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Esther Ross and the Struggle for Stillaguamish Identity

On June 8, 1975 several horse-drawn wagons and a collection of men clad in frontier buckskins gathered in Blaine, Washington, to begin a year-long trek across the United States in celebration of the nation's eagerly anticipated bicentennial. As they rumbled eastward across Washington, television cameras and reporters were assembling at Island Crossing, three miles west of Arlington. There, Stillaguamish Indian leader Esther Ross was preparing to stop the wagon train, and the press, sensing a big story, jockeyed for the best position from which to view the confrontation. Ross saw this as the perfect moment to press her case for federal recognition of the Stillaguamish tribe. When the wagon train finally approached Island Crossing, and the wagon master had been brought to the tribal office, she stepped forward to deliver her prepared statement. Targeting the wagon train as a symbol of broken treaties, unfulfilled promises, and the destruction of her people by the white man, she dramatically announced, "We stop this Bicentennial wagon train to bring to the attention of the nation that we have no other alternative short of violence that would bring our plight to light and produce action" (p. 153).

Arguably, this was Ross's finest moment, the culmination of a lifetime of arduous struggle to gain federal recognition for her people, and to restore to the Stillaguamish--and to her as one of its members--an Indian identity that had all but disappeared, the victim of white encroachments on ancestral lands, failed treaties, and assimilation of the tribe into American society. Ruby and Brown painstakingly reconstruct the story of this struggle--of Ross' extraordinary persistence and the equally extraordinary resistance she encountered--through her own papers, now housed in the Eastern Washington State Historical Society, and through extensive interviews with those who knew and worked closely with her. The published results are fascinating, providing us with important insights not only into the political machinations associated with the struggle for federal recognition, but also the important role played by women as tribal leaders and voices of influence, within the tribe and beyond it.

Ross was not a full-blooded Stillaguamish. But then, few of her tribespeople were. They were nearly all the products of intermixing with white settlers; Ross, in particular, could trace her ancestry through Portuguese and Norwegian immigrants who had come to the West Coast in the nineteenth century seeking new opportunity. On her mother's side, however, she could trace her lineage to Chief Caddus, an influential leader of the Stillaguamish. Although her youth was marked by the absence of any real connection to this Indian heritage, it later became the animating force in her quest for a native identity.

Ruby and Brown trace the source of this quest to the 1920s, when Ross's mother, Angelina, sought to reconstruct her own native identity by joining with other Puget Sound Indians in a suit against the United States Government. The Indians claimed that the government had failed to fulfill its obligations under the 1855 Treaty of Point Elliot, causing the Indians to lose their lands, resources and power in the Puget Sound region. As compensation, the Indians wanted a claims award that could easily be divided amongst themselves. But Ross, who accompanied her mother on the journey to Washington State to prepare for the suit, began to think otherwise. She found that the Stillaguamish whom she met lacked a native identity in the same way that she did; only through federal recognition of the tribe, she believed, could it be restored. Indeed, as Ruby and Brown point out, "She needed confirmation of her Indian heritage through official recognition of the Stillaguamish tribe" (p. 25). She would not stop at anything less.

She called the first official tribal meeting of her people in 1926. Twenty-five individuals came together and elected officers who would press claims against the government for lost lands. Though not officially elected, Ross served as de facto secretary of the tribe, a position she maintained for years, though rarely without contention.

Over the next five decades Ross worked indefatigably for federal recognition of the Stillaguamish. It is a remarkable tale of tenacity and outright moxie. In the 1960s in particular, when Indians across the nation became politically active in the name of tribal self-determination, Ross was learning important lessons about protest tactics through her associations with leaders of the fish-ins being conducted in Washington. She also kept company with the radical General Herbert C. Holdridge, whose fiery anti-government rhetoric and Vietnam War protests led her to make important links between federal policy in Southeast Asia and the injustices visited upon Indians in the U.S. Ross ultimately found Holdridge's message too extreme, but it did influence her perceptions of the federal government as corrupt and unethical.

In 1970, Ross succeeded in getting the Stillaguamish included in a suit by Washington Indian tribes against the state government. The issue was fishing rights, and particularly the use of net fishing, which the government had restricted in the name of conservation. At the same time, she was working steadily to get a piece of land put into trust status so that her tribe could prove that it had a land base, a prerequisite for federal recognition. This, in combination with the 1974 decision of District Judge Hugo Boldt to grant the Stillaguamish fishing rights, established new legitimacy for Ross and her people. As Ruby and Brown argue, the Boldt decision signaled to Indians and non-Indians alike her "potential as a viable political-economic force, and by the same token, a threat to federally recognized tribes contending with her for federal funds" (p. 128). The Lummi and Tulalip tribes opposed her most often, fearing that Stillaguamish recognition would dilute their own federal appropriations.

While intertribal rivalry over federal funding was intense, it is surprising to learn that there was a significant amount of discord among the Stillaguamish themselves. Many, for example, did

not want federal recognition and would not provide Ross with any financial support. As one interviewee explained, "They did not want their neighbors and friends to know they were Indians at that time. They did not want to be associated with Indians or called Indians. These folks who qualified for a share of government claims money wanted that without any show of demonstration of the fact, because it was bad at that time [to be Indian]" (p. 138). For this reason, she usually had to use her own money and resources for tribal business.

Landless Indians and those in urban locations did support Ross, and the National Congress of American Indians (NCAI) offered its own support for Stillaguamish recognition in 1974. Ross was in her seventies by this point. She was hard of hearing and at times irascible in her meetings with government officials. She was known to turn down the volume on her hearing aid when she did not want to listen to the opposition. From time to time she staged dramatic confrontations in order to gain media attention. Before the era of NAGPRA (Native American Graves Protection and Repatriation Act), for example, when no protection existed for the graves of Stillaguamish ancestors, Ross took it upon herself to toss on the desk of the governor of Washington a cigar box filled with the bones of Stillaguamish Indians. She asked him where his grandparents were buried and then blurted out, "I want to dig them up" (p. 92). In order to publicize the plight of federally unrecognized tribes, she sent in 1976 a frozen steelhead trout via air-freight to newly appointed Secretary of the Interior Thomas S. Kleppe. Federally unrecognized tribes had blessed it in order to gain the government's attention. Then, of course, there was the Bicentennial Wagon Train.

Ross's unique brand of militancy succeeded in spite of the negative responses it sometimes engendered. In October of 1976 the Department of the Interior recognized that the Stillaguamish had treaty rights and were eligible for federal services, though it did not formally state that the tribe was recognized. Nevertheless, Ross had won an important victory and was now feted by those who had once doubted her. She became "Chief," a mantle traditionally held only by men in the tribe, and was given the power not only to oversee tribal affairs, but also relations with the BIA.

This should have been a happy ending to a long and exhausting struggle for recognition, but as Ruby and Brown deftly point out, politics--particularly in regard to blood quantum requirements, accounting problems and nepotism involving Ross' family--led to confrontations with the tribal council and her eventual removal from leadership. Her health rapidly deteriorated after that and she died in 1988.

Ross's story, told admirably by Ruby and Brown, provides important insights into the struggle for federal recognition among tribes without land, culture or identity. We learn of the indifference of government officials, the jealousy of other tribes, and the lack of support among the Stillaguamish themselves. But we also learn of Ross's impressive vision and the extraordinary perseverance she exhibited in order to achieve it. That she was a woman underscores the increasing influence wielded by native women in improving their tribal communities' health, education and welfare. Anyone interested in these important issues in twentieth-century American Indian studies will not want to miss this book.

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