

THOSE WHO CAME

BEFORE

A short history of the early inhabitants of the Yachats area

STORY BY MICHAEL K. SHAY

THERE WAS A time when people in Yachats had forgotten those who lived in this paradise before us. But we remember now. As Doc Slyter, tribal elder and council member of the Confederated Tribes of Coos, Lower Umpqua, and Siuslaw Indians says, "Eventually, history has a way of coming around to truth."

Truth gained a foothold in Yachats when Joanne Kittel and Suzanne Curtis published their booklet, *The Yachats Indians, Origins of the Yachats Name, and the Prison Camp Years*, in 1996. What started as a personal quest turned into a commitment to tell the community the "unvarnished truth" about Yachats' past.

While Kittel and Curtis point to multiple seasonally occupied sites dating back 1,500 years, Phyllis Steeves, retired archaeologist and tribal liaison for the Siuslaw National Forest, says erosion, looting, and development have destroyed many more. She adds that

rising sea levels inundated most sites over 5,000 years old on the central Oregon coast.

We know Indians from Alsea Bay camped here in summer and fall. They left middens, piles of shells, and other materials along the basalt bluffs of the 804 Trail. As I walk the 804 each morning with my furry friend, Turbo, I often stop at the footprint of a midden

ABOVE: The layer of white shells in the middle of this photo is the partial footprint of a midden that once towered forty feet above the bluff behind the Adobe Resort.

BELOW: Indians from Alsea Bay harvested shellfish from the rocks below the 804 Trail at low tide.



PHOTOS BY MICHAEL SHAY



that towered 40 feet above the bluff behind the Adobe Resort. Early homesteaders described other middens on the south side of the Yachats River mouth—some 300 feet around and 50 feet tall. Native American informants have told us Coos and Alsea people played a game like field hockey there.

Kittel and Curtis suggest there was at least one prehistoric village in Yachats. Robert Kentta, cultural resource director for the Confederated Tribes of Siletz Indians, points to references to Yahaitc,

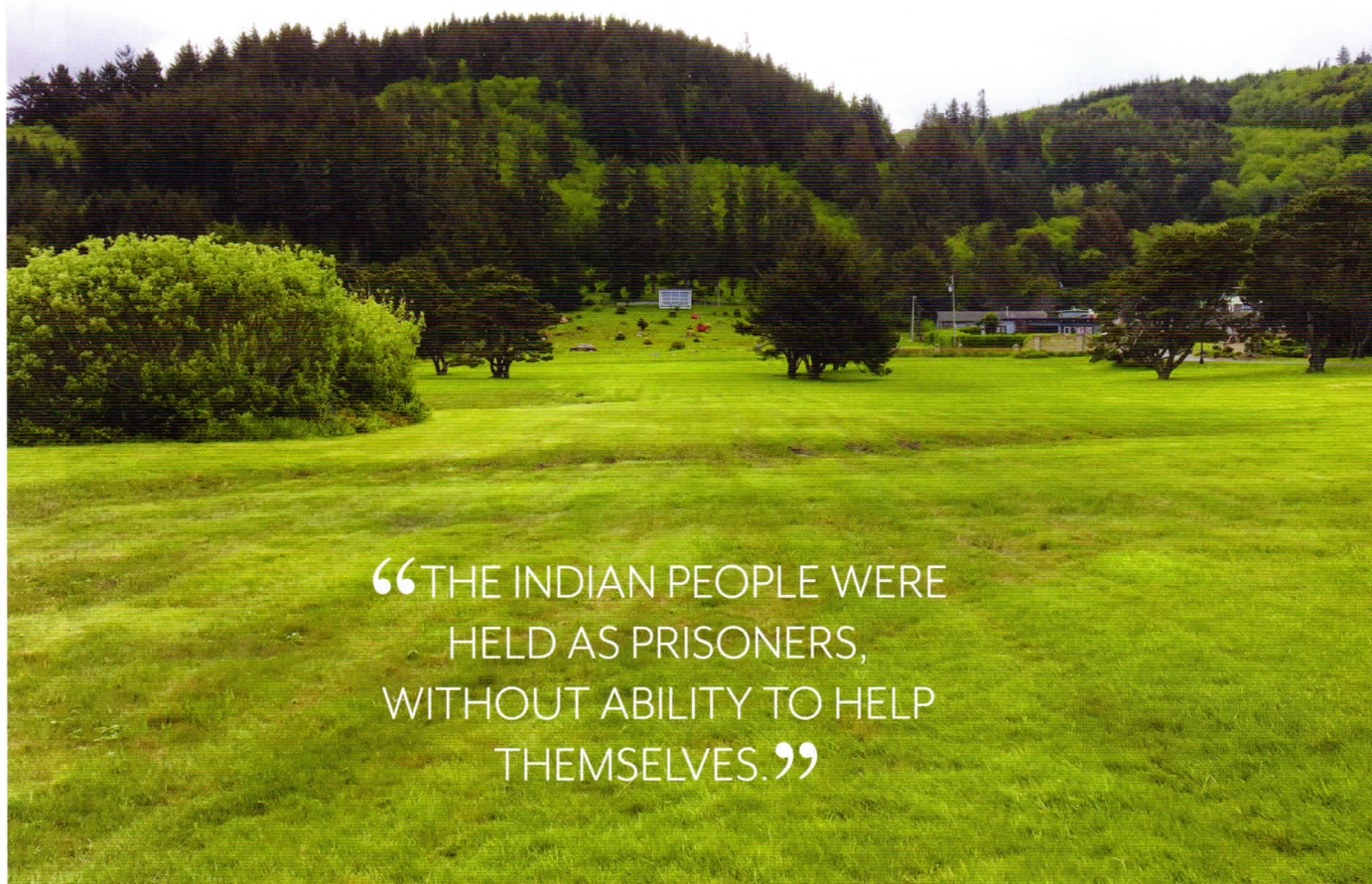
Yachatc, Yahach, and Ya'Xaik in the ethnographic literature, saying these might refer to a district or specific location, all meaning, "where the trail leaves the beach."

