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## Worldviews And The American West

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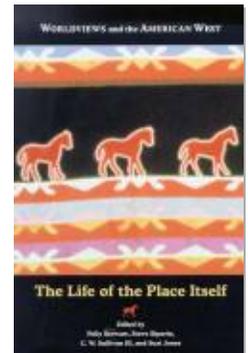
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# The Coquelle Indians and the Cultural "Black Hole" of the Southern Oregon Coast

George B. Wasson

From my childhood on, I have heard people remark, "Indians never forget. They're always bringing up things from the past." Growing up with one foot in Anglo culture and the other in Southern Oregon coastal Indian culture, I used to wonder about that and felt a little anxious because it seemed to be true. Yet at the same time I knew that the past should not be forgotten but should be carefully told over and over again. Sometimes—as in the telling of stories about Talapus (Old Man Coyote) and about his power (*tamanawis*) that could be used to make his escapades work for good or ill—it seemed that the old people were still living in the olden days and couldn't tell the difference. At other times I'd hear stories or remarks about present-day happenings that brought in the past and wrapped past and present up together. It has taken me decades of experience and reflection to begin to understand that for traditionally minded Indians the past doesn't go away but is present and makes us who and what we are now.

The seeds for my understanding this were planted one day in about 1947 when I was visiting my Aunt Daisy at Empire. She was having some kind of disagreement with people down on South Slough and she was raving about their eternal stupidity or something like that. I made the mistake—as I reflect on it now, a fortunate mistake—of asking her what she meant. Aunt Daisy exclaimed something like, "They don't even know how to cook beans or make coffee. They just boil the coffee beans and pour off the water, then they throw flour on each other's faces and yell, 'Look, now we're white men.'" I asked who, and what flour, and she snapped impatiently about "those soldiers out there" giving the flour to them. I hadn't known about any soldiers down at Charleston, but I knew that World War II had ended not too long before and I wondered whether some of them had

stayed hidden down there. I was startled, puzzled, yet I knew when not to ask Aunt Daisy more questions.

Twenty-five years later I read about the Jedediah Smith expedition that came up the Oregon Coast in 1828. My great-grandfather, Kitzn-Jin-Jn-Galada-Lui, head man of the Miluks, of lower Coos Bay, took a delegation of three hundred men to greet the Smith party when they arrived at Cape Arago and lead them to a campsite on South Slough. He prepared a lavish feast for them, provisioned them with fresh meat, and helped them negotiate local estuaries as they left, heading north (George B. Wasson, Sr., unpublished papers in author's possession). It may well have been the Smith party that introduced the Miluks to dried beans and how to cook them—a gift of gratitude in exchange for hospitality. Then in 1851, the military ship *Captain Lincoln* foundered on the North Spit. The South Slough residents helped the soldiers salvage their stores and were rewarded with coffee beans and flour. So, knowing how to boil beans to get them tender enough to eat, they put the coffee beans into pots of water and put in hot stones to cook them. Dark foul water resulted, which they carefully poured off, starting over again. Someone opened a sack of the flour, totally strange to them, and as they saw it turning their hands and arms white, they began covering their faces also, shouting and laughing, “Look, now we're just like white men” (Daisy Wasson Coddling, periodic personal communications).

Then it came clear to me. Time had not passed away, leaving the events of the past dim, forgotten. The antics of those South Slough relatives were as vibrant in memory in 1947 as they had been nearly a century before. Aunt Daisy was responding to their foolishness as she had learned it from her mother and grandmother. The present is a compilation of memory of all the events that have ever happened.

For Indians, time is an expansion of experience. Time is spherical. Time is a record of the memory of expenditure of energy. All that has ever happened is memorized and becomes compacted around us just as sound waves emanate from a source and float out all around. Some events are so dynamic in their meaning and effect that they do not dissipate as quickly as other happenings. They might hang nearby as a cloud or fog waiting to be reactivated in the present, where those memories are as current as what's happening right now. If it is worth saying once, it's worth saying over and over: Time is a spherical record of memories of the expenditure of energy. Our past is our present.

Hence, I describe, in the present study, the nineteenth-century events leading to a cultural “black hole” and the devastating effect of this development on today's concerns just as it has been all along for the people of the Southern Oregon coast. For many generations before white contact, the Indian cultures of Oregon's south coast were vigorous and eclectic, yet these cultures were vanquished in a shockingly brief period once continuous contact had

become a fact. The devastation was so sudden and so far-reaching that to call the event a holocaust—the Oregon holocaust—is not unreasonable. Mass killings of Indian people and the burning of villages, often with the inhabitants inside their plank houses, swept northward from California in the early 1850s—to Gunther Island, Yontoket, Chetco, Chet-Less-Chun-Dunn, Nasomah, and hundreds more in between.<sup>1</sup>

The genocide left a gaping hole where there had once been cultures. To describe it, I have adopted the concept of the cultural “black hole,” under which, as Homer Barnett states, surviving descendants “retained only a few relics of their indigenous culture” (Barnett 1983, 157). Because of the short span between the onset of white contact and the destruction of native cultural, spiritual, and physical integrity, little knowledge has been produced and preserved through scientific research. As observer T. T. Waterman was to sum up the situation in 1931, “A number of ethnologists worked in . . . [the Southern Oregon coast] prior to the writer’s advent . . . but relatively little concerning these groups has found its way into print” (Waterman, 6). Because the people and their villages and lifeways were so thoroughly destroyed, only bits and pieces of Indian culture and language have survived.

