

# I Wish I Could Have Seen the Falls

By Carol Craig (Yakama)

*This story comes from many stories from many elders that I have listened to throughout my life.*

—Carol Craig



*Grandparents are a natural part of tribal family life, and most times they teach the grandchildren lessons about the history of the tribe as well as tradition and culture. In this story, the narrator is Chucky, an eleven-year-old Yakama boy. He lives near the Columbia River at a village site on the Oregon side of the river, as did his parents and grandparents. Chucky has his daily chores after he gets home from school. After chores, he and his Grandmother share their time talking while his mother and father are at work.*

*When fishing starts, his parents go to the river to get their share of fish to eat fresh or prepare for future use. Salmon has always been a part of their meals and is considered very important to their culture and tradition as tribal people.*

I have always learned a lot from my grandma, and she is a good teacher. She always talks about long time ago and what it was like then. As I learn from her, she tells me she did the same thing when she was young. Her grandma taught her many things, and that is why she teaches me every day.

One day I saw her looking at some old pictures. I had never seen them before.

"What are you looking at, Grandma?" I asked her.

"Come, sit down and I will tell you, Grandson. Then you will understand," she told me. "Long before any tribal people were on Mother Earth, the Creator made a very special place for the tribal people," she said. "See this picture?"

I looked and could see a huge, wide waterfall and lots of people fishing, with others just watching the fishermen.

"It was called Celilo Falls, and it means 'echo of the falling water.'"

Then Grandma showed me more pictures of the falls and all the people that came to that place along the Columbia River. Some of the pictures were so old they had a different color to them.

Grandma described what the falls were like. "You could always hear the roar of the falls.

"Even from a long distance away, the sound was always there. That's where I grew up, and I was used to the thundering noise day and night, and the mist from the falling water was everywhere," she said.

"What did you do there, Grandma?"

Grandma told me how when she was little, she would run and play all day. "The scars on my knees are from running so fast over the jagged rocks and falling down sometimes," she said.

"Gee, did you cry, Grandma?"

"No, I was having so much fun it didn't hurt. I'd dust myself off and continue playing and running. When it was time for everyone to begin fishing in the spring, you could smell the fish water," she said. "My dad and his brothers would fish, and my mother would take care of the salmon after it was caught."

Grandma told me that as soon as it got warmer, children would ask if they could go swimming in the river. "My cousins and I even had a special place on the river where we would go down and swim. And my mother always warned us not to go by ourselves. Sometimes we would go and forget to tell my mother because we were so excited. Other times, we would play down by the canal barges and the drawbridge, where the cable cars were. We'd get on and go across the water to the island," Grandma said. "Auntie or Uncle would see us and take us back to the shore. We always got caught and had to be reminded to let them know where we were going," she said.

"Did you get into trouble for that Grandma?"

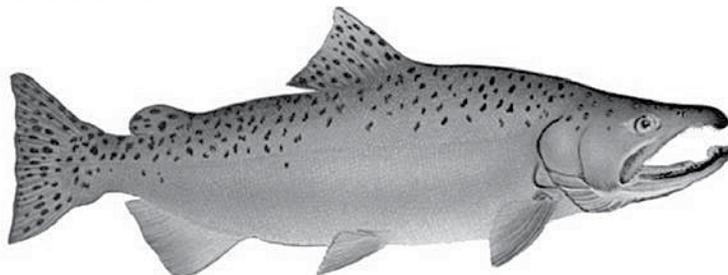
"No, they always warned us to be careful, and finally we started to tell them each time we wanted to go to the river to swim."

Grandma said a lot of people would come from a long ways just to get to that part of the river to fish. "People would travel from as far away as the Great Lakes area, Montana, the Washington Coast. They came from all over," Grandma said, her eyes sparkling. "There was dancing, games were played, and people visited, and traded."

I asked Grandma what people brought to trade.

"It was always something that we didn't have here, like buffalo hides and meat, shells from the coast, horses, baskets, and anything you could think of. The dancing started late at night and sometimes went into the daylight hours. Some of the people were known for their skills in fancy dance, war dances, and even couples who would do what we call the 'Round Dance.'"

Grandma said that as the months went by, different kinds of salmon came to the falls so they could continue their journey upriver and go where they were born. She said some of the fish would get as far as Nez Perce country and even farther.



"And the Fisheries Chief at Celilo always warned us to take only what we needed and to let some of the fish get back to where they were born to lay eggs and begin another generation. We were only 'borrowing' the fish and thinking about the future generations, so they would have fish, too," she said.

"In the springtime, it was the spring Chinook that fed us, and they were the most delicious." Grandma laughed as she remembered. "Sometimes they'd weigh as much as one hundred pounds. They were huge! The salmon would be placed on cedar boughs that were cut into long, thin pieces. The women would pierce the salmon flesh with the cedar sticks for support and one long piece of cedar went up the center of the cut salmon. Then it would be placed near the fire by digging a small hole where the stick would be pushed into the ground."



"How could they tell when it was time to turn the fish over to the other side Grandma?"

"They would touch the back of the fish and, if it was warm, then it was time to turn it around," she said. "The smoked fire gives the fish a wonderful flavor."

I knew what Grandma meant. I enjoyed eating fish every day. Grandma always told me it's like brain food. It makes me smart and helps me remember where I come from!

Grandma said that later in the year more salmon would return. She said coho and blueback, then steelhead, and, finally, fall Chinook would come up the Columbia River. "Some of the people would even catch the huge sturgeon, and that is prepared a special way because it is a whole different kind of fish," she told me.

Grandma said another delicacy for the tribal people was lamprey, or eels. "We'd get those and eat some freshly cooked, and then dry some for winter use. Celilo Falls provided much food for everyone all year round," she said. "My grandmother told me the importance of this place and how everyone treated it with respect. Everyone always thanked the Creator for providing us with such a treasure."

## **STOP HERE FOR EPISODE 1**

"Where are the falls now, Grandma?" I asked.

"Oh, long time ago the government wanted to build dams and told us we'd have to move because the new dam would flood over Celilo Falls and the village. We didn't have a choice and we had to move."

I asked Grandma when that happened and she told me it was long ago and in March of 1957.

"Where were you, Grandma?"

"I was with my two sisters, my brother, mother, father, grandmother, and grandfather, standing on the hillside when it happened. Once the dam was built, they closed the huge concrete gates which stopped the flow of the river, and the water began rising. We stood in our buckskin dresses and regalia to honor and mourn the loss," Grandma said.

"It took almost eight hours before Celilo Falls was completely covered over. Some of the people in the village were so hurt that day that they left because they didn't want to see the falls disappear. People that stayed at the village had their drums and they were

pounding them. They were crying, they were praying, and there was much sadness with the loss of Celilo Falls."

Grandma's hand held many of the pictures of the falls as she looked outside the window. I looked up at her and she had tears in her eyes as she stared at the river. I grabbed her hand and said, "Come on, Grandma, let's pray to the Creator to forgive what happened here."

She looked down at me and said, "You are right, my grandson. We have to go on, but we don't ever want to forget this place because it is a part of us. It is who we are."

I know that every time I talk with my grandma, I will learn something new. As I stood with her that day, I thought to myself, *I wish I could have seen Celilo Falls so I could run and play, feel the mist on my face and hear the roar of the water as it rushed over the rocks.* Now I understand how important the falls were to my family and their family before that.

**THE END**

