

The First World Trade Center

By Shana Brown

Long before anyone had heard of New York City or the stock exchange, tribes along the Columbia River operated their own world trade center. It was called Celilo. Celilo Falls was located in what is now the town of The Dalles. Since **time immemorial**, tribes as far north as Alaska, as far east as the Great Lakes, and possibly as far south as Northern California gathered and traded at this sacred fishing ground. People bought, sold, and traded products from their homelands with the tribes who fished along the Columbia River and with those who traveled to the trade center too.



With the settlement of the West came non-Indian **commerce**. There were conflicts that were mostly resolved through the United States court system. In various court cases, the United States defended the **treaty rights** of local tribes against **encroachment** of non-Indians, commercial fisheries, and often the states of Oregon and Washington. Often, though, the United States was slow to act or enforce the laws that the U.S. government helped to create.

In the late 1930s, the U.S. government itself wanted to control the Columbia River, **subdue** it, and use its massive power for **hydroelectric power** generated by dams. They also wanted the Columbia's water for irrigation supplied by reservoirs that were created as a result of building those dams. This would destroy most of the sacred tribal fishing grounds, including **Kettle Falls** and Celilo Falls.

By treaty, tribes were entitled to fish at "**usual and accustomed**" fishing grounds. This included sites along the Columbia River. So, if the United States just started building the dams without permission from the tribes, they would be violating their treaties with those tribes. In short, they would be breaking their own laws.

The demands for electricity and water for irrigation were not going to go away. The U.S. government had to respond.

Another group of people who wanted to use the river was commercial fishers, non-Indian businesses who sold fish for profit. They built their fisheries along the Columbia River too, and instead of using the traditional scaffolds and dip nets, as tribal fishers had done for centuries, they used **fishing wheels**. These wheels harvested much more fish than the traditional way the Indians used. As a result, there were conflicts between the Indians and the non-Indian

fishers. Where commercial fishers built their fisheries and how they affected tribal fisheries was often a source of conflict, as well as how much fish they caught. Since the government had no formal agreements with the commercial fisheries, the fisheries really were not a part of the negotiation, though they watched closely to see what the future had in store for their businesses.

These three groups of people all wanted to use N'ichi Wana (the Wasco word for the Columbia, meaning “big water”). The **Bonneville Power Administration**, or BPA, had already dammed several portions of the Columbia River, and so many tribes knew what might be coming. Currently, there was already a canal built around Celilo Falls so that non-Indian commerce and enterprises could develop.

Find out more about the Bonneville Power Administration at http://www.bpa.gov/corporate/About_BPA/history.cfm.

Under the **Rivers and Harbors Act**, the U.S. government, through the **Bureau of Indian Affairs** (BIA), negotiated a settlement with the tribes whose custom it was to fish and trade at Celilo. This settlement required two things from the government:

- fair compensation for the economic, cultural, and religious loss of Celilo
- **in lieu fishing sites**, or at least sixty areas along the Columbia for tribal people to continue to harvest salmon. The government would either find new fishing sites or build them for the Indian people.

The BIA negotiated a 27 million dollar compensation for the tribes' loss. However, Celilo Village still languishes in disrepair, and the in lieu fishing sites are not adequate to sustain tribal life.

Tribes felt they had no choice but to negotiate. Much like the non-Indian settlement on their lands just one hundred years earlier, they knew that if they refused to negotiate some sort of compensation for their sacred falls, the falls would be taken nonetheless, and the tribes would receive nothing in return.

The Wyam people, however, did not sign the negotiation. Chief Tommy Thompson said he would not sell it.

No compensation could be made which would benefit my future generations, the people still to come.

– *Watson Totus (Yakama) during the appropriations hearings for The Dalles Dam, 7 May 1951.*

Vocabulary List

Bonneville Power Administration (BPA)	fishing wheels	subdue
Bureau of Indian Affairs	hydroelectric power	time immemorial
commerce	in lieu fishing sites	treaty rights
encroachment	Kettle Falls	usual and accustomed
	Rivers and Harbors Act	

For more background information, see <http://www.ccrh.org/comm/river/celilo.php>.