

## RIVER OF MEMORY

The Columbia, Wild and Free

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The Wanapums, a small Native American band of about 100 people, live in a village by Priest Rapids as they have done since the time of the Ancients. Their lands once covered millions of acres; roots and salmon were plentiful. Their old tule mat village, P'na, stood alongside the rapids until the late 1950s when it was flooded by the backwaters of Priest Rapids Dam. Lands for a newer village of modern homes and a well-used long house were set aside at that time by Grant County Public Utility District as part of their ongoing commitment to promote and perpetuate Wanapum culture. While the dams have altered life immeasurably, many Wanapums work at Priest Rapids and Wanapum Dams, both licensed to Grant County PUD. In spite of enormous changes, Wanapums hold to their traditional ways and sacred teachings; their relationship to the river remains vitally strong.

According to Wanapum teaching, the world has gone through three major epochs. In each instance, the Creator made the world anew. This happened long before the Animal People roamed the land.

*In the time previous to our own, the Creator made the Ancient People. He sent Sun Man to the sky and directed him to sit still, warm the earth, and watch his creation. There were no days and nights, no winter, and no hard times. The People had no worries about food. Perpetually bathed in light, they lived in harmony. When villagers felt hunger, they sat in the long house and closed their eyes. Their leader would chant words of power, following which the people would open their eyes and find the finest of foods sitting before them. After eating, all closed their eyes again and the food disappeared.*

*One day their leader died. No one talked or sang the special songs and, after a time, they were forgotten. Soon darkness fell and the food no longer appeared. Huddled in their lodge with hunger in their bellies and fear in their hearts, the People discussed their plight. One of them finally spoke. He said that they needed to remember the words that the Creator had given to their leader. Sitting together in darkness, a man remembered a word from the song, then another. Line by line, phrase by phrase, the People brought the words and songs forward until they could be sung whole again.*

*Listening, the Creator took pity yet was angered at having been forgotten. He directed Sun Man to return but only for part of the day. He told the People they would now have to work. To eat they would need to dig for roots, hunt for game, and fish for salmon. He instructed them to hold a feast of thanksgiving each year when the first roots appeared and the first fish swam upriver.*

*The Creator then gave the People a commandment: dance and sing that you may remember. If the People did this, the world would continue; if they forgot, the Creator would take Sun Man away for good and all would be left cold to wander in darkness with only lizards and frogs to eat.*

*At that moment a new world began. One by one, every bird and animal, every root, berry, plant, and tree emerged from its place of darkness into the light.*

This story, belonging to the Wanapums of Priest Rapids, offers much. Like all great creation mythologies throughout the world, it resonates transcendent meanings that give added dimension to life. We who share a passion for history find the story particularly inspiring, as much of what we do centers on keeping memory alive.

It is interesting to compare this commandment given to the Wanapums to those handed down by Yahweh to Moses. Inscribed in stone, future generations had only to see the words to know the commandments. In the Wanapum worldview, the important teachings are spoken from memory, carefully passed from one generation to the next. As with other oral traditions, the important teachings are backed by a wisdom that knows we do our best remembering when all the senses are fully engaged. Wanapum spiritual leader Rex Buck, Jr., speaks of them as being written in the heart.

These river places are part of the unbroken lineage of memory that passes through each generation of Wanapum children. Stories and myths such as the one related above are intimately connected with landscapes that form the literal ground of being in cultures based on oral tradition. As such, they are imbued with holiness.

Sing and dance that you may remember—the story's poignancy is all the more deepened by the particular setting of its drama—Chalwash Chilni—the Sacred Island below P'na at Priest Rapids on N'chi wana, the big river—a river whose original song has given way to one more recent—the song of the working river, the river that lights our nights and powers our days, the song that waters our land and yields great stores of foods for our tables.

Aside from two isolated stretches—above North-port and within the Hanford Reach—it is quite clear when traveling along mid Columbia shorelines that we are looking at river places divided into geographic and economic units. We visit Lake Roosevelt, Wanapum Reservoir, Rufus Woods Lake, and Lake Entiat—all distinct entities, all places created and defined by dams. Sadly, there are now few, if any, who have seen the entire river running wild and free. Memory of the unregulated Columbia flows like the river itself, segment to segment, reservoir to reservoir, each section of river having its own constituency of elders who knew its untamed waters—the rapids, currents, back eddies, and falls—now vanished from our view.

