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One town: Two stories

Authors look at the role of race in The Dalles during the 1950s

By Mark Gibson The Dalles Chronicle Nov 30, 2019 Updated Dec 6, 2019

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A collection of student-made masks are part of “Gifts from our ancestors,” a Confluence Project art installation on the outside wall of The Dalles High School designed to promote cultural awareness. On Nov. 11, Confluence sponsored a reading of “C Falls: Parallel Lives Along N’chi-Wana” at the school theater.

Mark B. Gibson photos

This article is the first of two and considers The Dalles High School mascot and the city-owned swimming pool. Part two will look at the Granada Theater, the destruction of Celilo Falls and the exclusion of Native Americans from local businesses.

Residents of The Dalles who attended the reading of “Celilo Falls: Parallel Lives Along N’chi-Wana” by Native American Poet Ed Edmo and Ethicist Lani Roberts on Nov. 10 heard two radically different portrayals of life in The Dalles in the 1950s, as reflected in stories illustrating the sharp

divide between a dominant culture and a racial minority; stories that highlight the racial injustice of the past.

Roberts and Edmo are of the same age, and both grew up near The Dalles.

“The first few times we read this, I cried in the middle of it,” Roberts told the audience after the reading. “That was the depth of my feelings about the material. This is not an academic exercise—it is an attempt at truth and reconciliation. If you can’t tell the truth, there is no possibility of reconciling it.”

The essay presented a picture of racism in the region, and in the city, going back to the earliest days of European settlement, as witnessed by the authors.

“Edmo is Shoshone Bannock, Nez Perce, Yakama and Siletz and lived at the fishing village at Celilo Falls until it’s destruction in March 1957. I grew up six miles away just outside The Dalles, a descendant of an early settler family,” Roberts said. “Although we grew up in the same area and are the same age, our lives were lived in parallel fashion because of the differences in our ethnic heritage—Ed is Native American, I am European American.”

Their paths crossed first at a conference on environmental justice. Edmo was attending as an acclaimed poet, storyteller, actor and clay artist; Lani was a faculty member in the Philosophy Department at Oregon State University.

They talked of growing up in the same area near The Dalles.

After the reading, Roberts said that she was helping Edmo make copies of his poetry book so he could sell it at the conference. As they worked, Edmo asked if she remembered how the Indian kids weren't allowed to enter the city swimming pool.

She did not.

"I don't have words to describe what that did to me," she said. "It knocked me for a loop."

That conversation was the spark that led them to collaborate.

They began working together, talking and emailing back and forth, and piecing together two "Parallel Lives Along N'chi-Wana."

“It soon became painfully clear that our lives were in divergence and at odds in ways explainable only by the racism and sexism the dominant culture imposes on native peoples,” Roberts said. “We have very different memories of growing up, living near the river, the destruction of Celilo Falls, the city-owned swimming pool, the Granada theater and the The Dalles High School’s mascot. We grew up in the same geographical space, but lived in radically different worlds. We live together yet apart—we are estranged,” she said.

The Dalles Natatorium

The Dalles Natatorium was a public swimming pool owned and operated by the City of The Dalles.

For Roberts, the pool was a beautiful relief from the heat in The Dalles, where the hottest days are over 100 degrees and the nights sometimes don’t cool below 80 degrees.

“Like lots of kids, my siblings and I walked there nearly every day in the summer. As a child I did not notice that the Indian kids weren’t swimming with us, even on the hottest days,” she said. “As is all too often the case, people of ethnic minorities are invisible to the dominant culture, and my childhood was no exception. I did not even notice that ‘kids’ meant ‘white kids,’ and no adult in my life pointed out this fact.”

It was, in fact, many years later as she was helping Edmo make copies of his poetry for a conference they were both speaking at that she learned Indians were excluded from “The Nat.” Edmo said that when he was five years old, he did not understand why Indians were not allowed in the public swimming pool, with its deep greenish-blue water and its high diving boards. “If we

wanted to get wet at the pool, we had to go to the Thompson wading pool (outside the pool fence), even grown men and women. I guess the white people believed that some of their white would wear off if we experienced some of their white privilege.

“One time the Boys and Girls Club had a swim day. My brother was a member and we went to the swim pool on Saturday morning.” The night before, their house was tense and his mom and dad talked in hushed voices. “I could see the serious in mom’s face.”

When they arrived at the pool the next day, they joined the long line of kids who were members of the club. At the entrance, the teenage boy watching the gate yelled, “Red Faced Man,” and a discussion ensued as to whether or not the Edmo kids could enter pool. A phone call was made to the pool manager. “Looking back at me and his brother, Mr. Warren [the leader of the club] said, “the Boys and Girls Club is open to needy children. Well I had a mom and dad, my grandma lived on the hill above us, the warmth of the wood stove, I didn’t think we were ‘needy.’ Sometimes we ran out of food, and we went to the missionaries house to eat.