The Coquilles, or Coquelles—until recently the common spelling was not Coquille but Coquelle (Zenk 1990, 579), pronounced Ko-Kwel’ as in tribal use today—are a group from that black hole. (In the present study the spelling “Coquille” is retained in the context of map features and other official names.) I propose to look at the “few relics” of knowledge about the Coquelles in an effort to reconstruct as nearly as possible their lost cultural heritage. My approach will be in part to examine characteristics of neighboring tribes for whom there is fairly adequate information, to draw parallel inferences about the lost information, and in part to draw upon the oral traditions of surviving descendants of the Coquille black hole, largely my own family.

The antiquity of human occupation in the Coquille territory has been suggested by archaeological investigations and amateur discoveries at Camas Valley on the Upper Coquille River drainage ranging from 4,500 years before the present (BP) to as much as 11,500 years BP. At the Standley site in Camas Valley, obsidian hydration evidence indicates that occupation may have begun between 4,500 and 5,000 BP. (Additional fragments of clay figurines discovered there date between 1,100 and 400 BP [Connolly 1991, 1]). Archaeological research at the Indian Sands site in Curry County, just south of the Coquelles, has revealed occupation dates as early as 8,200 years BP (Erlandson and Moss 1994). The discovery in Camas Valley of a Clovis-type point made from chert indigenous to that specific area (Wallmann 1994; Erlandson and Moss 1994) dates human occupation of the Upper Coquille territory to as much as 11,500 years BP.

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Today's Coquille Indian tribal members are descended from people who once lived in villages at South Slough and Coos Bay, in villages along the Coquille River, and in coastal villages as far south as the Sixes River (see map). Many are related through intertribal marriage to the Coos, Umpqua, Siuslaw, Tututni, Shasta Costa, Chetco, and Tolowa tribes (though because of a complex series of land claims based upon oral testimony, to be discussed in detail in appendix B, below, the Coquelles and the Coos today are recognized by the federal government as two separate tribes).

Along the coast, the dominant language of the Lower Coquelles (aside from Chinook Jargon, the *lingua franca* of the entire Pacific Northwest) was Miluk, a Kusan (or Coosan) dialect, while that of the inland Upper Coquelles was a dialect of Athabaskan. It is likely that tribal members, whether Lower or Upper Coquille, also spoke many neighboring languages (Hall 1984, 20; 140-41). Among the Coquelles, for whom village and family life was patrilocal, it was incumbent upon a woman to know or learn the language of her husband's village, to which she moved from her home village. It also seems probable that every young woman had, by the time of her marriage, already learned the several languages her mother spoke. Support for a hypothesis regarding the special multilinguality of women can be noted in the number of multilingual female informants from whom linguists and ethnographers collected language information for the Coos-Coquille area. My forebears Susan Adulsah Wasson and her mother Gishgiu were each known to have spoken several languages and dialects fluently (George B. Wasson Sr., and Daisy Wasson Codding, periodic personal communications).

Social and political leadership among villages and extended-family bands was acknowledged through group deference to dominant wealthy headmen or to shamans with especially prominent healing powers. (While shamanic medicine was practiced by both men and women, all people sought personal spiritual power through fasting, prayer, and vision quests.) The presence of slavery, not unknown to the Coquelles but less common among them than among the more northerly tribes of the Northwest Coast, along with evidence of wealth accumulation and a form of potlatch suggest that Coquille culture included elements from farther up the Northwest Coast. On the other hand, Coquille dance forms, ceremonial clothing, and accouterments of spirituality, including reverence for flicker feathers and redheaded woodpecker scalps, showed relation to their southern neighbors—Tututnis, Chetcos, Tolowas, and Yuroks.

The Coquille cultural area approximates the drainage of the Coquille River, bounded by Floras Creek on the south, South Slough on the north, and the crest of the Coastal Range on the east, a geography that encompasses all landforms and all soil, plant, and animal types of Western Oregon. There are high prairies and coastal mountain meadows containing lush grasses that once sustained large populations of Roosevelt elk and black-tailed deer.

Valleys were once loaded with roots and bulbs for annual harvests, while the rivers and streams extending to the ocean produced abundant fish, eels, shellfish, and sea mammals. Forests furnished the now-rare Port Orford cedar for canoes and western red cedar for plank houses. The land also yielded the widest variety of basketry materials available anywhere along the West Coast.

Coquille canoes (carved most desirably from Port Orford white cedar) were basically of "shovel-nose" design, though canoes with special high prows were carved for ocean going (G. B. Wasson, Sr., cited in Harrington 1943). Oral legend tells that one such canoe carried a whole village full of Coquille people across the Pacific Ocean to escape annihilation by vengeful Chetco-Tolowas. As an indication of the seaworthiness of the Coquille ocean-going canoe, speakers of Miluk, the dominant Lower Coquille dialect, have been found living in Japan (Hall 1984, 35). The manufacture of baskets, nets, twine, and other woven materials was among the traditional industries of all Oregon coastal peoples. The Coquille and their neighbors lived amid abundant resources for those weaving materials. In 1817, trader Peter Corney commented on a friendly encounter with southern coastal people: "They . . . brought some berries, fish, and handsome baskets for sale. These men were tall and well formed, their garment made of dressed deerskins, with a small round hat, in the shape of a basin, that fitted close round the head; none of the women made their appearance" (Beckham 1977, 103). Such hats were reportedly customary for the Coos and Coquilles as well. (It is worth noting that although only men were in the canoes to greet Corney's sailors, his description of the hats they were wearing matches that of the basket hats worn traditionally by Coos, Coquille, and Yurok women still today.) Though knowledge of gathering, preparation, and weaving has been almost entirely lost due to the cultural annihilation of the black hole, a few weavers in Southern Oregon and Northern California have learned traditional practices from older people, thereby keeping alive those secrets and skills at which Coquille basketmakers once were counted among the most proficient.

