falls on the S. side and another a few miles above on the N. side. the first consists of 19, the 2cd of 11, and the 3rd of 5 lodges. their houses . . . have their floors on the surface of the ground, but are formed of sticks and covered with mats and straw. they are large and contain usually several families each.<sup>6</sup>

It seems the Wayam-lá-ma had returned, now occupying eleven houses on the south shore at the head of the falls at what appears to be the site of present-day Celilo Village. But who were the villagers on the northern shore?

Today, elders speak of two villages that correspond to Clark’s October account of clusters of seventeen lodges above the falls and five at its foot, and to Lewis’s April account of nineteen and five lodges, as Wapáykt and Sk’in by name. William Yallup, chief at Sk’in in the early decades of the twentieth century, testified in a 1942 report taken by Edward Swindell: “There was a . . . village below Wah-pykt known as Skein, which was also located on the Washington side of the River.”<sup>7</sup> Chief Yallup’s testimony and that of James Selam, who lived at Sk’in as a boy in the 1920s and 1930s, affirm that

Sk'in (Skein) and Wapáykt (Wah-pykt) were two closely allied but distinct village communities and that they were located precisely where Lewis and Clark had mapped them.

Evidence of the people of Sk'in is also found in the records of treaty negotiations. The Yakama Nation was defined by the 1855 Treaty with the Yakama as a confederation of fourteen "tribes and bands," and fourteen men are named as having signed the treaty. Of the tribes and bands, eight can be clearly identified as corresponding to known local Indian communities, including what the treaty identified as "Skin-pah, Wish-ham, . . . [and] Kamilt-pah." The "Wish-ham" lived at Nixlúidiḡ, the Wishram Chinookan name for the village known in Sahaptin as Wishḡamí, which was located nine miles below Celilo Falls at the head of The Long Narrows, at present-day Horsethief Lake State Park, and immediately opposite the westernmost Sahaptin-speaking village of Tináynu ("Tenino").<sup>8</sup> The Wish-hams spoke an entirely different language from their Skin-pah neighbors. Their kin at the village of Wasqu, downstream and on the south shore, ended up enrolled at the Confederated Tribes of the Warm Springs Reservation. The "Kah-milt-pah" lived at Q'mil, a Sahaptin word descriptive of a deep cleft in the basalt cliffs cut by Rock Creek to reach the Columbia some thirty miles upstream from Celilo Falls. Though an independent community, Rock Creek people had and still have close ties with the "Skin-pah," who lived at Sk'in.

One way to understand those ties is by looking at the life of James Selam, a John Day River elder, enrolled Yakama, and indigenous scholar who was born at Rock Creek in 1919 and was raised in a traditional tule-mat house at Táwash, now Blalock, Oregon, an adjunct to Tákshpash, a major Indian village at the falls of the John Day River.<sup>9</sup> These are villages of the "Dock-Spus," one of four Sahaptin-speaking "tribes" named in the 1855 Treaty with the Tribes of Middle Oregon who were assigned with the "Wyam" to the Warm Springs confederation.<sup>10</sup> As a boy, James spent summers at Sk'in, because his father owned traditional rights to fishing sites on the northern channels of Celilo Falls. Sk'in was then a collection of a dozen or more shacks built on a basalt platform just above the river at the north base of the falls. The village was adjacent to a curving sandy beach where local Indians and non-Indian fishermen hauled in their seine nets on horseback.<sup>11</sup>

The people of Sk'in are variously the "Skin-pah," Sk'in-pam, or, most accurately, the Sk'in-lá-ma 'the people of Sk'in,' because Plateau Indians traditionally identified themselves as citizens of a particular village.<sup>12</sup> A dominant village would often lend its name to the families of smaller neighboring settlements, elevating the name of the primary village to that of a multivillage "tribe" or "band." So the "Skinpah" of the Yakama treaty likely

included not only the people of Sk'in but also those of Wapáykt, just above the falls at the site of present day Wishram Station. This pattern of village-based tribal identities demonstrates the fundamentally dispersed quality of Plateau political power. Each village was a sovereign "nation," but all of these multifarious, politically autonomous village groups were tied together in a Plateau-wide web of kinship. Treaty boundaries slashed through that web, as when the Wayam-lá-ma were assigned to the Confederated Tribes of Warm Springs and set in competition with their Celilo Falls kin at Sk'in, now of the Yakama Nation, as rival claimants for scarce federal resources and recognition as responsible authorities.