One Lower Umpqua/Siuslaw informant at Siletz, Spencer Scott, told John Peabody Harrington in 1941 that Alsea people came to Yachatc to fish and harvest mussels. He added one band, the Yahuch, lived here.

Lottie Evanoff, a Coos woman who lived in Yachats, told Harrington all

the Yahuch died of smallpox before her people arrived in 1860. Her father, Chief Daloose Jackson, said they found a plank house filled with bodies near the north end of the 804 Trail.

Siuslaw, Lower Umpqua, and Coos Indians trace their roots to the aboriginal occupation of the south-central coast. For thousands of years they enjoyed the bounty of the sea and coastal rivers; also making use of plants and animals that filled their homelands, stretching from the Coast Range to the beach.



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“Back then,” Warren Brainard, Chief of the Coos, Lower Umpqua, and Siuslaw explains, “there were so many campfires around Coos Bay and up the river there was air pollution!”

Whites made first contact with these people in 1791 when the British schooner *Jenny* entered Umpqua Bay. Hudson Bay Company fur trader Alexander McLeod made the first overland trek to their territory in winter, 1826-27. Whites became interested in the commercial potential of Coos Bay after the schooner *Nassau* crossed the bay’s bar in 1851 to rescue castaways on North Spit. By 1853 whites had established Empire City and discovered coal. Logging, lumber milling, and shipbuilding soon

followed. Chief Brainard says these were “joint ventures,” as whites needed Indian labor.

Relations remained peaceful at Coos Bay even as the Rogue River War broke out, but whites removed the Coos in late summer, 1856, forcing them onto a windswept spit to live with the Lower Umpquas in the dunes at the mouth of the Umpqua River. There, about 444 people endured exposure, starvation, and disease, resulting in a 50 percent death rate over the next few years.

In 1860, the army force-marched the survivors up the coast to Yachats—the site of the Alsea Sub-Agency of the Coast/Siletz Reservation. The early years here proved especially



GREG SCOTT



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CLOCKWISE FROM LEFT: The Alsea Sub-Agency was located near today's cemetery on the Yachats prairie; Native people leave gifts at this second Amanda statue as a way of honoring their ancestors; The first Amanda statue was buried in a mudslide in December 2015.

brutal. Because the U.S. Senate didn't ratify the 1855 Coast Treaty, in which Oregon Coast tribes proposed to cede aboriginal title to about 5 million acres, the Indian Agent did not have an appropriation to provide promised supplies and services. As Kentta says, "The Indian people were held as prisoners, without ability to help themselves."