The number of people who recall some of these places is quite small. To claim memory of Rock Island Rapids, inundated in 1931, a person would need to be more than 80 years old. He or she probably grew up near Wenatchee and may have stopped for gas at Picture Rocks Service Station, built in the 1920s along the new road that headed south to Quincy. A number of people may have briefly seen Rock Island Rapids from a Great Northern passenger car window as the train made its way from Seattle or Spokane. I know of only one living person who remembers being on the island and seeing its many petroglyphs. The last person who ran the rapids in a rowboat was Christine Fowler, who died in 1999 at age 96.

The story at Kettle Falls is much different. Ask any longtime northeastern Washington resident, and you are likely to get a story of seeing the falls. Many speak with excitement of watching Indians spear salmon from scaffolds suspended precariously over jagged rocks and rushing water. Martin Louie, a Colville Indian born in 1906, once fished from those platforms. Anyone carrying memories of the falls must be getting on in years. Martin passed away in January 2003 at age 96.

Some river places were rarely ever seen due to their remote locations. I have found only a handful of people who remember Box Canyon before it was flooded by the waters of Chief Joseph Dam. To visit this secluded spot along the river required both effort and purpose. Without a motorboat, it still does.

In the absence of people who can describe the unaltered Columbia firsthand, it becomes increasingly challenging to imagine rocks and rapids where none remain. Even before construction of the 14 dams along the main stem of the Columbia, many of its particular places remained unvisited and unknown. This gave rise to river explorer M. J. Lorraine naming his 1924 adventure travel book, *The Columbia Unveiled*.

If gaining a sense of the original river was difficult then, the job is far more daunting now, requiring something of an imaginative leap. For many years it seemed as though the song of the river was lost, such was the need and intensity of moving forward with the great transformations of hydro. Even in the otherwise earth-friendly *National Geographic* we find Maynard Owen Williams in 1941 extolling the benefits of the dams, crediting them with giving us beautiful manmade lakes to take the place of ugly lava chasms.

Firsthand knowledge of the native river can only now be held within the hearts and memories our elders, indigenous and immigrant alike. Other riverine documentation—fragments of the song, if you will—the collections of maps, reports, and photographs, were placed long ago in boxes that eventually found their way to the recesses of archives throughout the country. A few left published accounts—Lieutenant Thomas William Symons, Lewis Freeman, and M. J. Lorraine—but these books have been largely unavailable, sitting on shelves well behind the story of hydroelectric power, a story that required that none of us look back.

What follows is but a part of the larger song of the river that connects to the Wanapum legend. It is one person's attempt to gather together these fragments. Other people's work has illuminated different sections of the native Columbia, each speaking to broad archetypal themes that teach us how to bring together what is dismembered and forgotten, how to heal that which separates us from the wholeness of Creation. The Wanapum myth brings an essential teaching to the inner sanctum of our bodies, the place where memory is held most deeply. It mandates that we keep aware of what links us to the sources by which we are sustained.

River philosopher Chester Keller reminds us that the links are organic and personal. For those of us who live within the Columbia's vast watershed, every hour, every day its waters and food play through our cells—literally, the water and land reside in us and we in them.

In January 2001 seven bishops of the Roman Catholic Church issued a pastoral letter that takes our understandings of the river beyond the personal. They wrote that the waters of the

Columbia are a revelation of God's presence—a commons shared by all members of the community of life. This underscores what native people have held all along: that the Columbia's waters are sacred and need to be kept pure. To do so can be a matter of life and death. We have only to remember Hanford Nuclear Reservation's legacy to recognize that this is so.

Rock Island Rapids, Nespelém Canyon, and Kettle Falls are three very special river places. By my reckoning, each retains a living presence although they have been flooded for years.

At the base of a basalt cliff 13 miles below Wenatchee, Rock Island Dam comes into view. Built in 1931, it was the first hydro-power project on the main stem of the Columbia. A small part of Rock Island is still visible behind the dam. Our interest, however, is in the part that now lies beneath the waters.

On the river approach to the island, the current quickens at Bishop Rock, four miles upriver. French-Canadian voyageurs would now be tying kerchiefs around their heads and stripping down to essentials. The roar of the rapids becoming louder as we enter a dark canyon, the river finally cuts through the basalt of the Columbia Plateau, creating two channels around the large island. Within the channels are many smaller islands, jutting points, and fast currents that tail into back eddies where migrating salmon gather energy to ascend the rapids. Halfway down the left channel Hawksbells Point offers a commanding view of the island and rapids.