The importance of baskets and other woven materials (twine, rope, mats, and wickerwork) in the cultures of the coastal people is strongly indicated by mention of them in creation myths. Two mythical beings used baskets in creating the world, for example, splitting them open flat and laying them out to protect the newly forming land mass from erosion by ocean waves (Frachtenberg 1913, 5; Jacobs 1940, 239-40). The story implies that basketry, older than humans, comprises the cultural center for coastal tribes. The antiquity of the art is demonstrable in any case. Buried in the mud and silt of the Coquille River, at the Osprey Site near Bullards State Park, archaeologists found openwork woven structures of willow and split cedar, along with numerous fish weir stakes, radiocarbon dated to between 600 and 1,100 years old (Moss and Erlandson 1994). A traditionally woven basket was earlier

recovered from the silt just upriver at the Philpott Site, but treatment with linseed oil has rendered it undatable by radiocarbon methods.

Basketry materials such as bear grass and hazel required "burning off" prior to collection and preparation for weaving. Each fall, people would go to the mountains and set fires in the areas where the best grass and sticks were growing. When they returned the following summer, the bear grass would have grown into fresh clumps ready for harvesting. Hazel needed to grow for another season after burning and was harvested the following spring when the sap started flowing again (Thompson [1916] 1991, 331). Burning, a necessary technology for many aspects of tribal life, was applied to control weeds and to produce new shoots for berry production. The Kalapuya seasonally burned the Willamette Valley to enhance the harvest of tarweed seeds (*Lemolo sapolil*, "wild grain" in Chinook Jargon), and by this practice made it a garden-like parkland (Boag 1992). Regular burning not only prevented the growth of brush and cleared out the understory of old-growth forests, it also produced extensive grassy prairies on the ridges and southwestern slopes of the coastal mountains. On these ridges, people dug deep pits, staggered in series along a ridge line; here immense elk herds could be driven and some elk would inevitably fall in. Seasonal burning along the Oregon coast was so regular and noteworthy that the area was known to some sailors as Fire Land. Smoke shrouded the coastal mountains, and fires could be seen burning the entire length of the coast.

Surely there has never existed a more spiritual and ritualized relationship between humans and fish than flourished among the cultural groups of the Northwest Coast and their beloved salmon. So special were salmon to the Coquelles, as to other coastal people, that a highly sacred ceremony was performed upon the arrival of the first salmon. There was an obvious intent to pay honor and tribute to the salmon for returning again to the streams where the people could obtain them for food. A common and primary element of those rituals required that the bones of the honored fish be maintained intact. The flesh was cooked and shared with many people and eaten ritually with great reverence. The whole skeleton was then placed in the water, usually with the head pointed upstream to ensure that the salmon would continue to multiply and return the next season. Salmon fishing was done primarily in the streams, where weirs were constructed to either catch the fish in basket-like traps or contain them in areas where they could be readily speared or dipped out in hand nets.

One of the stories of "Old Man Coyote," collected by John P. Harrington from Coquel Thompson, an Upper Coquille informant, told of a notable fish dam on the Coquille River and of how the place came to be called *Thet-suh-wuh-let-sluh-dunn* ("place where two large round stones are located on either side of the water"). This place, where there was a riffle, lies on the Upper Coquille River somewhere upstream from the present town of Myrtle Point at

a broad stretch of gravel bar. There, in late summer in time for the September salmon run, the Upper Coquelles built a fish weir and a salmon trap, an immense dam of willow stakes driven straight down into the gravel bottom, which spanned the full width of the river. The construction of this dam was a great undertaking and required extensive communal effort to cut, sharpen, and pound the great stakes into place and weave smaller branches between them to form the secure barricade fence. (Such an enormous salmon weir always seemed to be of special importance to all the people along that river. Each coastal stream with a salmon run had reason to have such a structure, and people who were dedicated and accomplished enough to build one that reached from shore to shore had reason to be proud. The larger the dam, the more prestige it bestowed on the builders.)

No one seems to know where Coyote was coming from on the occasion recounted in the following story, or just why, but he was poling his way upstream in his canoe—along with his current wife, the former Mrs. Fishduck—when his progress was halted by the enormous salmon weir. Coyote tried to push his way through, but the structure was too sturdy. True to form, he became angry and vowed to smash through. So he went back down stream and loaded two large round boulders into the bow of his canoe and placed his wife at the stern. Though pushing against the current, Coyote was determined to break through the barricade; but his attempts were too feeble and he failed. At last, in a fit of rage, he poled as fast and hard as he could and broke through. But just as he got to the upstream side, his pole slipped, he lost his balance, and the current threw his canoe back against the weir, flipped it up on end, catapulted the boulders out onto either shore, and dumped Coyote and his wife into the water. Using *tamanawis*, the magical powers of his mind, Coyote brought the canoe up from under the swift current and quietly took his wife back downstream. That's why the place was called *thet* (stones) *suh-wuh-let* (spherical) *sluh-dunn* (on opposite sides of the water-place) (Wasson 1991:86).

