

## The River's People - Jessica Thompson

According to archeological evidence, the Kalapuya, the Willamette valley's first inhabitants, came to the area at least 10,000 years ago. (Mackey, 2004)

However, according to Carol Logan, a Kalapuya with ancestral roots throughout the Willamette valley, the Kalapuya have been here forever:

*"Our people have been here forever, as long as the life has been here of our people [...]"*

Over the years, archeologists, anthropologists and interested observers have attempted to learn more about these people who originate in the valley. What we know derives from historical texts, archeological findings, and accounts from remaining Kalapuya descendants.

It is challenging to produce a perfectly cohesive history from the limited ethnographic and archeological evidence available. Much of the information has been lost completely, as epidemics and other menaces had reduced the thriving population of 15,000 to merely 600 by the mid-1800s (Juntunen, 2005). It is necessary to acknowledge that many historical observations are from the perspectives of European-American traders, ethnographers and settlers, and not from the Kalapuya themselves. This clash of perspectives deserves important consideration today. The Kalapuya voice is out there but rarely heard.

There exist textual accounts of traditional Kalapuya culture and society documented by such people as Albert S. Gatschet, trained anthropologist and linguist, in 1877, and Dr. W.W. Oglesby, historian and traveler, in 1884. A third traditional account draws from an interview in 1913 with a Mary's River Indian man named William Hartless. The transcript from the dialogue with Hartless has special significance because it is the longest single document directly linked to a member of the Kalapuya tribe (Mackey, 2004). The way of life of the Kalapuya

can be determined by combining archeological evidence and knowledge passed down to Kalapuya descendants.

I met with Carol at the Grand Ronde Reservation on a day of immense blue sky when all mountains and forests on the horizon were clearly visible. She pointed toward Spirit Mountain, a place of extreme significance and the namesake for the current "Spirit Mountain Casino" that is located within a mile of the reservation. She described how this peak does not stand alone, but is deeply tied to the valley below, its neighboring mountains, the river, the trees and all other things. There is no way to separate it from the rest of the landscape. In a similar sense, there is no way that one can separate the story of the Kalapuya people from the history of the Willamette River and valley.

### Kalapuya Bands

The nation of the Kalapuya, at the height of population prior to European American contact, was composed of several small groups or "bands" within the Willamette valley. These bands were known as the Tualatin, Yamhill, Pudding River (Ashantchuyuck), Chemekatas, Luckiamute, Santiam, Mary's River (Chapanata), Calapooia and McKenzie, and Yoncalla (Aynankeld) (Collins, 1951). Early contact with fur traders and settlers brought about a designation of these particular bands, but there is some amount of uncertainty about their true names. Identification is somewhat difficult because these "bands" were not always clearly distinct, and observers may have dubbed certain groups in relation to natural features - such as *Mary's River* band- or after the chief of the particular group - which is speculated to have occurred with the *Santiam* band (Mackey, 2004).

Generally, a band was composed of an extended family of related male figures and their wives and children (Juntunen, 2005). Each band occupied a small valley or sub basin, and had its own dialect and cultural practices. Sub-regions separated the language groups: Tualatin-Yamhill in the north, Santiam-

McKenzie in the center, and Yoncallas in the south (Boag, 1988). The diversity of ecosystems brought on a diversity of dialects; there is little doubt that words and languages developed in relation to the particular landscapes and climates within the region. The customs and ways of life for each band were also as diverse as the languages.

### Livelihoods

Before European-American contact and settlement, the Kalapuya had a thriving population. They placed their permanent and winter settlements among thickets bordering large streams. They lived off a subsistence-based diet. The Kalapuya harvested several kinds of lily plants, the most important of which was the bulb of the camas lily (*Camassia quamash*). They dug camas bulbs, as well as wild onion, (*Allium* spp.), wild carrot (*Perideridia gairdneri*) and wapato (*Sagittaria latifolia*) from the ground with tools made of bone and wood (Boag, 1988). Acorn and hazelnut meat were also important food sources. Several berries, such as blackberry (*Rubus ursinus*), huckleberry (*Vaccinium ovatum*), strawberry (*Fragaria* spp.) and salmonberry (*Rubus ursinus*) were also incorporated into the diet throughout certain times of the year (Juntunen, 2005).

The harvested camas was cooked in large earthen ovens. A hole was dug within the Earth, and the bottom lined with heated rocks, green grasses and leaves, which created steam. Raw camas bulbs were then set on top, with more added layers of green grasses, leaves, and dirt. The bulbs baked for one to two days. They were then laid out to dry or eaten immediately (Juntunen, 2005).