“Mr. Warren asked, ‘When did you bathe last?’ This morning, sir. They talked in hushed voices. After a long time, he handed the phone to the white boy, who slammed the receiver down. There was a lot of cussing as me and my brother went to get our baskets. ‘Dirty Indians,’ one of boys said from behind the desk.”

Edmo happily put on his new swim suit and went to the pool, felling as if he could “walk on water.”

But one visit, his mother was late picking him up. “Five white boys shoved me. ‘Go back to your village, savage,’ they said. ‘We don’t like you around here, dirty Indian.’ They began pushing me, grabbing me. When my towel fell to the ground, they stomped on it and kicked me.”

Edmo responded by throwing a few “haymakers” or punches at them. A couple connected, which added to the hostilities. One of the boys grabbed his arm, twisted it behind his back. “I cried out in pain. But then mom came driving up with the car horn blaring. The white boys took off running when they saw her.” He tried to chase them, but his mom said no. “They have small hearts, to pick on you,” she told him.

TDHS Indians

“How appropriate that we are sitting here (in the TDHS auditorium),” Roberts said as she introduced the section of the essay addressing the TDHS “Indians” and their mascot, “Chief Wahoo.”

The issue of Native American mascots in sports has been a topic of concern throughout the United States, she noted, and it was a part of her ethics class when she was teaching.

“I have had to tell my students, with chagrin, that my high school was The Dalles Indians and, worse, that the mascot image was Chief Wahoo, a grinning cartoon caricature of an Indian, complete with a feather.”

She noted statewide newspaper *The Oregonian* stopped using such names in the early 1990s, but The Dalles and other high schools continued to use Native American names for their sports teams.

Roberts said that during the debates surrounding the merging of The Dalles and Wahtonka High Schools, she tried to get the new, combined school to stop using the Indian name and, more importantly, the Chief Wahoo logo. The debate was intense, she said.

“The chief argument of those who wished to keep the name and logo was ‘to preserve a proud history.’ I am a fourth-generation graduate of The Dalles High School, and it was my expressed view there was nothing whatsoever in the historical record encompassing the treatment of Indians in the community which was worthy of pride or preservation. To the contrary, the historical past was shameful.”

Several decisions regarding the name and the mascot were made, and rescinded. In 2004, the school was named The Dalles Wahtonka Union High School, and the board adopted the Eagle-Indians as the mascot. [The name has since been changed to The Dalles High School and the mascot, the Riverhawks.]

Edmo said he testified regarding the mascot issue in Salem, in two public hearings. Eventually the decision was made that school districts had to seek permission to use Native-themed mascots from the Native people themselves.

“My brother and I were mascots at The Dalles High School for the basketball team,” he said. “I’m not sure how the arrangement went, that we became mascots. I can only speculate that it was the way my father and mother tried to get us accepted in a community that hated Indians. I would wear my war bonnet, lead the team out on the court, dribble, and shoot the basketball.”

He said he got to go see the ocean as a mascot, and he even stayed in a motel. “I remember eating a steak at a cafe, and not being asked to leave because I was an Indian,” he said. He was later a mascot in Wishram as well.

“People do things for strange reasons,” he said of that experience.

After the reading, the authors were asked how things were today for those attending high school in The Dalles.

Edmo said he didn't know as that things had changed that much, noting that a few years ago, his niece organized a Christmas party for Native Americans living at "in lieu" sites along the river. These sites were provided "in lieu" of the traditional living and fishing sites along the river, he explained. "She got a lot more support in Hood River than she did The Dalles," he said.

Several of those attending were students at The Dalles High School in the 1950s and said they thought the Native Americans were well assimilated: They were heroes on the swim team in The Dalles, said one man. Another, speaking of their experience in the Yakima area, said Native residents were cheerleaders, and "we wouldn't have had a football team without them."

Roberts spoke of the difficulty of perceiving others, saying that as an ethicist she explored how we rank each other visually by sex, age and race. Roberts said people need to cross the artificially-constructed barriers of a society to understand the experiences and the realities of their lives to reach truth and reconcile.

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One town: Two stories; part 2

Authors look at the role of race in The Dalles during the 1950s

By Mark Gibson The Dalles Chronicle Dec 5, 2019 Updated Dec 6, 2019



Native people, salmon and the river are displayed as an interlocking whole in a section of the “Gifts of our Ancestors” Confluence Project art mural on an outside wall of The Dalles High School, which is designed to promote awareness of local Native American culture.