Treaty signers did not necessarily represent particular tribes or bands, but "Me-ni-nock" likely represented the "Skin-pah" at the Walla Walla council. His young son George was also there with him, and he later played a key role in the early litigation in defense of Indian treaty fishing rights.<sup>13</sup> His son, George, Jr., built a house at Sk'in, but James Selam recalled that the home stood empty much of the time, as the Meninock family lived then on the Yakama Reservation. Other prominent citizens of Sk'in include the prophet Shymáya, a contemporary of Smohalla (Smúxala) at Priest Rapids who, like Smohalla, took as his spiritual mentor and ally the oriole (wawshuk-lá) and Chief Black Wolf (Chmuk-xálish), a prominent leader in the decades immediately following the 1855 treaty negotiations. Perhaps the earliest published reference to Sk'in is Paul Kane's watercolor image of "Mancemuckt, chief of the Skeen."<sup>14</sup>

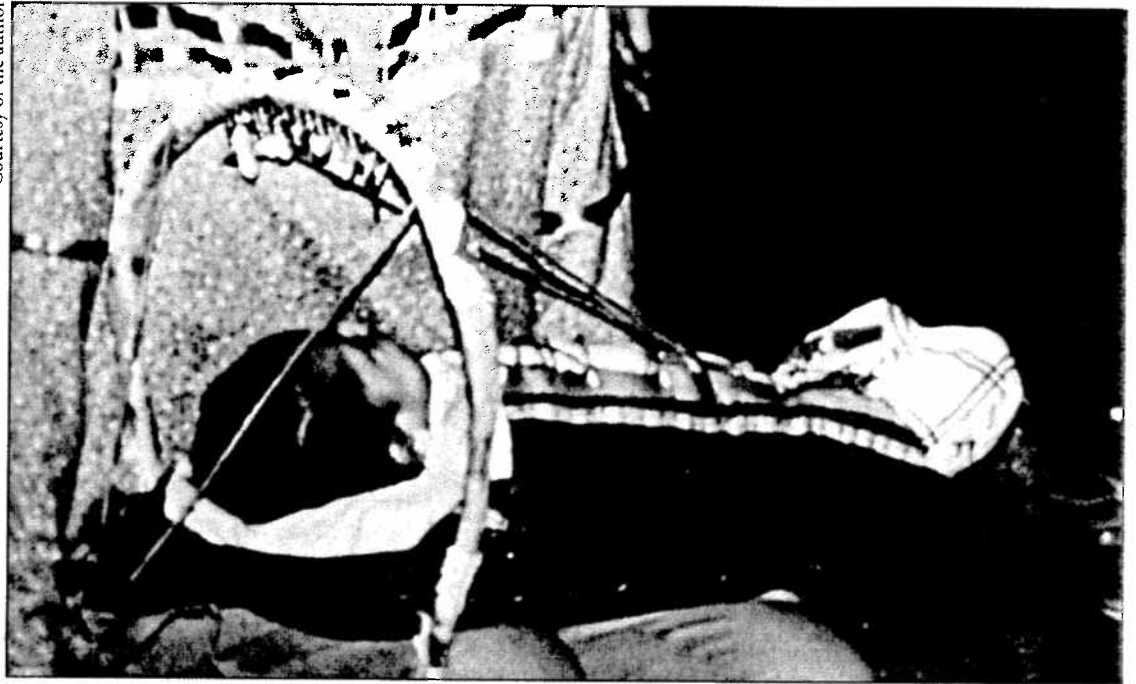
As James remembered from staying at Sk'in as a boy, William Yallup was the recognized leader (wiyántcha) and spokesperson (sanwi-lá) for the village:



Stark Museum of Art, Orange, Texas. 31-78/109 WWC 1021.

Paul Kane's (1810–1871) 1847 portrait, "Mancemuckt, chief of the Skeen," represents the earliest recorded reference to the village of that name (watercolor and pencil on paper, 5 5/8 × 4 inches).

Courtesy of the author



*This contemporary Indian cradleboard or sk'in was photographed by the author at Toppenish, Washington, in February 1987.*

Whenever any problems came to our village, he [Yallup] stood up to them and told them. He pointed his finger and told [them]: this is ours. Don't bring any problem to us.<sup>15</sup>

Chief Yallup's testimony for the Swindell Report confirms James's account:

There was another village below Wah-pykt [Wapáykt] known as Skein [Sk'in]. . . . Its name meant "cradle board" . . . At Skein, in addition . . . the Indians also used a long net [a seine] which was weighted down with a stone.<sup>16</sup>

Chief Yallup's statement is suggestive of the many layers of meaning in the single name Sk'in. First, it is the cradleboard into which every Indian child was securely laced — a pine plank with rounded end, broad at the shoulder. The baby was diapered with shredded cedar bark, protected physically and spiritually by a rosewood "bumper," and strapped to mother's back, leaving her hands free for work. There are various opinions regarding the reason for the village to be named Sk'in. Some say it is named for a cradleboard-shaped mountain on the ridge above the village. William Yallup is quoted to the effect that the village itself was shaped like a cradleboard. James Selam gave a detailed account of the cradleboard rock on the lip of the falls, and that explanation seems to me the most likely, as it fits best with mythological



themes.<sup>17</sup> Sk'in, the village on the north shore at the base of the Great Falls, was named for the rock perched above it.