Thus was the culture of the south coastal tribes constituted—by inference and analogy and legend—prior to contact with whites. The earliest white visitors found the people of the coast attractive and sociable—“tolerably well limbed” and preferring “cleanliness of body to tattoos.” In 1792, Captain George Vancouver, while exploring along the Northwest Coast, anchored his ship somewhere between Cape Blanco and Port Orford. Vancouver's surgeon and botanist, Dr. Archibald Menzies, wrote in his diary about the encounter between the ship's men and the Indians who paddled out to meet them: “[T]hey were of a middling size with mild pleasing features & nowise sullen or distrustful in their behaviour, they were of a copper colour but cleanly, as we observed no vestige of greasy paint or ochre about their faces or among their hair. . . .” (Beckham 1977, 102). Twenty-five years later, the fur trader Peter Corney sailed along this same section of the coast. Observing many villages

along the shore, he led in close and also met some of the Tututni Indians. He noted: "About noon, several canoes came off within hail of the ship; we waved to them to come closer, which they did, displaying green boughs and bunches of white feathers; they stopped paddling, and one man, whom we took to be the chief, stood up, and made a long speech, which we did not understand. We then waved a white flag, and they immediately pulled for the ship singing all the way. . . ." Corney observed that the Tututni men were "tall and well formed" (Beckham 1977, 102).

Soon enough, white explorers, trappers, and missionaries were streaming to the Pacific Northwest. By the middle of the nineteenth century most of the West Coast was populated with white miners and settlers. Because the rugged Coast Range made the Coquille-occupied portion of the Oregon coast nearly inaccessible from the east and the rugged coastline did likewise from the west, it was protected from direct white culture contact until the 1850s, long after the rest of the coast had been affected. Even so, the Coquille were not immune to germ-borne illness brought by whites. Diseases of European origin—gonorrhea, syphilis, measles, and smallpox—had been decimating the native populations along the Northwest coast since the late 1700s. Between 1829 and 1832, "the fevers" swept along the Columbia River, up the Willamette Valley, and on over to the Rogue River Valley and jumped across to the Sacramento Valley, killing up to 90 percent of the village inhabitants in some places (Drucker 1965, 64, 197–98). Archaeological and ethnohistorical findings indicate that the people of the Southern Oregon coast were not spared from these devastations and that an equally high percentage of their populations were wiped out in the same manner at about the same time. An early traveler up the Coquille River reported seeing hundreds of Indians working on fish weirs, while a few years later the same area was described as having only a few workers in those same locations (Chase 1873).

It became inevitable that with the clash of interests and the imbalance of technologies, incoming whites would sooner or later make life difficult for native peoples and would subsequently blame their victims by characterizing them negatively. The writing of Orvil Dodge provides a sample of settlers' attitudes toward the local Indians. In his 1898 book, *Pioneer History of Coos & Curry Counties, Oregon*, Dodge opines,

No wonder this favoured spot, where food and even luxuries abounded so plentiful, was inhabited with a class of swarthy, indolent Indians who had but little ambition or energy. They were square built and of medium height and those in the northern part of the county, who inhabited Coos bay and its tributaries and the various branches of the Coquille river, were naturally peaceable and friendly to the pioneers, in fact they never became hostile, and it is a fact that is not questioned, that in the early settlement north of Port

Orford there were no massacres so common in the early settlements of the great West, and there were no more tragedies than is common among the Anglo-Saxon or white citizens of this country. (Dodge [1898] 1969)

Setting aside this Anglo-Saxon's inadvertent self-condemnation in the last line quoted, and notwithstanding his characterization of Indians as "indolent," the native people were quite industrious, as indicated by A. W. Chase in his observation (above) of hundreds of Indians working on the fish weirs along the Coquille.

Dodge is moreover silent on a massacre perpetrated by whites against the Coquelles and their neighbors which in one swift move effectively wiped out the native culture of the Central Oregon coast and made way for untrammelled white settlement. Early on the morning of January 28, 1854, the Nasomah village of the Lower Coquille was brutally attacked and destroyed by a mob of forty miners from the nearby diggings at Randolph. Two of the main instigators were named Packwood and Soapy. A week later, an investigative agent named Smith wrote the following report: "A most horrid massacre, or rather an out-and-out barbarous mass murder, was perpetrated upon a portion of the Nasomah Band residing at the mouth of the Coquille River on the morning of January 28th by a party of 40 miners. The reason assigned by the miners, by their own statements, seem trivial. However, on the afternoon preceding the murders, the miners requested the chief to come in for a talk. This he refused to do. . . ." The report goes on to say that a meeting was held and a courier was dispatched to obtain the assistance of twenty more miners from nearby Randolph. Smith further reports,

At dawn the following day, led by one Abbott, the ferry party and the 20 miners, about 40 in all, formed three detachments, marched upon the Indian ranches and consummated a most inhuman slaughter. . . . The Indians were aroused from sleep to meet their deaths with but a feeble show of resistance; shot down as they were attempting to escape from their houses. Fifteen men and one Squaw were killed, two Squaws badly wounded. On the part of the white men, not even the slightest wound was received. The houses of the Indians, with but one exception, were fired and destroyed. Thus was committed a massacre too inhuman to be readily believed. (Peterson and Powers 1952, 89)

Survivors were herded into temporary concentration camps or dumped onto the reservations of inland tribes, and in less than two years, except for the families of Indian women who were married to white men, the coastal people were gone. The effect on the culture of the Coquelles and their close neighbors was devastating. Yet through the years, bits and pieces of tradition

and cultural spirit remained alive among survivors or were placed on record for scientific posterity. A few anthropologists and self-appointed historians recognized the enormity of the obliteration and felt compelled to save or write something of the cultures, however small.

The history taught in Oregon schools is only the official version of Oregon history. There are other truths. For instance, while it is true that the settlers did not have to fight the Kalapuyas, Mollalas, Luckiamutes, or any others to obtain control and possession of the splendid parkland that was the Willamette Valley, those native peoples had already been destroyed by the fevers of 1829–1832, and their villages had become ghost towns whose scattered survivors remained in permanent shock, as though mowed down by a Vietnam War. To the settlers' good fortune, the remaining Indians had been gathered by Jason Lee and his helpers to the Methodist Mission near Salem, "a virtual death camp" (Stephen Dow Beckham, personal communication, 1974), even though the internees were supposedly there as recipients of Christian charity.