Mark B. Gibson photo

This article is the second of two and considers growing up in The Dalles area, the destruction of Celilo Falls, the Granada Theater and signs in the city that read “No dogs, No Indians.”

Residents of The Dalles who attended the reading of “Celilo Falls: Parallel Lives Along N’chi-Wana” by Native American Poet Ed Edmo and Ethicist Lani Roberts on Nov. 10 heard two radically different portrayals of life in The Dalles in the 1950s, as reflected in stories illustrating the sharp divide between a dominant culture and a racial minority; stories that highlight the racial injustice of the past.

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Growing Up

Roberts described growing up in a house built by her great-great-grandfather in 1868 on land deeded to the family as a homestead. She said she grew up with the perception that the land was “empty and unused” when the family arrived, learning only later that it had been ceded by the indigenous people of the Mid-Columbia area in an 1851 treaty. The family also homesteaded a wheat ranch on the Deschutes River, lost to them in the Great Depression.

Her great-grandfather served in the Oregon legislature in the 1920s, and a room at the back of the Congregational Church Sanctuary in The Dalles, used for overflow crowds on Easter and Christmas, was dedicated to him as well.

She was the fourth generation of her family to graduate from The Dalles High School.

“My roots are deep in the Mid-Columbia region,” she said.

Edmo was born on an Indian reservation in 1946. His grandparents lived at Celilo Falls, a seasonal gathering site for Native Americans who came there from throughout the northwest to trade and socialize. “They made a plan for me to visit...It’s been a long, long, really long visit,” he said with a chuckle. “My home was on the river. The river was a welcome playmate—the sound of the river was soothing to my ear, like a lullaby. The river was always a friend.”

“We have been on the river a long, long time, fishing, digging roots, hunting, trading along N’chi-Wana—the big river bed, we called it—the Columbia River.”

Edmo said his father worked on the railroad. He said there were legends about the coming of his people, and stories, and they would talk of them at the dinner table and warm up the wood stove. “I remember being always warm, by the fire, in our house,” he said.

“I learned to read by a coal oil lamp before I started first grade in The Dalles. My mom would give me classic comic books: I broke my reading teeth on the classics.”

Destruction of Celilo Falls

“Without a doubt, the single most tragic and traumatic wrong done to the Mid-Columbia river and to the people who lived there was the flooding of Celilo Falls,” said Roberts.

“Although both of us still grieve this tragic loss, the direct impact and experiences were radically different between them, at the time and still today,” she said of the inundation of the falls by The Dalles Dam.

“When the government man came, it seems like he was constipated all the time,” remembers Edmo. “He never smiled.” He said the man had the same attitude to them as the townspeople of The Dalles, mocking them with his eyes. When government workers began leveling the ground for the railroad tracks they realized what they were going to do. “‘We’ll stand on our treaty rights,’ the Indians said,” Edmo recalled. “Many remembered when they built the Bonneville Dam in 1938, remembered the Indians were the first to move out,” losing their fishing sites and houses.

He remembers meetings were held in people’s houses, and the government man being told, “‘You should give us \$50 for every board in the drying house.’ It was a fair offer.” The government man responded that he would go to the judge and condemn the land, and not give them “a red cent.”

The white man who lived at Moody owned a gas station and a store, and he held out for a higher price, Edmo recalled. “I remember that white man was standing there crying into a red bandanna; the government had made an example out of him, and not paid him a fair offer.”

“It was done in the name of progress,” he said. “No one stuck up for us Indians except the Democratic Society of Wasco County and the Daughters of the American Revolution.” He said the government refused to let them settle near The Dalles Dam, because that land was destined to become hotels and gas stations. “The agreement was that the Indians would have a room to have a curio shop, to sell coffee and food to tourists. What happened?”

Roberts recalled visiting the falls when she was 10-years old. “I remember it well, mostly because the mood was serious, somber, almost spiritual—very much like it feels at a funeral. My parents explicitly told me they wanted me to see Celilo Falls because it would never exist again. That impressed me—how could something as huge and powerful and magnificent as Celilo Falls cease to exist? The water roared, the falls were taller than any building I’d ever seen, and the Indian fishermen dangled dangerously over the water, dipnetting salmon from the river.”

In March of 1957, the falls were flooded out of existence by the backwaters of The Dalles Dam. “I have mourned the loss of Celilo Falls my whole life. When I understood what had happened, I used to scare my parents by wishing someone would blow up The Dalles Dam,” Roberts said. “I doubt I am the only person who imagines such a thing.”

With the construction of dams along the Columbia, Roberts noted, “It seems completely wrong, a mistake, to call the Columbia a river anymore.”