In the classic mythic account that explains how Celilo Falls came to be, Coyote is traveling down the Big River when he hears that five sisters have dammed the river, preventing the salmon from swimming upstream to the villages above the Falls, starving the people.<sup>18</sup> He hits on the idea of deceiving these mythological sisters by turning himself into a baby strapped to a cradleboard, adrift on the river. The baby (who is Coyote) in his cradleboard lodges against the Sisters' dam. Their maternal instincts are aroused when they find the poor waif, so they rescue him and take him under their care.

The next morning, the women set off to dig roots in the hills above the river. As soon as the Sisters are out of sight, Coyote changes back to his actual form and begins to make digging sticks of oak and mortars of rock-hard oak burls. Meanwhile, in the hills the youngest sister — and of course the wisest — breaks her digging stick, a sure sign of trouble back home. The sisters rush back to find not the baby but rather Coyote busy digging away at their dam. The river rushes through the deep gashes Coyote has made, rupturing the dam, and the waiting salmon leap through the gaps and swim on up to the hungry villagers. Coyote then decrees that the Sisters will thereafter be swallows whose flight announces the arrival of the salmon each spring. The cradleboard is turned to stone, hanging on the lip of the falls where it first lodged.

James's father, George Selam, owned a fishing site adjacent to the namesake rock at a place called Núshnu 'nose', for its shape. Another Sk'in family, the Barneys, fished at their traditional site nearby at Kis 'stinking', so-named for the rotting fish that collected in pockets in the rocks there. By James's time, however, Coyote's cradleboard had been dynamited to make room for the foundation of the northernmost pylon of the railroad bridge, which was built across the lip of the falls in 1910. In the 1920s, James Selam recalled, the village was a cluster of a dozen houses. George Meninock, grandfather of contemporary Yakama Nation leaders Johnson and Jerry Meninock, had built his home there on stilts, most likely for the air-conditioning effect rather than as a caution against flooding, as the village was securely located on a basalt platform well above high water. James also recalled attending Wáashat services — of the Sahaptin Sacred Dance or Seven Drums religion — in the Long House built by the prophet Shymáya.

The village of Sk'in was destroyed three times, first by fire and then by water. It was first burned to the ground by the U.S. Army in the aftermath of the Yakima Wars (1866–1868). But the pull of the fishery was too strong, and those with traditional rights to the best fishing rocks at the river's various stages returned to Sk'in. Sometime around 1932, according to James

Selam, vigilantes burned Sk'in for the second time, apparently while the residents were away, perhaps camped in the mountains at the huckleberry grounds. After that fire, the fishermen of Sk'in settled on the opposite shore at Waxyayq'ish 'end of the bridge', commuting across the bridge on foot to their old fishing sites. A new highway past Celilo Falls on the Oregon side focused public attention on the Oregon village of Wayám, which soon came to be synonymous with the Celilo Falls Indian fishery.

The third and perhaps final destruction of Sk'in came with the closing of the flood gates at The Dalles Dam in 1957. Sk'in lives on in the memories of elders who have enduring family ties to the venerable town. In July 2005, I traveled to Sk'in with James Selam, his son William, and David Ross, who represented a gravel mining company hoping to contract with the Indian owners of an allotment on the bluffs above the old village site. Permission to proceed with the contract hinges on the cultural values of the site, which in turn can only be resolved by reference to the testimony of Indian elders who knew Sk'in first hand, such as James Selam. James was in favor of granting the Indian landowners the right to develop their allotment and argued that the cultural values linked to the old village had already been destroyed by the railroad and the dam. James died at the end of February 2007, leaving all of us poorer for the loss of his vivid memories of Sk'in.

THIS BRIEF ACCOUNT of one nearly forgotten Columbia River Indian village may suggest that the familiar Celilo story is not only abridged but systematically distorted. Sk'in and its neighbor Wapáykt — misplaced as "Wishram" station — deserve to be remembered. James Selam was irate when we stopped to read the historical marker placed at the Celilo Falls overlook along Washington's State Highway 14, which attributed the stretch of river below to the "Wishram," a distinctly different people resident nine miles downstream. A historical error of no great import to us perhaps but profoundly disturbing to an Indian elder who was raised right there and who knew so much better. It is important to get the story straight and to respect the testimony of those whose lives are deeply rooted in this landscape.