It was quite different on the coast in the later 1850s, when the Southern Oregon Indians were herded to a government concentration camp at Yachats. There was no Christian charity here. Yachats was an extermination camp; many interned therein had survived village massacres. Of the more than 2,000 at Yachats, only 260 were covered by the signed treaties of 1855; the rest, from Southwest Oregon (including the Coos and Coquelles), were simply dumped in with them. The provisions supposedly guaranteed by treaty seldom arrived and if they did were too meager to divide among all the starving. In the first decade, fully half died from starvation or from drowning while attempting to obtain mussels for food. These concentration camp facts have never been told in school history books.

With the loss of family and group integrity necessary for appropriate spiritual guidance, many Indians fell victim to moral decay and social chaos. This was especially the plight of younger women, who learned from experience with soldiers and miners how to survive through use of their bodies for sexual purposes. Other examples of social dissolution are recorded. One jealous woman punished a woman from another tribal area who was an "unpurchased wife" of her husband. (According to Miller and Seaburg [1990, 585], "To be respectable a woman had to be purchased in marriage.") The outsider was pounced upon, beaten, and dragged to the fire where her undergarments were ripped off and she was sexually humiliated. In a second, similar incident, the offending woman was chastised with a firebrand. (Jacobs 1939, 116, 117). In a third incident, a young Miluk woman was murdered by a drunken miner. Struggling against his attempts to rape her, she got away and ran down the beach to hide, but he caught up with her and, finding her desperately stuffing sand into her vagina, killed her (Hall 1984, 105).

My own great-grandmother Gishgiu (“Gekka”), as the wife of a local headman, went with the American soldiers in good faith, first to the concentration camp at Reedsport and then on to Yachats, because she believed that the 1851 treaty signed by her husband, Kitzn-Jin-Jn, would eventually be honored (see appendix A, *Treaties and Land Claims*). However, conditions there continued to be so bad that she lost faith in the word of the American government and ran away. My father and his sisters—Aunt Lolly, Aunt Daisy, and Aunt Mary—often told me, when I was growing up, the story of their grandmother Gekka running away and coming back to South Slough. Diving into the ocean, she swam around the major headlands such as Cape Perpetua and the Sea Lion Caves to evade the soldiers on the trail above. Hiding in brush during the daytime, she walked the long beaches at night, arriving at Coos Bay through the sand dunes. At the turn of high tide, Gishgiu entered the water and swam with the ebb-flow until it carried her across and down to South Slough. There she walked up the slough to near her daughter’s home and made herself a comfortable den in a hollow log not far away. At night, Gekka made contact with her daughter, Susan Adulsah, who gave her food. They met secretly that way, until Susan’s husband, my grandfather George R. Wasson, became suspicious of his wife talking to someone in her Indian language late at night. He usually thought nothing of her getting up and doing things in the middle of the night, but this became more secretive, and when he discovered that his mother-in-law was living not far away in a hollow cedar log, he insisted that she move into the house with them where she belonged. However, the soldiers from Fort Yamhill had orders to round up runaway Indians, and a detachment was sent out to scour the country where they might be hiding.

One day when grandfather was out in the logging woods with his bull team, word came to the house that two soldiers were headed there to take Gekka back to Yachats. Quickly, the women emptied the storage space behind the living-room staircase and tiny Gishgiu crawled back under the bottom step. Then all the boxes and trunks were shoved into place as though nothing more could possibly be under there. While the soldiers were ransacking the house looking for Gishgiu, some of the younger kids, caught up in the excitement of a game with real soldiers, were running around pointing to the bottom step of the stairs saying “Gekka, Gekka.” The soldiers, having no idea what they were hearing, just pushed the kids out of the way as they hurried with their search, pounding the floor with their rifle butts, looking for loose boards under which the old woman could be hidden. One of the older children slipped away and raced through the woods to summon Grandpa for help. They say Grandpa Wasson was a big man, and no two soldiers could stand up to his fury. He marched into his house, grabbed them both by the back of their necks, and threw them out into the yard—or, some say, through the parlor window. He told them to never come back, and they

didn't. Gishgiu lived out the remainder of her days with the family, mending clothes, which she could do even though blind by then, doing the things an old grandmother would need to do while sitting in the dark.

In 1853, my grandfather had built the first log cabin at Empire on Coos Bay. By 1856, nearly all of the older Indians had been either killed off or taken away to reservations. My father was born in 1880, the first generation after the coming of the white man. His mother, Susan Adulsah, didn't want to hold him back by hindering him socially with the use of her native languages, so she insisted that he learn English and become educated in the best possible schools. He attended school first at Chemawa. Later he attended the military-style Indian school directed by Captain Richard H. Pratt at Carlisle, Pennsylvania, one of a number of schools founded as part of a massive government program to "kill the Indian and educate the man." Carlisle was free to Indians, so he went there, in 1898, and it changed his life forever. His first choice for a course of study was law, which was acceptable to the school officials. As was the case for students at Carlisle and at all other Indian schools, though, he was also required to learn a trade so he might have a realistic chance at success later on, as it was well understood that Indians could never be successful at professions requiring a college degree. He became a tailor—quite a good one. I am sure he would have liked to practice law, but that was not his destiny. His knowledge of law, though, was beneficial to the Indians back home in Coos Bay. The tailoring never brought much income other than small amounts to cover his meager living expenses. Indians of Western Oregon pledged monthly donations to support his trips to Washington, D.C., but seldom could fulfill their commitments.