### Relationship With Land

The Kalapuya shaped their landscape as well. Peter Boag illustrates in his 1988 dissertation, *The Calapooian Matrix: Landscape and Experience on a Western Frontier*, "The environment of the Willamette Valley was shaped by the interplay between Kalapuya Indians and nature" (32). There is evidence to suggest that

they periodically set fire to upper and lower grasslands in order to maintain grasses and oak groves. This, in turn, increased camas yield and acorn production, and made certain foods, such as tarweed and grasshoppers, easier to consume (Boag, 1988). The burning played a part in wiping out small shrubs and trees, and allowing for oak and hazelnut groves to thrive. It is thought that thanks to this burning, the central floor of the Willamette Valley had an almost "park-like appearance" (Juntunen, 2005).

The Kalapuya no doubt appreciated the land for its beauty. Millions of people who have seen the Willamette Valley have commented on its magnificence and richness. It is unfortunate that, after 150 years of agricultural, home and industrial development, this natural beauty has been erased bit by bit. One can only imagine what the valley looked like to the Kalapuya prior to European-American contact. The appreciation of this beauty and intimacy with the land saturated the culture, and was exhibited through many Kalapuya practices, such as spirituality and storytelling.

The Kalapuya year was divided into 12 lunar months, which began in late August or early September. In the summer, many bands moved to the foothills for camp, the men hunted, and women gathered acorns, berries and camas roots. Throughout late summer and fall, harvesting would be finished and groups would move back to permanent settlements in the valleys to prepare for cold weather. During the winter months, groups remained within villages, spending time sitting in front of the fire, weaving baskets and telling stories. The weather was so cold in January that older people leaned close to the fire and got their chest hairs singed - this is aptly called the month of the "burned breast." The coming of spring meant that the Kalapuya left their winter dwellings and camps for the summer, preparing for camas harvesting (Juntunen, 2005).

The Kalapuya did not view time in the linear fashion that Western society maintains. Time was more rounded and cyclical. The people felt that they had a

cooperative and supportive relationship with the land, a fundamental connection. The Kalapuya viewed death as part of the connection, and burial of the dead was an important way to give back to the Earth. Carol elaborated on this:

*"And there was a lot of burial grounds within that Willamette Valley. And that's why the camas thrives so much [...] because our people ate the foods, our people then became a part of the land through the food - a connecting to the earth. So when you eat the foods, you connect to the earth, you connect to the water, so when you pass away and get buried in to the water, you basically are those foods, you are that which you ate. So then, it just, your body deteriorates. Then you make that land fertile again. That's what makes the foods grow, that's what makes the land fertile, that's what gives the land all it's nutrients and its vitamins and everything."*

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Within *The World of the Kalapuya*, Judy Rycraft Juntunen and other researchers attempt to illustrate the spirituality of many of the Kalapuya people. Using sources from *Kalapuya Texts*, an ethnographic study of the Kalapuya published in 1945, Juntunen and others piece together what they believe to be an accurate description of spirituality. According to these sources, many of the Kalapuya believed that after death, a person's body went into the Earth, and their heart journeyed west over the ocean to the "land of the dead." Clothing and personal items were buried with the dead to aid them in their journey. Though the dead were believed to travel, they were also thought to linger in the world of the living, sometimes visiting in dreams. Kalapuya spirituality was a conscious mixture of the living and dead, of giving and receiving. (Juntunen, 2005).

Also discussed in *The World of the Kalapuya* is the concept that, for the Kalapuya, the spirit world resided in dreams. Each individual possessed their own "guardian spirit" that they attained from these dreams. In the life of a maturing Kalapuya, a significant turning point was when a child set off on a "spirit

quest" in search of his/her own guardian spirit. The guardian spirits provided protection, health, wealth, luck in hunting, longevity and strength. They appeared in dreams, and were represented as animals or natural forces. The seeker went to a sacred place - many times, a peak of a sacred mountain - and fasted and exercised vigorously in order to encourage harder sleep and an entering into the spirit world. For five days, the child would fall asleep to dream and wake up the next day to bathe in a nearby stream. If the spirit appeared to the child during those five days, it would teach the child a song, chant or dance that would belong to only them. When the quest came to an end, the person would return to the village and share his/her experience as well as the special gift provided by their guardian spirit (Juntunen, 2005).