Edmo said his dad took him to Wishram on the Washington side of the Columbia to watch as the falls were flooded. “It was like a bad dream, that something so big and wonderful was flooded,” he said. He said he had watched his grandfather and father and uncle fish, and believed he to would become a fisherman one day. “Those role models were taken away by the flooding of the falls. Nowadays I tell legends about the river, I tell stories about Celilo Falls. I go to Fred Meyers and get my groceries. I am still a fisherman, but in a different way.”

Granada Theater

Saturday Matinéés at the Granada Theater, still standing at the corner of Second and Federal streets downtown The Dalles, were popular among the kids as Roberts and Edmo were growing up.

Roberts noted that cowboy movies were a mainstay at the theater during those years. “It was from these movies that we kids drew our inspiration as we played cowboys and Indians in the neighborhood,” said Roberts. “In retrospect, I can recall that no one wanted to be the Indians. The littlest kids had to be the Indians, because the cowboys were always supposed to win.”

This kind of play was thought of as normal and harmless, but Roberts said that as an ethicist who studied how we human beings organize ourselves to harm some of us for the benefit of others, such play and the movies that inspired it had an impact on how native people were viewed. “How could it not have led us to view them as other than us?” she said.

The Granada was the only movie house in The Dalles, Edmo said, and his parents always sat in the balcony. “I always thought they picked those seats because they were the best seats in the house,” he said.

“One time my brother and I were sitting down on the main floor. The usher came down. ‘Indian boys have to sit up in (racial expletive deleted) heaven,’ he said. His brother pointed to his uniform. “See this uniform?’ he said. ‘I fought for this country, I can sit where I want,’” Edmo said. The manager

threatened to “call the cops,” and his brother said, “Go ahead, call the cops. He’s got a uniform, I’ve got a uniform, we can talk to this out man to man.”

“The manager never did call the cops, and ever since the Indians sat on the main floor of the Granada Theater,” Edmo said.

No Indians

Roberts said, “even though I was raised to not judge others by the color of their skin, and my parents forbade in no uncertain terms the use of racist words, I grew up smack dab in the middle of toxic racism directed toward the Indians with whom I lived.”

She said when she describes the racism at the pool and theater, and the signs in the stores that said “no dogs, no coloreds,” her students were quick to think of the Jim Crow south. “When I tell them this was my own home town, The Dalles, Oregon, when I was a kid, they’re shocked,” she said.

“I remember seeing the signs in the windows in most of the stores in The Dalles that read, ‘No dogs or Indians allowed,’” Edmo said. “I couldn’t understand. I was raised in a good, Christian home, taught that we should love and overcome all. But when we went to town, the white men would throw rocks with their eyes. You can’t see the rocks, but they sure hurt and the bruises last for a long time.”

He said the exclusion wasn’t just one store, but most stores. There was only one cafe in The Dalles where they could eat, for example. [Johny’s Cafe, now closed]. If they were allowed into a store, they were waited on last and if a white person entered, they would stop helping the Indian and help the white customer. For a long time, they were not allowed to try on clothes, and they had to guess if they would fit, Edmo said.

Yet the racism against the Indian, so prevalent when she was growing up, was unseen by her in her youth. “Why is it that the wrongs most present in our everyday life are the ones most difficult to see?” she wondered. “Is it because they are so ever present, everywhere, that like the air we breathe it becomes invisible? Is it because I’m European American, white, so that my privilege plays in my Oregon home town so I didn’t have to notice?”

Her questions remain unanswered in the essay.

About the reading

The reading was sponsored by the Confluence Project, a series of outdoor installations and interpretive artworks located in public parks along the Columbia River and its tributaries. Each art installation explores the confluence of history, culture and ecology of the Columbia River system.

Ed Edmo

Internationally acclaimed poet, storyteller, actor and clay artist, Ed Edmo uses puppets to tell Indian legends to children and adults – helping people learn to laugh again. Since 1981, Ed has traveled to colleges, pre-schools, trade shows, pow-wows, and more as a Native Consultant. In 1984, Ed earned top prize at the Interstate Firehouse Cultural Center One Act Play Festival for his play, Through “Coyote’s Eyes: A Visit with Ed Edmo.” In addition to co-authoring “Celilo Falls: Parallel Lives Along N’Che Wana” in “Seeing Color: Indigenous Peoples and Radicalized Ethnic Minorities in Oregon,” he is also the author of “A Nation Within.”

Lani Roberts

Lani Roberts (Ph.D., B.A., Philosophy, University of Oregon) was a faculty member in the Philosophy Department at Oregon State University from 1989 through 2011. She is now retired and lives in Hood River. During her time in the OSU Philosophy Department, Roberts directed the graduate program, coordinated the applied ethics certificate, and directed the peace studies program. She was a founding member of Faculty and Staff for Peace and Justice, and member of AFAPC (Association of Faculty for the Advancement of People of Color).