My father was destined to spend his adult life as a go-between in the two worlds of Indian and white man, struggling to explain each to the other, never having an opportunity just to be himself in either. That was a common story for many capable and intelligent young Indians just after the turn of the century. The land, hunting and fishing rights, culture, and traditions were all gone with the unratified treaties of 1855. Language was of little use, except for talking with old people or for keeping nosy whites from understanding personal conversations. For most young people, the stigma of being Indians (or "half-breeds") was a major obstacle, and the ability to "talk Indian" was not a quality to show off in public. Moreover, speaking in native languages was a punishable offense in the government schools. Not surprisingly, young Indians all over the country grew up with little or no access to their native languages. Along with loss of language came the loss of cultural and spiritual traditions and tribal identity, as well as anxiety and frustration for young Indians who still knew the major concepts of their ancestral culture—knew how different these were from concepts of the dominant Anglophone culture—and yet were denied self-expression in the home languages so vital to their ancestral heritage.

Some families maintained a steadfast interest and a determined effort to keep ideas and traditions alive, if not in actual practice, then in family memories. So it was in my family. We cared about our history and traditions and never hesitated to let it be known we were Indians. Without our language, though, it was difficult to defend our cultural heritage and pride against the derision of others who mocked Indians in general. Among my siblings, it was my brother Wilfred and I who went on to college and who gathered information on our tribe's culture and history, but there were many times that I realized how limited my knowledge was compared to the vast amount of culture that had been lost to disuse or obliterated by the government policy of "kill the Indian and educate the man." The product of this policy was the cultural black hole. My brother and I had not grown up on a reservation like "real Indians," and we could not prove our tribal background because at that time we were not even from a federally recognized tribe.

At college, I was mortified to realize that I did not know the names and locations of the major tribes in the United States. I did not know the histories of U. S.-Indian relationships. I did not even know the full history of my own tribe's treaty, our language, or our culture, and the more Indians I met the more inadequate I felt. I finally completed my undergraduate degree and immediately entered into a master's program in counseling. At the same time, I was offered and accepted a position as an assistant dean of students at the university. Because I proudly claimed my Indianness, other administrators expected me to be able to answer any questions concerning all Indians and to relate in a "culturally correct" manner to the other Indians on campus, whatever tribe they came from and whatever problem they had for the university to solve. I barely knew my own tribe's culture and history, and my problem was now compounded enormously by not knowing about other Indians as well. One solution was to read and study all I could about all Indians in America. That was a monumental task, and it would lead me into more years of study and research and would demand more skills than I had. It sometimes seemed hopeless.

Through the 1970s and 1980s, there was a major search for self-awareness among concerned Indians all across the country. However, there was no grand plan, no road map or formula, for young Indians to follow in finding themselves in the big picture of the American Indian cultural-historical milieu. All tribes or nations were affected to one degree or another by the black hole, but each was in a different situation—in a different boat (or canoe as it were), adrift, without adequate knowledge of navigation and with no obvious means of propulsion.

Some tribal people were removed from their home areas, relocated into urban settings, and offered education and retraining opportunities at government expense. They were not warned that they would be left to fend for

themselves in those urban areas with their newly acculturated skills and training, nor did they receive any help to prepare them for this eventuality.

It seemed as though the ancient flood myth of the Coos Bay area was being lived out again, wherein the People who had rushed to their canoes in advance of the rising waters were set adrift, except for those who had prepared by stashing long ropes in their canoes. They could tie up to the tops of the tallest fir trees on the mountaintops and gradually let themselves back down as the waters receded. Those with shorter ropes either capsized or were forced to cut loose; those with no ropes at all were swept far away into another land.

Perhaps that old story equates to the tribal people who were able to maintain their cultural integrity through the years of acculturation while others ignored their cultural background and drifted into the mainstream or "melting pot" of dominant society. Not all Indians experienced a loss of self-identity, but such was the case for nearly all of those tribal members and descendants from the federally terminated tribes of the 1950s. These terminations, along with federal policies of acculturation, thoroughly undermined the cultural integrity of tribes, including the Coquelles and other small Oregon tribes. The struggle for self-awareness and self-sufficiency has produced extensive social and political schisms among Coquelle tribal members and between the tribe and outside public agencies. Many young tribal members are desperate to understand the overall processes of cultural change and cultural loss experienced by earlier generations. Indications of the extensive variety of lost languages, myths, tales, and cultural traditions in the Pacific Northwest (and most particularly in Southwestern Oregon), now lost, can be noted in the writings of Melville Jacobs, who said that before 1750 the Pacific Northwest

had sixty to seventy Indian languages, two to three thousand bands, hamlets, or villages, and something under, around, or over two hundred thousand people. This hunting-fishing-gathering population could once have yielded a million or more versions of myths, smaller numbers of tales, and no one can estimate how much of other oral genres. . . . Myths of most variable merit that have been collected over the region total less than a thousand and will never exceed that number. Tales amount to a few hundred, forever so. The bleak harvest is . . . maybe one percent of what could have been obtained if the culture-bound, condescending, and racist invaders had had the slightest capacity to perceive merit in the heritages of non-Europeans. By the time anyone with such capacity went to work, native humiliation and extinction had erased almost everything. Folklore-oriented linguists . . . arrived too late after the pioneers had trampled upon and destroyed the Indians. (Jacobs 1972)

In pondering the analogy of a “cultural black hole” on the Southern Oregon coast, we can note that the black holes of outer space are thought to absorb and condense all available matter within reach but then to be no longer visible or identifiable to the outside observer. Only research from an inside perspective will reveal the lost information so vital to the reculturation of the Coquelles and their neighbors. Meanwhile, the effect of the black hole on the tribes of Southern Oregon was an American holocaust. Just as the holocaust in Germany must be taught and remembered, so must the holocaust in Oregon be taught in our schools, so Oregonians and other Americans will know the true history. That knowledge might better ensure that such a holocaust will never happen again.