### Willamette River/Water Importance

The Willamette River was the main artery for the Kalapuya people. Akin to a major highway, it was the way that they traveled up and down the valley. It provided both bodily and spiritual sustenance. Carol Logan illustrated the importance of the water to the Kalapuya:

*"Our people got foods from out of the waters there, there's different kind of species that live in the water. So, our people would do that through nets, or, you know, in the shallower areas, there's other kind of foods that they could gather there. They dried a lot of their foods along the river. [...] traveling by the water, doing ceremonies by the water because the water is very important and a part of our ceremonies. Water is life, [...] you know, we can't have life without the water."*

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The river was of central importance, and the Willamette valley's first people had many original names for the river. Harold Mackey in *The Kalapuyans: A Sourcebook on the Indians of the Willamette Valley*, employs information from the journals of Lewis and Clark, maps, and letters from early settlers to show the

evolution of the name *Walama* to the modern-day *Willamette*. It is thought that prior to contact with French traders, many of the Kalapuya bands referred to the river as *Walama*, which was thought to mean "to spill or pour water." The suffixes "et" and "ette," are most likely French in origin. The name of the river was then recorded as "Wallamette," indicated by a Gibbs-Starling map of 1851 (Mackey, 2004). John Gale, an early settler, wrote about the debate over the proper name: "As regarding the other word, *Willamette* I have never heard it pronounced by any of the Indians unless perhaps by some of the young folks who naturally fell into the habit of pronouncing the word as the whites did" (Mackey, 2004: 19). Gale also thought the word "Willamette" wasn't an apt description of the river: "*Willamet* is a pretty and proper word, but according to the eternal fitness of things it is out of its place when applied to the more manly, deep toned, sonorous *Wallamet*. It can never accord with the general characteristics of that noble river" (Mackey, 2004: 19). Indeed, the writings of a settler do not give complete insight into what, historically, the Kalapuya called the river and why. However, it does illuminate a little of how the river was viewed by them, as well as the importance of the river's name.

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When asked about the spiritual importance of water to the Kalapuya, Carol revealed:

"Praying with the water is a very important part of our people's way of life."

However, she did not give any further detail than that. There are some practices of the Kalapuya today that are, out of respect, not shared with everyone. What historical information tells us, however, is that this "praying with the water" involved the use of sweat lodges. The Kalapuya believed that steam worked to purify their bodies and spiritual beings (Juntunen, 2005).

Storytelling

A strong connection and understanding with the Earth and one another was seen through storytelling. The Kalapuya told stories during the cold winter months when much time was spent indoors. Stories could be told for the purpose of entertaining, teaching a lesson, or an explanation as to why certain things were the way they were. There were oftentimes rules to follow when telling a story, so it would be conveyed correctly.

Stories were an important part of educating children about traditions and living in a community. Carol explained the importance of this:

*"An oral tradition of our people is we respect one another, that we work together, and we help one another. And the children, the children are a big priority in our people's life, and making sure that they know who they are, that they are respected in that way, and that they're raised that way with a meaning and a purpose in their life. And we teach our children, you know, to respect the Mother Earth, to take care of our Mother Earth, and take care of all things around them. And to teach the children that they need to help their elders, and to do and be the best they can, in their walk in life. And that we're only here as care takers of this Earth, we're not here for ownership. To walk in as much balance as we can. Take our mistakes and learn from them."*

The oral tradition remains an important part of the Kalapuya way of life today, despite the tragedy that befell the Willamette Valley's native people.

### European-American Contact

It was around the 1700s when first contact with European traders occurred, and after this initial meeting, the Kalapuya life was forever changed. Introduction to early fur trappers, traders and settlers caused waves of severe epidemics that almost wiped out the Kalapuya people. Having no natural resistance and knowing no treatment for these new diseases, thousands of the Kalapuya succumbed to them. The first wave of smallpox appeared in 1782-83 out of the



Midwest. It is thought to have been responsible for reducing the original population of approximately 14,000, to half its size in only a few years. Settlers in 1790 recorded the presence of venereal diseases, which no doubt affected the nearby Kalapuya bands and further reduced their numbers. For close to 40 years afterward, the Kalapuya people were free from disease, but frequent interaction with ever-increasing newcomers brought upon a deadly epidemic in the 1830s that was described as "fever and ague" (Mackey, 2004). This disease, thought to have been malaria, reduced an already dwindling population to only about 600 in 1834. The severe reduction in population and weakening of spirit are what made European-American settlement not only possible, but largely unproblematic. They were met with little resistance upon arrival.

The years to follow brought on intense struggle for the Kalapuya people. Settlement of the Willamette valley, painful uprooting to reservations and acculturation all delivered painful blows.