Denying them weapons for hunting, the government expected the Indians to farm the salty coastal plain. When the experiment failed, tribal members resorted to traditional foods, but had to scramble at the end of the year, often not able to gather enough before winter.

The Yachats agent did issue passes to work or fish off the reservation, but sent soldiers to track down those who left without permission or stayed beyond the length of their permits. Annie Miner Peterson, a resident at the Sub-Agency, said the agent gathered people together to watch prisoners being whipped when they returned.

Slightly more enlightened leadership came to the Sub-Agency in later years. Agent Sam Case reported in 1872 that 107 Alseans lived south of the Alsea River—hunting, fishing, and farming. Fifty Siuslaw lived in their homeland down south, while 110 Coos and 40 Lower Umpquas resided on the agency farm in Yachats. They raised 35 acres of oats, 20 acres of potatoes, and 14 acres of wheat that year. Case



MICHAEL SHAY

Scene along Amanda's Trail from Cape Perpetua to Yachats.

allowed hunting and encouraged the Indians to build a road into the Yachats valley, where they grew additional crops. Their success attracted white settlers' attention.

By 1875, Congress voted to open the area to settlers. Because the act specified Indians would not be removed without their agreement, agents held a conference with Alsea, Coos, Lower Umpqua, and Siuslaw chiefs. They promised farms and equipment to those who moved to the remaining reservation at Siletz. Not one Indian leader agreed, but the government closed the Sub-Agency anyway. Some people

moved to Siletz. Others headed south where whites had taken over their homeland—their villages long gone.

During their 15-year stay in Yachats, more than 300 people died. Not surprisingly, Yachats has not been a favorite place for Native Americans to visit over the years. While some came to throw wreaths into the sea to apologize to their ancestors for the lies and injustices they suffered, "it was not a place to go," Chief Brainard says.

Then came the Kittel/Curtis booklet. The 1998 dedication of Amanda's Trail greatly increased distribution of the article. More than 120

AMANDA'S SACRIFICE



Just prior to the 2016 Peace Hike, a huge mudslide devastated the Amanda Grotto, ripping away the statue of Amanda and the Grotto's bridge. With the trail being unsafe, organizers re-routed the hike to the 804 and Ya'Xaik trails.

After enjoying post-hike music and ceremonies in the Yachats Commons, Jesse Beers, cultural stewardship manager of the Coos, Lower Umpqua, and Siuslaw Indians, stopped by the Grotto on his way home. He found many trees down on the trail—the very spot people would have gathered had they hiked the original route.

At first, Beers thought the trees had been part of the original slide, but later learned they had fallen during that day's hike. As he points out, the change in the route probably prevented injuries or even saved lives. "Amanda was there," Joanne Kittel says. "She sacrificed her symbol and she sacrificed the bridge and the trees to save the people."

Beers agrees. "Our ancestors are truly looking out for us," he says.

People from Yachats will join with tribal members again at the Peace Hike on January 1, 2018. No doubt, Amanda will be watching.

For more information, please contact Joanne Kittel. (jnkittel@peak.org)



PHOTOS BY MICHAEL SHAY

CLOCKWISE FROM UPPER LEFT: Hikers head to the 804 Trail on a drippy 2017 Peace Hike; Indians from Alsea Bay hiked this beach to Yachats to harvest shellfish and other resources in summer and fall; Doc Slyter plays his flute near the first Amanda statue.

people heard Amanda's story, which had been documented by Royal A. Bensell, one of the soldiers sent to round up Indians at Coos Bay in 1864.

Amanda, an elderly Coos woman, lived with a white man and their daughter. Because her husband refused to legally marry or acknowledge Amanda as his common-law wife, soldiers marched her to Yachats.

As she rounded Cape Perpetua, Bensell wrote, "Amanda, who is blind tore her feet horribly over these ragged rock, leaving blood sufficient to track her by. One of the Boys led her around the dangerous places. I cursed Ind.

Agents generally, and Harvey particularly."

Amanda's Trail, first conceived in 1984 by Loyd Collette, former director of the Cape Perpetua Scenic Area, became a 25-year project that "created ripples in Yachats," Kittel says. The trail promoted "greater awareness and appreciation of the history of the Original People," she explains.

