



Monday, February 12, 2007 - 12:00 AM

Permission to reprint or copy this article or photo, other than personal use, must be obtained from The Seattle Times. Call 206-464-3113 or e-mail resale@seattletimes.com with your request.

After 153 years, Treaty Tree lost to winter storm

By Lynda V. Mapes
Seattle Times staff reporter

MEDICINE CREEK, Thurston County — It withstood earthquakes and more than 153 years of history. But the Treaty Tree, witness to the signing of the first Indian treaty in Western Washington, finally blew down in the windstorm that blasted the region in December.

Today the weathered Douglas fir snag, once visible from Interstate 5, lies in pieces. Its gnarled top bobs at high tide in a side channel of Medicine Creek, also known as McAllister Creek. Another chunk rests alongside the water. A last chunk of the trunk still spears some 20 feet into the air.

It was here, in 1854, that tribes signed the Treaty of Medicine Creek with territorial Gov. Isaac Stevens, the first in a series of treaties that would cede most of present-day Western Washington to the United States. The treaty council took place in a grove of firs, including the Treaty Tree, the sole survivor that stood watch as the South Sound native people, including the Nisqually, Squaxin and Puyallup tribes, signed away some 4,000 square miles of their homeland, from the South Sound all the way north to Vashon Island.

In her account, "Treaty Time at Nisqually," Nisqually tribal historian and author Cecilia Svinth Carpenter recounts the scene described by George Gibbs, who recorded the proceedings of the treaty council for Stevens, including a description of the grove with the Treaty Tree:

"The Indians took their quarters on a forested bench a short distance away. The scene was lively. Thin temporary huts of mats with the smoke of their numerous camp fires, the prows of the canoes hauled up on the bank and protruding from among the huts, the horses grazing on the marsh, the gloom of the firs and the cedars ... and the scattered and moving groups of Indians in all kinds of odd and fantastic dresses present a curious picture."



ELLEN M. BANNER / THE SEATTLE TIMES

Indian leader Billy Frank stands at the fallen Treaty Tree, which has marked the 1854 gathering spot where South Sound tribes agreed to give up most of their lands.



ALAN BERNER / THE SEATTLE TIMES, 1985

The Treaty Tree, at the site where the Medicine Creek Treaty was signed in 1854, stood as a snag in the 1980s. December's winds finally snapped it.

While it had no plaque, no sign, no bronze historic marker, the Treaty Tree was a widely known and revered landmark, said Billy Frank, a Nisqually tribal member internationally recognized for his collaborative work defending Indian treaty rights. On a visit last week, Frank laid a hand on the weathered bark of the Treaty Tree.

"People love this tree, not only the Indian people, but the people who know the history," Frank said. "You can feel the spirit of the tree, the spark of life in this tree. It was a symbol of a place, and of that treaty. You close your eyes, you can still see the canoes right here."

With the signing of the treaty, the tribes reserved their rights to hunt, fish and gather roots, berries and other essentials in their traditional places, and kept portions of their aboriginal lands, intended for their exclusive use. For non-Indians, the treaty opened the door to the development of Puget Sound country, granting clear title to the lands that would create fortunes for generations to come.

"They implement their side of the treaty every day," Frank said of the pioneers' descendants. "They go to the bank."

The treaty proved an uneven bargain. Much of the land reserved for the tribes was condemned, or allotted and sold to others. And the way of life the treaty was intended to protect was soon under attack and remains so today, Frank said.

The treaty pushed the Nisqually people off their river and relocated them to rocky terrain, a result so unacceptable to the Nisqually that they went to war in 1855. The result was relocation to a new reservation on the Nisqually River, where the tribe remains. More than 3,000 acres of that reservation, however, were condemned with the creation of Fort Lewis in 1917. And today, Frank said, development eats away at the environment needed to sustain the tribe's traditional ways.

"What scares the tribes now is our way of life continually, every day, is eroded," he said. "Puget Sound is dying. Our rivers and cricks have no water. There's no trees, no huckleberries, no salmon. No hunting and gathering. No roots, no medicines. Through signing the treaty, these are supposed to be protected. And they are not."

Yet Frank still believes in the promise of the treaty and the power of collaboration to fulfill it. "We are all together, we are one people here. What are we going to leave our children? A better place, or a bigger problem? We have to turn the corner to bring the natural world back."

Just what to do with the remaining pieces of the Treaty Tree has been under discussion since the storm, said Nisqually Tribal Chairwoman Cynthia Iyall. Ideas include collecting the wood and putting it in a museum and carving some of it into a bench or plaque for display at the Nisqually tribal center. And the tribe wants to mark the site, perhaps with erection of a permanent monument, or even raising a totem pole tall enough to be seen from I-5.

As traffic whizzes by on the freeway, that the tree survived at all seems a wonder. But it was no accident. Bob Barnes, landscape architect for the state Department of Transportation, said the agency was careful to avoid the tree when it constructed I-5 through the area in the 1960s.



ELLEN M. BANNER / THE SEATTLE TIMES
Billy Frank says he can imagine the scene of tribal leaders' conclave with Gov. Isaac Stevens. The future of the Treaty Tree's remnants is undecided.

But fill placed in the right of way, where the tree is rooted, affected its health. Dead since the winter of 1979, the snag had been left to weather. Noticing its decline, an earlier DOT employee, Bill Melton, gathered seeds and planted a grove of descendants in 1975 that today stand some 40 feet tall around the Treaty Tree.

A new crop of seedlings from those descendants is also being grown now, to be gifted to tribes in the area. "We are going to continue to keep the history alive," said Barnes, an enrolled member of the Blackfeet Tribe.

Through those seedlings the Treaty Tree lives on — just like the treaty.

"This old-timer, his day has passed," Frank said. "But as long as the grass grows and the rivers flow and the sun rises in the east and sets in the west, that treaty is alive."

Lynda Mapes: 206-464-2736 or lmapes@seattletimes.com

[Copyright © 2007 The Seattle Times Company](#)