In the three-quarter-mile length of the island, the river drops ten feet—slowly at first, but more steeply at its foot where numerous rocks obstruct both channels. Shooting these rapids never failed to produce excitement. Listen to Lieutenant Robert Johnson's account from the 1847 Wilkes expedition:

*Shortly after starting in the morning we ran down the Isle de Pierres Rapids. For about two miles the river rushed between lofty islets, against which the eddying waters foamed in their fury. The descent, of course, required all the skill and coolness of the bowman and steersman; the vessel was tossed on the surging waters, with the surf and spray continually dashing over her bows; all at once as if by magic we were gliding along without a ripple on the surface.*

Reaching the island itself was risky, requiring a trip through the river's swift current at the head of the rapid. Once there, jagged piles of rock made walking difficult. The experience of being on the island—the powerful river falling fast all around—must have been exhilarating.

Sounds emanating from both channels are heightened by canyon walls catching the low rumble and sending it back. At times stiff winds funnel through the canyon, adding yet another dimension to the island's already magnified presence. By summer the island's rocks generate intense heat, and in winter ice jams sometimes clog the channels.

When the salmon arrived in spring, excitement ran high. Fishing stations were ideally situated throughout the rapids. The village of K'watskin, just upstream at Rock Island Creek, swelled in numbers during these times. It was an ideal place to go for sustenance and reflection, but many traveling to Rock Island held a deeper intent—that of revelation. This required a person to give him or herself over to island presences both seen and unseen. The ethnographies documenting Plateau cultures indicate it meant leaving behind familiar consciousness and entering the shadowy and potentially dangerous world that coexists alongside normally known reality. The

seeker might spend several days in a secluded spot on the island. Perhaps after a time of praying and fasting, long periods of wakefulness, and little relief from the sun, he or she might be visited by an animal power or spirit being and thereby acquire special wisdom. Such clarifying, life-transforming moments were deeply personal and provided essential underpinnings for all that might follow throughout a lifetime.

Taking a hammer stone, chisel or paint, the person on occasion gave expression to these moments of profound realization by recording the experience in stone. A new image would thus join those previously left by Ancestors and other relations.

Clustered on the north side of the island close to the river's left channel were hundreds of petroglyph-bearing boulders, many with up to 30 figures. Among the carvings were elk, deer, sheep, goats, a bear, and smaller mammals as well. One depicted a centipede, another a crawfish. Humans abounded, some standing, some engaged in the hunt, and others with hands raised. A number of images appeared to depict supernatural beings. Not all figures were representational; many bore geometric and abstract designs. Two unique boulders stood apart from the others, one with deep pits and grooves, the other filled with cupules.

The petroglyphs at Rock Island revealed a world of vitality, animation, and story, mirroring the multidimensional life ways of Plateau Indians where human, animal, and spiritual elements in one realm could deeply affect outcomes in the other.

David Thompson, fur trader and explorer extraordinaire, visited the village of K'watchin at the head of the rapids on July 7, 1811. His visit lasted four hours and concluded with the village of 800 lifting their hands in prayer as they saw him off. Two days earlier Thompson was just entering Nespelem Canyon, and things were not so upbeat. As evening approached, it began to rain. Darkening walls rose precipitously from the river. Thompson directed several crewmembers to walk ahead in search of a campsite, but they found only steep banks and wet boulders—no level ground upon which to pitch their cotton tents.

Ignace, the steersman, and several others attempted to paddle the boat down the shoreline in order to meet those who had walked ahead. Suddenly, the current thrust the boat into an overhanging tree that knocked Ignace overboard into the raging waters. The men in the boat immediately paddled into the fast water and rescued him. Once safely ashore they discovered that Ignace had received a severe blow to the head, which Thompson treated by bleeding the wound. Night came, and the rain continued without a lull as the men sat shelterless on the rocks through the long hours of darkness. It was still raining the next morning. From driftwood found along the shores, the men made more paddles to replace those broken the day before.

Soon the boat was tightly packed and launched into the current, which again proved too strong. Thompson gave the order to pull ashore, and the men began unloading their gear for a long and difficult portage. Climbing out of the canyon, one of the crewmen glanced up through the mist to see a large procession of men, women, and children approaching on foot and horseback. They were a welcome sight.

