

We Are Still Here

On June 19th Upper Columbia Tribes held their annual salmon ceremony and canoe journey at a site on the Columbia River just north of Kettle Falls. The river was running strong and you could see the turbulence that the falls still create under the surface of Lake Roosevelt. A hundred years ago the salmon would be returning to their ancient spawning beds and would soon be attempting to pass the falls that are now under the lake's surface. Native people would be gathering to harvest the salmon and celebrate their return; the tremendous abundance of thousands of fifty-pound salmon; and the camaraderie of hundreds of friends and relatives. On this day too there was a lot to celebrate.



I noticed the Sinixt (Lakes Indian) logo on a truck. It spelled out the name in universal phonetic letters and a motto underneath that translates to “We are Still Here”. Simple words but with a lot of implications. It reminded me of 2009 when my mother was nearing death. We would talk to her on the phone asking how she was. She would reply “I’m still here.” In that context it meant that she was ready to move on but somehow had not yet. Also, it implied that we could still come to visit. With the Sinixt it says so much more.

Nearly 200 years ago when the Hudson’s Bay Company established Fort Colville at a site directly across the lake/river from where we were, native people could have hardly imagined that it signaled the end of thousands of years of living next to the river, its bounty and its beauty. Those things did not happen immediately. Hudson’s Bay people brought with them life-changing practical goods: knives, pots, needles, axes and guns. The administration was mostly Scotch and British, but they also brought Metis French/Indian trappers, boat builders and carpenters. Almost all were single men. They inter-married with native women. It is hard to portray those unions as all good or all bad. One certain result was a new generation of mixed-blood kids with French and English last names.

To each other they were just family. But to the flood of American settlers who arrived as the fort was being abandoned and operations moved to Canada after the 49th parallel became a border in 1846 they were all Indians. That identity isolated them and was used to denigrate and discriminate against them. Much was lost in the sad and sordid history of the next 150 years. What they did not lose was family.

They are still here, and the ceremonies involved celebration of the Desautel Decision, a Supreme Court ruling in Canada that on April 23rd, 2021 officially admitted that the Sinixt are still here and have hunting, fishing and other rights. Rights denied them after a 1956 declaration that they were extinct in Canada.

There was much more to celebrate, commemorate and invoke. The occasion got into high gear as a flotilla of canoes crossed the lake from Mission Point. Hand-carved dugout canoes flying flags of the Sinixt, Spokane, Kalispel and Coeur d'Alene tribes arrived amid a swarm of smaller sturgeon nose canoes to the sound of shouts and drumming. The first and biggest canoe was that of the Sinixt. It had come, with many others on a long journey down the river from Canada. Many of the others had paddled up the lake from the South. They represented not only the tribes but also the resurgence of youth involvement in building and powering the canoes and reclaiming their heritage for themselves. A colorful crowd of Indigenous people soon hoisted the 1000-pound canoe above their heads and carried it to high ground. Other canoes followed.



The Salmon Ceremony itself is an ancient tradition of calling the salmon back to home to their spawning grounds. Drumming, singing and clicking rocks together invited the salmon back to join the family reunion. It was a sacred ceremony, a prayer, and a festival. This year Richard Armstrong, a Sinixt elder, came down from Canada to lead the singing and summon the salmon. Shelly Boyd, Arrow Lakes Facilitator at Confederated Tribes of the Colville Reservation, guided the gathering. Representatives from many tribes told of their work and assisted in the ceremony.

The gathering was an occasion to announce many things, tell some stories, introduce people to each other and catch up with old friends. All of this was done in Salish, which was another thing to celebrate and welcome back. Interpretation was done in English.

One of the announcements was by DR Michel, Executive Director of the [Upper Columbia United Tribes](#). Their work involves restoring native species and habitat. It is scientific, political, and cultural. They sponsored carving dugout canoes at the Spokane Museum of Art and Culture earlier this month. His news was that salmon released into Lake Roosevelt are indeed spawning again on the San Poil River.

Of course, there was also food. Much like a potlatch, everything was given away. Salmon roasted the traditional way on sticks over hot coals was given to everyone along with moose stew and dumplings.



Awards of art and clothing were handed to many of those instrumental in bringing the family together not just for this event but in the many ways that were being celebrated that day.

A particular focus was on children and young people who learned skills, language, and traditions leading to these ceremonies. They are the hope of the future and pride of the present who can carry on in restoring the knowledge, wisdom, and purpose of this event. A gift to everyone was the book [The Heart of the River](#) by Eileen Delehanty Pearkes with illustrations by Nichola Lytle.

Written in the voice of the Columbia River, it tells of the changes that have drained life from the river over the last two centuries and the people of the river who lived on its shores and enjoyed its salmon. The story is written in simple words with pictures anyone can understand. It concludes with the Sinixt logo picturing a salmon and the declaration in Salish and English, “We Are Still Here”.