## APPENDIX A

### *Treaties and Land Claims*

Coquelle headmen signed the treaty of 1855 with the United States Government (the unratified Port Orford treaty of 1851 also identified several signatories as Coquelle Indians, some of whom were actually Coos), which would have ceded tribal land to the United States in return for a reservation and various tribal rights. Although the treaty was never ratified by Congress, the survivors of the Rogue River Wars of 1856 (survivors also of earlier village massacres by white miners and of U.S. Army retaliations) were marched overland or shipped up the coast by steamers to concentration camps at Reedsport and Yachats. Some were moved later to the Siletz Reservation, while many others died or ran away.

In 1916 George Bundy Wasson began investigating Indian land claims based primarily on broken or unratified treaties and “began a thirty-year campaign for claims settlements in western Oregon” (Beckham 1990, 186). For eleven years he lobbied Congress and finally won permission to go to court in 1929. According to Beckham,

The concern about injustice, legal rights, and land claims was voiced most clearly by the Coos, lower Umpqua, and Siuslaw. These three tribes—operating as one unit since their treaty agreement with Joel Palmer in 1855—pioneered in using the “system.” Their efforts, which set a pattern for other Indian groups throughout the Pacific Northwest, began in 1916. In the summer of that year, George Bundy Wasson, a graduate of Chemawa and Carlisle, went to Washington D. C. to investigate the Indian land claim. Wasson had grown up on his mother’s allotment on South Slough on Coos Bay. That trip began eleven lonely and frustrating years of lobbying by these Indians. Like other American Indians they were prohibited by law

from suing the United States government. To bring a suit for their land claims, the Coos, Lower Umpqua, and Siuslaw had to gain a special act of Congress. Not until 1929 did Congress pass the measure which permitted them to go to court.

Case K-345, the lawsuit of the Coos, lower Umpqua, and Siuslaw for settlement of land claims, took nine years to get a judgment in the Court of Claims. During all of the time between 1917 and 1938 these Indians had to pay for their own legal expenses. . . . Each family that could gave \$5.00 a month to help pay for George Wasson's trips to Washington, D.C., and to pay for the work of the Attorneys. (Beckham 1977, 37)

In 1931, George Bundy Wasson called upon the most knowledgeable members of the Coos and Coquelle tribes to provide evidence for aboriginal land claims. Court-appointed clerks took Indian testimony in North Bend, Oregon. Seventeen members of the tribes spoke, several of them in their native languages. The aged James Buchanan was one who remembered much of what had happened. In 1875 he had spoken at the Yachats Conference and protested against the closing of the Alsea Reservation. Now in 1931 he spoke again for his people and their land claim. Lottie Evanoff named the villages and fishing places. George, Maggie Sacchi, Annie Peterson, Laura Metcalf, Frances Elliot, and Mrs. William Waters spoke.

On April 2, 1945, the federal Court of Claims decided favorably for the Coquelles and for other coastal groups. The United States Supreme Court overruled an appeal by the Justice Department on November 25, 1946. The case was finally closed in 1950, awarding \$1.20 per acre for 722,530 acres. Coquelle descendants were awarded an inheritance of \$3,128,000, and after numerous federal deductions, the remainder equaled approximately \$2,000 per person. Final settlement was made in per-capita payments, by which the total was divided equally among eligible tribal enrollees—a stratagem that had the unfortunate effect of watering down the payment.

Perhaps the tribal members were glad to get something at last for all they had lost by not having a treaty and giving up all of their land. It seems as though they believed that the end of their status as a legitimate Indian tribe was at hand. It surely seemed impossible to fight the federal government's efforts to destroy their "Indianness" and render them virtually persons without identity, as had already been done to the Coos, Lower Umpqua, and Siuslaw.

The Coos and Coquelles were among those terminated and among those whose cultural losses became most evident during the efforts to obtain federal restoration. Along with restoration as federally recognized tribes, there came a whole new set of problems to compound the cultural turmoil. Restoration required the establishment of a tribal council and adoption of a

tribal constitution (upon approval of the BIA and Department of Interior) as well as the acceptance of federal dollars in the form of new-tribes funding.

On August 13, 1954, along with forty-two other Western Oregon Indian tribes, the Coquelles were effectively terminated by President Dwight D. Eisenhower's signing of Public Law 588, making termination effective on August 13, 1956. Termination was not a satisfactory solution to problems of American Indians and did not fulfill the obligations of the federal government to Indian people. Tribal members continued to communicate through a home-printed newsletter. Meanwhile, tribal leaders, spearheaded by Wilfred Wasson, worked with Native American Program Oregon Legal Services (NAPOLS) attorneys Rod Clark and Michael Mason to reverse termination, as other tribes had succeeded in doing. The Coquille Indian Tribe was finally restored to federal recognition by an Act of Congress on June 28, 1989, by passage of the "Coquille Indian Restoration Act" (103 Stat. 91).