The native people helped Thompson load his supplies onto their horses, and, in another several hours the remarkable entourage arrived at the people's village near the foot of the canyon. They

gave him horses, salmon, dried meat, and roots. Grateful for the kindness of these Indians, Thompson was generous in return, giving them tobacco and beads, cloth trim, buttons and rings, as well as 18 hawksbells.

Dropping nearly 30 feet in a four-mile run, the river current at Nespelem Canyon sped along at ten miles an hour, even faster at high water. Jutting rocks tossed the frothing water from one wall to the other, the canyon's constriction forced its waters to rise from 50 to 90 feet above low water level. When the river ran high, the narrow canyon backed up the Columbia's waters nearly ten miles in the direction of Grand Coulee.

Had Thompson run the rapids that day, he would likely have been given even more trouble from Kalichen Rock, a large protrusion extending halfway across the river from the right shoreline. The first challenge confronting river travelers was to avoid being smashed into the rock, as the current directed everything toward it. Kalichen Rock's more sinister effect, however, was created by the monstrously huge whirlpool that awaited river travelers once they reached its other side. During high water its reach extended across the entire river. Witnesses reported seeing huge 200-foot trees sucked through its vortex and not resurfacing for half a mile. Here in 1847 Pierre DeSmet helplessly watched the whirlpool claim the lives of five Hudson's Bay Company boatmen. He wrote that once the boat was sucked down not the faintest trace of their tragic fate could be seen upon the river's breast. For those lucky enough to survive its many perils, Nespelem Canyon promised high adventure. Listen to Lieutenant Thomas William Symons's 1881 account:

*And so we plunge along swiftly through the rolling water, with huge rocks looming up, now on one side and then on the other. Every stroke of the oar is bearing us onward, nearer Nespelem Canyon and nearer the terrible Kalichen Falls and Whirlpool Rapids. For a few moments the rowing ceases, while brave old Pierre gives his orders to the Indians in their own tongue.*

*With a shout they seize their oars, and commence laying to them with all their strength. We are rushing forward at a fearful rate, and we shudder at the thought of striking any of the huge black rocks near which we glide.*

*Now we are fairly in the rapids, and our boat is rushing madly through the foam and billows. The Indians are shouting at every stroke in their wild savage glee. It is infectious, we shout, too, and feel the wild exultation which comes to men in moments of great excitement and danger.*

*Ugly masses of rock show their heads above the troubled waters on every side. Great billows strike us fore and aft, some falling squarely over the bow and drenching us to the waist. This is bad enough, but the worst is yet to come as we draw near with great velocity to a huge rock which appears dead ahead.*

*Has old Pierre seen it? The water looks terribly cold as we think of his failing eyesight. Then an order, a shout, backing on one side and pulling on the other, and a quick stroke of the steering oar, and the rock appears on our right hand. Another command and answering shout. The oars bend like willows as the Indians struggle to get the boat out of the strong eddy into which Pierre had thrown her. Finally she shoots ahead and passes the rock like a flash, within less than an oar's length of it, and we shout for joy and breathe freely again.*

Symons, DeSmet, and Thompson all began their journeys downriver at Kettle Falls. Here the Columbia rushed over large, slanted quartzite formations straddling the width of the river. During normal flows the river divided into two channels separated by Hayes Island. The

shallower east channel narrowed to 50 feet before abruptly turning to join the main river channel. The river dropped 31 feet over two principal falls set only 1,300 feet apart. The upper falls, extending 380 feet from the mainland to Hayes Island, fell from 18 to 25 feet while the lower falls, formed by a large promontory jutting 60 feet into the river, dropped 8 to 13 feet in two parts. Although the total fall between the two remained relatively constant, at high water the lower fall was greater on account of the river's engorgement, which was caused by the jutting reef below.

Beginning in late June and continuing through the fall, huge numbers of salmon arrived at Kettle Falls. Frontier artist Paul Kane compared their numbers to large flocks of birds leaping the falls from dawn to dusk with as many as 40 jumping at once. Fishing here was always dangerous, requiring a high degree of organization developed over many years.

