

Daniel L. Boxberger. *To Fish In Common: The Ethnohistory of Lummi Indian Salmon Fishing.* Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1989. xviii + 212 pp. \$17.95 (paper), ISBN 978-0-295-97848-2.

Reviewed by Andrew H. Fisher (Department of History, Arizona State University)

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A Fine Kettle of Fish

Heading north on Interstate 5 between Portland and Seattle, drivers pass a billboard featuring a smiling portrait of Uncle Sam. The accompanying message changes periodically, but a recurring theme is the alleged status of Native Americans as “supercitizens” with unfair and environmentally destructive treaty rights. “FIRST SALMON, NOW SHELLFISH,” Sam warned after last year’s court decision guaranteeing tribal access to tidelands, “ELK WILL BE NEXT.” More recently, the avuncular icon advocated “EQUAL RIGHTS FOR REDS AND WHITES.” The persistence and renewed virulence of such sentiments suggests that a reprint edition of *To Fish In Common* could not have come too soon. In the age of casino gaming and Makah whaling, many people still cherish the misconception that treaty rights have enriched Native peoples at the expense of endangered species and the rest of society.

On the contrary, Daniel Boxberger demonstrates in his case study of the Lummi experience, most Indian tribes have endured chronic poverty and high unemployment in spite of legally guaranteed access to natural resources. New issues have arisen in the decade since the first edition appeared in print, while fresh interpretations have enhanced our understanding of economic change and cultural evolution among Native Americans. Yet *To Fish In Common* retains much of its explanatory power and remains an important work of historical scholarship.

Boxberger knows his subject inside and out. A professor of anthropology at Western Washington University in Bellingham, he has lived on the Lummi reservation since the early 1970s and has seen firsthand the bitter legacy of tribal exclusion from the fishing industry. Although his personal connection to the community rarely shows through in the text, it informs his application of dependency theory to the Lummis’ current economic predicament. Start-

ing from the assumption that dependency produces underdevelopment, he follows the shifting fortunes of tribal fishers from aboriginal times to the mid-1980s. As the chapters move forward in time, Boxberger considers the interplay of four local variables: Lummi access to the salmon resource; technological advances in the fishing industry; the regional political economy, particularly the integration of salmon into the capitalist marketplace; and the Indians’ relationship to the state and federal governments. The resulting narrative follows a familiar path of declension, as powerful external forces transform the tribe into an internal colony, but the author strives throughout to “present the Lummi society as a continuum, a constantly changing, constantly adapting group who are as distinct today as they were in 1790” (p. 10).

At the time of European contact, Indians could fish wherever they had relatives, which typically meant anywhere in Straits Salish territory. Although specific weirs and reef netting areas belonged to individuals, who administered them on behalf of a larger kin group, abundant sites and plentiful runs of Fraser River sockeye allowed everyone to share in the harvest. More than a mere source of subsistence, salmon supported a rich culture and an intricate class system within Native society. The Indians reserved on- and off-reservation rights to this precious resource in the 1855 Treaty of Port Elliott, which established the modern Lummi “tribe,” but Euro-American entrepreneurs increasingly challenged their control of the fishery. The advent of improved canning technology in the 1880s made salmon a valuable commodity. Cannery owners built fish traps on Lummi reef net sites, while an influx of Asian labor pushed most Indians out of the processing sector. Neglecting both its trust responsibility and an obvious economic opportunity, the Bureau of Indian Affairs did little to help because it regarded fishing as an impediment to agri-

cultural pursuits. By 1900, the Lummis maintained only a token presence in the commercial fishing industry on Puget Sound.

Their foothold became a toehold during the twentieth century. As further technological innovations made the industry more capital intensive, the Lummis found it nearly impossible to compete with the growing fleet of purse seiners, gill netters, and trollers. Confined to terminal fisheries on or near the reservation, Indians bore the brunt of state regulations aimed at conserving the already dwindling stocks of salmon. The passage of Initiative 77 removed competition from fish traps after 1934, while the Indian Reorganization Act encouraged the new tribal council to draft its own fishing regulations. Yet the Lummis fell deeper into dependency on the federal government. Except for a brief period during World War II, which created a temporary vacuum in the commercial fishery, they struggled to stay afloat on the periphery of the fishing industry. Washington State still blamed them for shrinking salmon runs, however, and Indian protests against the mounting assault on their treaty rights sparked confrontations on the water and in the courts. The 1974 "Boldt decision" ostensibly ended the controversy in favor of the treaty tribes, but non-Indians continue to contest the ruling even today. In addition, bitter inter- and intratribal disputes have since developed over harvest allocation and fishing areas. Though the Lummis dominated the Indian fishery by 1985, the bulk of its benefits fell to an elite group of purse seiners. Even their share has declined over the past fifteen years. There are simply too many boats chasing too few fish. With little capital to diversify its economy, the Lummi tribe remains in a state of underdevelopment.

Boxberger's exacting analysis furnishes a significant Northwest example to place alongside the works of Richard White and David Rich Lewis.[1] Like those authors, he makes a convincing case for the erosion of Indian self-sufficiency by economic and political currents flowing from the capitalist "center." While scholars now prefer to emphasize Native agency, Boxberger reminds us that they must do so within the inescapable context of material loss and cultural distress. At the same time, he contextualizes the contemporary problems of a community he has come to care about. Knowing the historical roots of their misfortune may not make it easier for the Lummis to escape the fine kettle of fish the dominant society has placed them in. For those who read more than billboards, however, Boxberger's book supplies

an effective antidote to the anti-Indian venom that continues to poison public debate.

Of course, *To Fish In Common* does have some shortcomings. Given the author's anthropological training and close ties to the Lummi reservation, one could hope for a stronger Native voice and a deeper cultural analysis. Though Boxberger utilizes ethnographic material and personal observations to good effect, he presents an economic history rather than a true ethnohistory of Lummi salmon fishing. The dependency framework prevents him from pursuing some of his more intriguing points, while his focus on the reservation and the tribe largely obscures the successful adaptations that individual Indians made to changing economic conditions. Non-reservation natives, in particular, cry out for more attention. As Alexandra Harmon and Brad Asher have recently shown, many Indians in western Washington stayed off the reservations or resided there on only a seasonal basis.[2] This aspect of Native survival deserves greater play, especially considering Boxberger's contention that non-reservation Indians "entered and stayed in the commercial salmon fishery competitively from the beginning" (p. 75). Similarly, the question of tribal membership warrants further investigation, since the ability to claim treaty rights and to access traditional fishing grounds increasingly hinged on the assertion of a "Lummi" identity. Boxberger clearly recognizes the existence of these issues, however, and thus my remarks are intended less as criticisms than as suggestions for prospective inquiry. As Chris Friday notes in his foreword to the new volume, future scholars will be well served to consult this addition to the Columbia Northwest Classics series.

Notes

[1]. David Rich Lewis, *Neither Wolf Nor Dog: American Indians, Environment, and Agrarian Change* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1994), and Richard White, *The Roots of Dependency: Subsistence, Environment, and Social Change among the Choctaws, Pawnees, and Navajos* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1983).

[2]. Brad Asher, *Beyond the Reservation: Indians, Settlers, and the Law in Washington Territory, 1853-1889* (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1999), and Alexandra Harmon, *Indians in the Making: Ethnic Relations and Indian Identities around Puget Sound* (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1999).

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