When land claims hearings were conducted in the 1930s and 1940s, the Coos (including many Coquelles), Lower Umpqua, and Siuslaw appealed as a confederated group. The Court of Claims denied their appeal due to lack of evidence. The land claims for the "Coos" had been based on the testimonies of the oldest Indians alive at that time. George Bundy Wasson thought there could be no better evidence of aboriginal sovereignty and territorial occupation than the words of the old people themselves. The federal government declared their testimony to be merely hearsay. However, after collecting ethnographic information from the old Indians of that area, John P. Harrington stated that the Coquelles were undoubtedly the true descendants of the aboriginal occupants of their land, hence the land claims settlement for the Coquelles. This decision caused a split between the Coos and Coquelles, which ultimately resulted in separate federally recognized tribes.

## APPENDIX B

### *Some Notable Coquille Leaders of the Twentieth Century*

*Coquel Thompson* (1839–1946) was removed as a young man from his Upper Coquille village to the reservation at Siletz. His vast knowledge of myths and legends, history, traditions, and language diversity made him the most reliable Coquille informant. He shared information with J. O. Dorsey in the 1880s, with Philip Drucker in 1934, probably with Elizabeth Jacobs in 1935, and with John P. Harrington in the 1940s. It was this information, through Harrington's testimony to the Court of Claims, that firmly established the Coquelles as true descendants of the aboriginal inhabitants of their tribal territory.

*Susan Adulsah Wasson* (1841–1917) is the most frequently mentioned Coquille ancestor on the final tribal rolls. She was the daughter of Kitzn-Jin-Jn

Galada-lui, "Man with Heart Too Big for Elk Robe to Meet in the Middle" (also known as Kitchen), headman of the major South Slough village on Coos Bay in 1828, and his wife Gishgiu (also known as Gekka, "Little Old Woman"), daughter of an Upper Coquelle headman. (That marriage was said to have united the Coos and Coquelles.) From her first marriage to Charles Hodgkiss (Hodgkin?), who died at sea, Susan Adulsah had one daughter, Laura. Her second marriage, to Hodgkiss's partner George Richardson Wasson, who in 1849 sailed from New Brunswick around South America to San Francisco and then traveled overland to Jacksonville in 1851 and to Coos Bay in 1853, produced nine more children. Susan spoke several coastal languages and was famed as a historian of the Coos Bay tribal area, having memorized detailed information on family ties, land ownership, myths, and legends.

*George Bundy Wasson* (1880–1947), my father, was the youngest child of Susan and George R. Wasson to reach adulthood. In his youth, his grandmother Gekka stood with him on a hill above South Slough in Coos Bay. With a slow sweeping gesture of her extended arm, Gekka said, "All this land belongs your *hyas papas* ["grandfathers" in Chinook Jargon]. Someday, *Chawch* ["George" in Chinook Jargon], you get it back." George Bundy Wasson attended both Chemawa and Carlisle Indian Schools, along with his sister *Daisy Wasson Coddling* (the first registered nurse in Oregon south of Portland). George spent his adult life as a tailor, timber cruiser, and lobbyist in Congress for Indian land claims. He was the first and most thorough organizer among the Coquelles and an adamant defender of Indian human rights. He married my mother, Bess Finley, in 1923 and they had five children. George died of a heart attack at Cape Blanco in 1947 while assessing tribal mineral rights and land values, before the final Coquelle land claims inheritance was paid.

*Charles Edward "Eddy" Ned* (1889–1956) was the son of Charles and Susan Ned. He served in World War I, worked many years in the "logging woods," and assisted George B. Wasson in cruising timber. While living with the Wasson family off and on for many years, he served as a "tutor" of Coquelle cultural heritage for the Wasson children. In his elder years he was fondly known as the last full-blooded Coquelle.

*Wilfred Carlisle Wasson* (1924–90), my brother, the eldest son of Bess Finley and George Bundy Wasson, was known for his wealth of knowledge of Coyote stories, myths, legends, tribal history, and culture. After studying anthropology for several years, he earned in 1974 a Ph.D. in education from the University of Oregon. Wilfred served on the faculties at Oregon State University in Corvallis, Western Washington State University in Bellingham,

and the University of Oregon in Eugene, and was a member of the board of directors at D. Q. University in Davis, California. He worked many years on educational and economic development projects for coastal Indians. He served as Coquelle Tribal Chairman and was instrumental in restoring federal recognition to the Coquelle Indian Tribe.

### Notes

I wish to acknowledge that the topics and contents of this paper have resulted from many years of conversations with my closest cultural companion, my older brother Wilfred C. Wasson. "Will" inspired me to contemplate life now and long ago. His death in 1990 left me feeling I would never again share the thoughts and memories of Old Man Coyote, family anecdotes, myths, legends, or traditional stories. Now, as I write what I have always known and believed, and report the missing information I have always sought, I find strength and support in remembering how he would have responded to my questions and ideas. I'm grateful that my brother gave me so much to remember and think about. Other members of my family, particularly my mother, Bess Hockema, inspired me to go back to college and write a true history of the Coquelle Indian Tribe. My good friend Barre Toelken expended great amounts of energy listening, exchanging ideas, and encouraging me at times of despair. He's family. I'm honored they think I could do it. I'm humbled by the experience. Finally, I appreciate the support, confidence, and inspiration of the faculty and my fellow students in the graduate program in anthropology at the University of Oregon. Mel Aikens and Madonna Moss have been positive listeners to my creative ideas, and stimulating critics to my academic products. Jon Erlandson, however, is the greatest catalyst in my academic endeavors and accomplishments. His encouragement and advisorial persuasion have helped bring my graduate degree to fruition.

1. Treatments of this period will be found in Jack Norton, *Genocide in Northwestern California* (1979), and in E. A. Schwartz, *The Rogue River Indian War and Its Aftermath, 1850-1980* (1997).