Beyond getting the story straight, we should appreciate the multifarious dimensions to every local history. Beneath Celilo Falls, of course, is a particularly rich vein of historical understanding. It transcends tribal boundaries, bridges Indian and Euro-American memories and desires, welds technical and experiential ecologies, juxtaposes mythological and documentary readings, and generates spiritual as well as technological power. The flooding of these falls was at once an act of awesome creation and terrible destruction. That is the lesson of Sk'in.

## NOTES

1. The village name "Tenino" has been generalized in some ethnographic summaries to encompass all the Sahaptin villages between The Dalles and the John Day River. Native place-names are Columbia River Sahaptin terms unless otherwise noted. The Greek letter  $\chi$  represents a "back x," which sounds like the "ch" of German "*doch*." The "barred l" (ł) is pronounced like "thl" in "athlete." The "barred i" (i) is pronounced like the "i" of "bit."
2. George P. Murdoch, "Notes on the Tenino, Molalla, and Paiute of Oregon," *American Anthropology* 40 (1938): 395–402; and Bruce Rigsby, "Linguistic relations in the Southern Plateau" (Ph.D. diss., University of Oregon, 1965), 54.
3. Gary E. Moulton, ed., *The Journals of the Lewis & Clark Expedition* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1988), 5:321. Moulton speculates that the root might have been *Sagittaria latifolia*, the wapato harvested downstream at the mouth of the Willamette River by Chinookan Indians, but this is unlikely given the configuration of the Columbia River shoreline east of the Cascade Mountains.
4. C. Leo Hitchcock, Arthur Cronquist, and Marion Ownbey, *Vascular Plants of the Pacific Northwest, Part 1: Vascular Cryptogams, Gymnosperms, and Monocotyledons* (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 1969), 755.
5. Clark in Moulton, *Journals*, 5: 323.
6. Lewis in Moulton, *Journals*, 7: 145–46.
7. Edward G. Swindell, Jr., *Report on Source, Nature, and Extent of the Fishing, Hunting and Miscellaneous Related Rights of Certain Indian Tribes in Washington and Oregon . . .* (Los Angeles: U.S. Department of the Interior, Office of Indian Affairs, Division of Forestry and Grazing, 1942). Other elders who testified in that report confounded the two villages as one. Isaac McKinley stated that "Skein and Wah-pykt were two names for the same place which was located on the Washington side of the Columbia River at a point just below the present railroad bridge which crossed the river about three quarters of a mile below Celilo Falls," while Tommy Thompson, Wayam chief, stated that "Skein . . . is located immediately below the railroad bridge crossing the Columbia River west of the falls . . . that the Indians also called this place Wah-pykt."
8. Rigsby, "Linguistic Relations," 56.
9. See Eugene S. Hunn with James Selam and family, *Nch'i-Wána "The Big River": Mid-Columbia Indians and Their Land* (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 1990).
10. The 1855 treaties refer to Indian "nations" or tribal confederations uniting named "tribes" and/or "bands." The groups so-named, however, lacked a common identity and were not effective political units; thus, the term "tribe" is misleading. See Hunn and Selam, *Nch'i-Wána "The Big River"*, 201–27.
11. See Ivan J. Donaldson and Frederick K. Cramer, *Fishwheels of the Columbia* (Portland, Ore.: Binford & Mort, 1971), photo on page 99.
12. Other such identifications include the wayam-lá-ma 'the people of the village of Wayám' and imatílám-lá-ma 'the people of the village of Ímatílám', that is, "Umatilla," at the mouth of the river we now know by that name. See Rigsby, "Linguistic Relations," 48, 54.
13. Joseph C. Dupris, Kathleen S. Hill, and William H. Rodgers, Jr., *The Si'lailo Way: Indians, Salmon and Law on the Columbia River* (Durham, N.C.: Carolina Academic Press, 2006), 224.
14. Harper, J. Russell, ed., *Paul Kane's Frontier* (Austin and London: University of Texas Press, 1971), 112, see figure 148.
15. James Selam, "Tamnanaxt Sk'inki," unpublished manuscript in Sahaptin and English, July 7, 2005, in possession of the author.
16. Swindell, *Report on Source*. William Yallup's testimony conflicts with that of other elders with regard to Sk'in. Celilo chief Tommy Thompson, for example, testified that Wapáyt was one and the same as Sk'in, indicating that knowledge of traditional village and fishing sites is highly specific to those who have direct personal experience.
17. Selam, "Tamnanaxt."
18. See the version published in this issue, recorded by W.E. Meyers. See also Virginia Beavert and Deward E. Walker, Jr., eds, *The Way It Was: Anaku Iwacha: Yakima Indian Legends*, The Consortium of Johnson O'Malley Committees of Region IV (Franklin Press, 1974); and Jarold Ramsey, ed., *Coyote Was Going There: Indian Literature of the Oregon Country* (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 1977).