

Reproduced with permission from the Columbia River Intertribal Fish Commission (<http://www.critfc.org/text/ceremony.html>).

First Salmon Feast

The Wash'ut service, the longhouse, and the seven drums are all part of the traditional religion of the Columbia River tribes. Before tribal celebrations, commemorative or memorial services, Wash'ut prayers are offered. Water is the most essential part of all longhouse rituals and has a deep symbolic significance for tribal people.



Lonnie Selam, Sr., Yakama leader, standing inside a longhouse.

In the longhouse, the songs and ceremonies celebrating the first foods are held each year, timed to the appropriate time of its harvest. One of the most important services is the First Food Feast. This ceremony must occur before hunting, fishing, root digging, or gathering can take place. The following is a description of a First Food Feast held to celebrate the return of the salmon on May 1, 1994, at Willamette Falls, Oregon.

Standing shoulder to shoulder in two circles—women on the south and men on the north—tribal and non-tribal participants gathered inside the longhouse-style tent to witness the religious service. Drummers, in line at the front of the longhouse, began a series of prayer-songs. To their right, Tony Washines, Yakama longhouse leader, held a brass bell, ringing it and using it to count the song sequences. During the service, Wash'ut members sang, while some danced, moving with small dignified steps. Some of the songs thanked the salmon for giving its life to feed the people, while others reminded the Indian people of the traditional laws that must be observed.

“When the Creator created our Mother Earth, He gave it life,” explained Washines. “When the dawn comes on this sacred day, the light of our Father is here. This life is a sacred inherent right of our people. These songs speak of this life from the time that life began. We’ve always been alongside the animals, the trees, the grass, and all the roots that make the medicines and foods.”

He said that tribal people hold all these in great reverence “because they too have a purpose—to nourish and strengthen our hearts, our minds and our bodies.” The solemn occasion of the service gives way to a festive occasion to enjoy the company of those seated together.

While the songs were still being sung, food servers, both young women and men, gradually brought out the food and set it in front of all those assembled inside and outside the longhouse. Before the meal was eaten, Washines rang the bell as a signal for everyone to stand and join in prayer-song. The bell rang again, and participants picked up their cups of water and drank. After the traditional meal of salmon, deer or elk, roots, and berries, everyone again took a drink of water.



After the blessings, the foods, beginning and ending with water, are honored and eaten.