Newly arriving settlers brought profound changes to the native people. Methodist missionaries arrived in 1834 seeking to convert much of the remaining population. Most of the Kalapuya, however, would not be swayed. It was when the United States government began to offer free land in Oregon territory that the Kalapuya way of life began to crumble entirely: farmers drained wetlands, plowed camas and tarweed fields, introduced exotic crops and prevented the native people from using fire to promote the growth of essential food sources. Oregon became a territory of the United States in 1848, and in 1855, the government created a treaty that would put aside land for reservations and give entire ownership of the Willamette valley to the United States. The headmen of 15 different bands signed this treaty (Juntunen 2005).

These treaties gave the president the power to set up reservations. On November 9<sup>th</sup>, 1855, United States President Franklin Pierce authorized the creation of the Siletz Reservation, and President James Buchanan issued an

order for the Grand Ronde Reservation on June 30<sup>th</sup>, 1857. The government promised to supply extensive land, shelter, schools, food, supplies, and a farmer, blacksmith, doctor and teacher to help them become self-sufficient. On the journey to these reservations, the Kalapuya were forced to leave their possessions behind and were not allowed weapons (which would have been used for hunting). When they arrived on the reservations, they found that most of the government's promises had not been kept; they had no shelter, no schools or supplies (Juntunen, 2005).

Reservation life was very difficult for the native people thanks to the poor conditions. The government ignored cultural differences and treated all groups and bands as if they were the same. In both Siletz and Grand Ronde reservations, groups were forced to cohabit with other bands and tribes. The government expected the Native Americans to become farmers, yet did not provide them with proper supplies. Many were already weakened from sickness, and as a result, perished (Juntunen, 2005).

Racism toward Native Americans brought on continued manipulation: reservations dwindled in size due to settlers demanding more land, benefits such as supplies and shelter were taken away, and attempts to "civilize" the Kalapuya led to further degrading of their people and erasing of many traditions. They were seen as "savage," more animal than human, and were encouraged to dismiss their traditional ways. In boarding schools for Native American children, punishments opposing cultural practices were harsh and cruel. Though many traditional ways are maintained today thanks to those who practiced traditional language and ceremonies in private, many of the Kalapuya traditional ways have forever vanished (Juntunen, 2005).

Today

There are many efforts on behalf of descendants to revive what is left of the Kalapuya traditions. At the Grand Ronde Reservation, where there are now

5,600 registered members, there are efforts to share language, storytelling and traditional practices with children. Thanks to recovery work, a significant portion of language, culture and history has been restored.

Though retaining the culture of the Kalapuya people is of extreme importance, injustices towards these native people still exist; to Carol, these injustices need to be addressed before there is any more discussion of language and culture. The Kalapuya are still treated as if they no longer exist. Their burial sites throughout the Willamette valley have been and are continuing to be disturbed. Archeologists and property owners also show little understanding of the importance of burial sites and sacred grounds. This issue, according to Carol, is of utmost importance:

*"This land needs to be replenished. And so when they removed all those human remains, all the bones and everything, they took away from the Earth. So our cry is out there, is bring these human remains back, and put 'em back where they belong. Put 'em back in the Earth. [...] But they [the archeologists] don't want to do that, because they don't understand. For them, it's like, we wanna own, we wanna take control and we wanna own. It's more than that. We don't live forever. [...] our bodies go back into the Earth and our spirit and our soul travels to another place... to where the green grass grows. But it's hard explaining these things to the people, that there's other reasons of why those remains, to respect them...and that's our last resting place, and that's where they need to remain. To help the Earth. To thrive. To become - to get us nutrients back. [...] they took the nutrients, and they need to be put back."*

Many people talk as if the Kalapuya are not here. The Kalapuya people were the first inhabitants: they have always been here. Like Carol, many members are fighting to protect the rights of Native Americans in the Willamette Valley and throughout the world. Changes are starting to come about. Despite epidemics, difficult reservation life and intense acculturation that wiped out much of the oral

tradition and language, the Kalapuya have survived and will continue to thrive. They will continue to be an intricate part of the past and future of the Willamette Valley, and an intricate link in the human connection to the rivers and the earth.

Carol described to me the honor and admiration she feels for her people:

*"For me, it's like, I feel very honored, because I know our people didn't leave garbage behind, I know they utilized and I know that they said prayers seven generations ahead for all of their children, always thinking about the future coming ahead. So, when I go to that valley, I feel the prayers that our people left there for the children. Knowing how much they cared for the families, and the concern and the compassion that they had for the people - no matter what. With that freeway there - no matter what. Of the building, no matter who lives there, the farms, or whatever, I feel connected to the Earth because that's who we are ... we're Earth. And we return back to the Earth ... and nobody can ever take that away."*

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