"That set the foundation in place," Kentta says, "but we need to go further [by] getting people (city government, residents, visitors) to understand and respond to Oregon State law regarding discovery and legal protection of

artifacts and sites on both private and public land."

The placement of the first Amanda statue in a grotto at the foot of Cape Perpetua helped increase the "understanding" Kentta wants to see. Created by local artist Sy Meadow, the statue greatly increased the popularity of the trail and the telling of Amanda's story. "When I first saw the statue it brought tears to my eyes," Doc Slyter says.

For tribal members, the Grotto has become a place of healing. Jesse Beers, cultural stewardship manager of the Coos, Lower Umpqua, and Siuslaw, says native people bring gifts to Amanda



CLOCKWISE FROM TOP: Volunteers salvaged a piece of the washed out bridge to use until a replacement is built; Yachats from Amanda's Trail; Amanda's Trail begins at the top of Cape Perpetua and ends in Yachats; Paths like the Ya'Xaik Trail serve as a vehicle for remembering those who came before us in Yachats.

"to show our ancestors that we care, acknowledge them, and are doing what we can to honor them."

Upon the trail's extension into Yachats in 2009, more than 200 people, including Yachats officials and 30 tribal members, celebrated together. Since then, Yachats citizens and tribal members have joined in a New Year's Day Peace Hike, walking from Yachats to the Grotto to hear Amanda's story. As Kittel says, "it's a solemn and spiritual path that remembers in perpetuity."

In December, 2015, a powerful storm sent a mudslide roaring through the Grotto, taking out the bridge and

the Amanda statue. Kittel says 88 people came to clean up the mess, many offering money for a new statue. Now, a second donated Amanda stands above the devastated grotto and rebuilt bridge.

During the 2017 Peace Hike, Yachats celebrated its first annual Indigenous People's Day. Doc Slyter talked again about how native people once avoided town. "But Yachats has taken care of that," he says. "Now I'm honored to come to Yachats because the people are so involved—not only with Amanda, but in all phases of community activities. I tell people they





PHOTOS BY MICHAEL SHAY

LOOKING TO THE FUTURE



should go see what's in the Yachats water that makes the entire community work together!"

Over time, trails projects have become a vehicle for honoring those who came before us in Yachats. The most recent trail, named for Ya'Xaik, took over six years to build. Signage along the path tells stories of the people who once lived here.

Kittel says trails are magic—that trails create spiritual connections across time. I feel the same truth. Each morning, when Turbo and I walk the 804, I feel the presence of Indian women gathering shellfish on the rocks below. I can almost see their children leaping from boulder to boulder, just as my own kids did, growing up in the same place. Yes, I hear their voices. I hear them laugh and play and sing. ■

Warren Brainard, Chief of the Confederated Tribes of Coos, Lower Umpqua, and Siuslaw Indians, tells a story in which a little boy, upon meeting him, says, "I thought all Indians were dead!"

In truth, Coos, Lower Umpqua, and Siuslaw people have persevered. As Jesse Beers, cultural stewardship manager of the tribes says, "It's an ongoing story. We are still here."

While the tribes never received a penny for their land, they are eager to share their knowledge of it today. As Chief Brainard says, "We have learned a lot about Mother Earth in 10,000 years. We want to share our traditional ecological knowledge and to serve as stewards."

Their involvement in the Tenmile Lakes Basin Lamprey Conservation Project serves as an example. Reflecting the cultural importance of lamprey eels to the tribes, the Coos, Lower Umpqua and Siuslaw are conducting a demonstration project that will help bring the lamprey back. They

consider this a gift to the world and future generations.

Their effort reflects a larger worldview—one Chief Brainard articulates simply and eloquently. "Have respect for your grandkids!"

"We look out seven generations," he says. Perhaps that's why his people have survived the adversity they've endured.



Lamprey eels may not seem as important to us in the larger community as they are to the Coos, Lower Umpqua and Siuslaw people. But Doc Slyter will not let them go.

His determination is rooted in the strength of his people, who have endured more than 150 years of struggle and injustice. As Doc Slyter repeated at the 2017 Peace Hike, "hli'in hel hantl tuuwitinye—hei." Translation? "We're not going to fall down—hey."

For more information about the history of Western Oregon Indians, watch the video, *Broken Treaties*, available at Oregon Public Broadcasting.