The highly respected Salmon Chief, called See-Pay or Chief of the Waters, speared the first salmon coming upriver and presided over ceremonies honoring the fish's return. As water levels fell, he supervised the placement of large fishing basket traps alongside the rocks where the fish leapt from the water. It was not unusual to find 300 fish in the basket when it was lifted from the turbulent waters.

Fishermen speared and netted up to 3,000 fish in a single day. To prevent large fish from yanking fishermen into the roiling waters, lines were affixed to harpoons so that if a salmon was not landed immediately, the fish could take the line downstream. When a salmon was speared, the pole was deftly turned to fix the harpoon in the fish's flesh. Often, to prevent being pulled off balance, the fisherman threw himself prone on the suspended platform as he worked to land the fish.

By day's end the Salmon Chief portioned the catch among the families according to rights and needs. As salmon comprised up to one-half of native diets, families needed to procure three to six fish from each day's catch to sustain them throughout the year. Archaeologist/historian David Chance estimated that prior to 1875 fishermen caught a million pounds of salmon annually at the falls.

When fish were running, Kettle Falls was a place of excitement and festivity, drawing more than a thousand people annually. The camps bustled with activity—a rich assortment of families sharing the work of fishing by day and the pleasure of singing, dancing, and gaming at night.

Native Americans and First Nations peoples from both sides of the river gathered on Sunday, June 13, 1941, for a Ceremony of Tears on Hayes Island to honor and grieve for the falls that soon would be inundated by Grand Coulee Dam. Over the course of three days, many spoke to the memory and meaning of the falls. It was a place their people had known since time began—a center of vitality for a life way thousands of years in the making.

The losses felt that week at the falls were legion. It was a particularly sad time for those who had been forced to move their homes to make ready for Grand Coulee Dam. The people reflected and prayed—gone the salmon, gone the favorite places along the river where fish might be caught, gone thousands of acres of food, producing bottomlands and access to root and berry grounds.

Three weeks later, on July 5, 1941, the last traces of Kettle Falls disappeared—their inspiring beauty, the foaming, surging, roaring, tumbling water rushing over rocks, creating mists and sprays of shimmering rainbows in the early morning sun—silenced and covered beneath the newly created lake.

Living memories remain, but not for long. With the passage of time—now 61 years—each story remembered becomes increasingly important because we know that its teller is among the last few surviving who knew this special place.

In the summer of 2001 the North Central Washington Playback Theatre Company visited the Kettle Falls area for the purpose of calling these stories forward. A group of 125 gathered at the Woodland Theater, where actors and musicians listened intently as elders described their feelings and shared their memories of the falls. Following each story, the actors mirrored the story back to both teller and audience.

Newell Wilson, now 85 years old, remembered visiting the falls as a boy of eight. His mother took a photograph that day of an Indian child who later that afternoon lost his footing on the slippery rocks and drowned. Some days later an Indian woman came to his neighborhood looking for the person who had taken the photograph. At first his mother thought she might be in some trouble, but the grieving mother explained that this was the only picture ever taken of the boy and could she see it? After the actors finished, we sat with the story's many dimensions, taking in both its beauty as well as its particular grief, a grief made larger yet by our own personal histories with those we have left behind and the places we have lost.

I have found that to honor these river places now gone from our view, it is helpful to breathe in the reality of those losses. We need to feel them, however thankful we may be for the benefits the modern river bestows on us. In doing so, a doorway opens that nurtures deep comfort derived from the knowledge that we can keep the native river alive within us and thereby experience its blessings.

Mr. McKee, an early Bridgeport rancher, used to step out of his door each morning to look for his herd of horses high on the ridges above the Columbia. If he could spot his lead white stallion, "Old Safety," he knew that the rest of the herd was there. Many years later, long after he no longer owned horses, the old man found himself still going outside each morning, scanning the hillside to see if he could spot Old Safety.

High on the ridge near his homestead stood a white rock. One morning Mr. McKee returned to the kitchen, a smile on his face. He reported that he had spotted his horse high up among the cliffs: Old Safety was on duty and all was well with the herd. It was a story that neighbor Wade



Troutman was fond of telling his daughter Melba as they drove home to their ranch just beyond Pearl Hill. Yet, with years, the white rock faded. In 1970, to keep the memory alive, father and daughter climbed to the rock and gave it a fresh coat of white paint. Then they, too, could look up from below each day to find Old Safety there again and know that all was well.

I think of this story and remind myself: The river is there, written in the heart. Sing and dance that you may remember.

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