

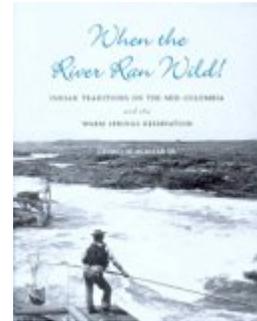
H-Net Reviews

in the Humanities & Social Sciences

George W. Aguilar, Sr. *When the River Ran Wild!* Seattle and London: University of Washington Press, 2005. xviii + 298 pp. \$22.50 (paper), ISBN 978-0-295-98484-1.

Reviewed by Roberta Ulrich (Independent Scholar.)

Published on H-AmIndian (April, 2006)



The River People by One of Their Own

George Aguilar's *When the River Ran Wild!* is part memoir, part history, part folk lore, part nature study—and part lament for the rich and robust way of life that vanished under the backwaters of twentieth-century dams.

White people have studied and written about the Indian people of the Columbia River since Lewis and Clark floated past them more than two hundred years ago. Now, one of those River People has told their story from inside the culture. At 75, Aguilar is old enough to remember the dip net fisheries, family life in a remote canyon without an automobile, Indian boarding school and horseback migrations to mountain berry fields. He describes all this and more.

Make no mistake: Aguilar is no latter-day native back-to-nature philosopher providing fodder for New Age Indian wannabes. He is a thoroughly modern Indian with a deep appreciation of both the old tribal ways and the flexibility that let the Warm Springs Indians combine contemporary business methods and traditional customs into a successful society. Aguilar has been a sergeant in the U.S. Army, a fisherman, a farm field worker, a logger, a carpenter, an auto mechanic and a businessman, operating a service station and owning and dealing blackjack tables. He served as construction manager for his tribal government, the Confederated Tribes of the Warm Springs Indian Reservation. He says that at 75 he can still keep up with younger people in construction and reforestation work (p xiv).

Aguilar's people are the Wasco who lived and

fished along the Columbia River, roughly between the Willamette River and the point where the Columbia bends north into Washington State. There were numerous tribes and bands along the river. In 1855 they were scooped up into the Treaty with the Tribes of Middle Oregon and assigned to the Warm Springs Reservation, an area of forested mountains and near-desert plains more than sixty miles south of the river. There, they shared the land with the Warm Springs, whose homeland was closer to the reservation, and Paiutes from southern Oregon, who had been enemies of the Wasco.

Aguilar's sources are his own vivid memory, family records, the memories of other tribal elders, tribal records, and those basics of more formal historians' research—books, libraries, and archives. Those looking for a typical linear history or memoir, however, will need to adjust their thinking. This book reflects an Indian relationship with time. Yesterday is part of today. Time does not so much move forward as circle back upon itself. For instance, a chapter discussing a contemporary situation includes—as if current information—Lewis and Clark's impressions. There are frequent references to the “created” reservation, a reminder that this dry, high plain was not the River People's original home. Although one early chapter is devoted to his childhood in typical memoir fashion, the remainder of the book is divided by topic such as flora, fauna, native salmon fishery, the giving of Indian names, and warfare.

The writing varies from mundane descriptive passages to sheer poetry, as when he describes returning to

the remote ranch of his early childhood many years after a range fire drove the family to another reservation community:

“In a recent visit to Wolford Canyon, where I was brought up, there was only silence. The memories remain, but the echoes of the canyon are calm. No children play in the springwater pools. No sweat-house fires heat the rocks. No deer hides are soaking. No buckskin tanning. No gardens. No wheat or hay growing. The fields are now teeming with juniper trees where the golden heads of wheat once swayed to the whispers of the wind ... The only survivors of this canyon where I lived as a child are five huge ponderosa pine trees. Their branches move with the motion of the wind, their needles whispering, ‘We’re still alive’” (p. 39).

Aguilar devotes a chapter to listing food and medicinal plants complete with both their Indian and Latin names, their uses and, for many, their nutritional content. Another chapter describes in detail the esoteric rules of Indian name-giving.

Most of the writing is matter-of-fact in tone, even when the author is recounting tragic injustices such as the government’s failure to provide promised food and clothing after removing the tribal people from their food sources in the 1850s. The same restrained tone continues through more personal experiences such as his punishment as a boarding school first grader for “messing my pants,” a result of the drastic change in diet in moving from his home’s traditional foods to the school’s Euro-American menu. After being struck on the hand with a hairbrush, he was forced to stand in a hall corner for three hours a day for a week (p. 37).

He discusses, without apology or defensiveness, the practices of slavery and polygamy. Quoting from an account by Indian Superintendent A. B. Meacham, he makes the reader see the anguish of an old man wrestling with the government’s mandate to rid himself of all but one of his half-dozen wives. Nor does Aguilar recoil from more recent incidents that do not show his fellow tribesmen in good light. Aguilar is the son of an immigrant from the Philippines and a woman of mixed Columbia River tribal heritage, the bands of Eastern Kiksht Chi-

nookian speakers. Both parents died when he was an infant and he was raised by his maternal grandparents, first in a remote canyon of the 640,000-acre Warm Springs Reservation, then in a community near the Bureau of Indian Affairs agency. Describing his early school days, he said his mixed-blood parentage made him in the eyes of his full-blooded classmates “the scum of the Warm Springs people.” He writes, “I was scorned and relentlessly laughed at because I was a half breed Tanan” (p. 36). Also in nonjudgmental style he describes racism in the Dalles and by law enforcement officers.

The book includes word portraits of some individual tribal members, instructions for tanning deer hides and making buckskin and descriptions of reservation life from the 1800s to contemporary times. It provides a close look at the fishing that was at the heart of the Indians’ lives, the rules that governed the fishery and fishing sites and the life that surrounded it. Aguilar also describes the changes forced by the construction of dams that put an end to the wild river. He makes note also that many of the traditional foods no longer grow in areas that once provided abundant harvest under the Indians’ care; white farmers’ use of the land for livestock grazing has replaced the native plants with nonnative grasses and sedges. There are some of the myths, especially Coyote and stick people stories. The author details tribal religious beliefs from early shamanism to contemporary faiths. There is humor too growing from everyday incidents.

Aguilar says he wrote the book for his fellow tribesmen and the general public. However, academics would be well advised to read it if they wish to understand the Indian culture of the Columbia River. Although many books have been written about the fishing tribes of the Columbia River, this is the first by a member of that culture. It is not the only tribal view. Those views can be as varied as within any group of people. But Aguilar’s is a real and realistic view. Like his ancestors who happily made use of the firearms and metal cooking pots introduced by early traders, he made use of Euro-American records and accounts to fill in his own observations and oral history. The result is a book worth reading for anyone with an interest in American Indian history and culture.

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Citation: Roberta Ulrich. Review of Aguilar, George W., Sr., *When the River Ran Wild!*. H-AmIndian, H-Net Reviews. April, 2006.

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