



Grandma Aggie wants to sit in her family chair. Who could say no to that? But Grandma Aggie is **no ordinary grandma** and her chair is **not the front porch rocker**.

BRINGING GRANDMA HOME

Mid winter 2012, in Grants Pass, Oregon, the oldest living Takelma Indian was in bed at her usual rehab center, tethered to an IV bag as she recovered from yet another joint replacement. At 87, Agnes Baker Pilgrim could barely sit up, let alone walk, and she was reminding me of my one crucial task at her annual Salmon Ceremony on the Rogue River: securing the golf cart. “Grandma Aggie” is famous for racing around in a golf cart with one hand on the steering wheel and the other holding a bullhorn, blasting everyone out of their teepees and tents at 6:00 a.m. for the sunrise prayer circle.

“The cart is no problem,” I said. Laurel Acres, our local golf course, always donates one.

“Good!” She smiled sweetly. “And I want my picture taken on the Story Chair.”

BY STEPHEN KIESLING



“But Grandma!” I said finally, picking up my jaw. “The Story Chair is in the middle of a Class IV waterfall. In fact, Ti’lomikh (ti low meekh) Falls is the largest falls on the middle Rogue.” I shook my head. “You could get ripped up like one of those old salmon that’s already spawned.”

Grandma just smiled and patted my hand. She had made up her mind—and nobody says no to Grandma. She is the matriarch of a huge family that includes great-great-grandchildren. She is also the chair of the International Council of 13 Indigenous Grandmothers, a world-traveling pack of tribal elders who consult with the Dalai Lama and have petitioned the Pope on behalf of indigenous peoples and sacred places. The Siletz Reservation, where she was born, calls Grandma Aggie a “Living Treasure,” and the Oregon Council of the Arts calls her a “Living Cultural Legend.” Before she became a spiritual and environmental activist, she was a logger, a stockcar racer, and a jail barber. She’s a force of nature who became a force *for* nature—and a source of inspiration for countless non-Natives like me. Nevertheless, only a few days earlier it seemed the strongest thing in her was pneumonia.

“But Grandma,” I began again.

She shushed me and then her eyes softened. “My father sat in the Story Chair. My ancestors for thousands of years. It’s my time.”

The Story Chair is where Dahl-Dahl, the Great Dragonfly, created the Salmon Ceremony to bring peace to the tribes who were killing each other over fish. Grandma Aggie’s ancestors were elders who sat in the stone seat and managed the fishery. No one knows the date of the first Salmon Ceremony, but tribal stories hold the memory of Mount Mazama blowing up to form Crater Lake more than 7,700 years ago—and moccasins were found buried under the volcanic ash. To look into Grandma Aggie’s eye is to peer into a ritual perhaps older than Christianity, Judaism, and Hinduism.

If the Story Chair were in Europe, or Israel or India, this symbol of peace and sustainable fisheries management would appear in guidebooks and inspire highway signs and postcards. Tourists would visit and have their pictures taken. But here in Oregon, the Siletz Tribal Council didn’t even want a roadside marker.

Why? In the brutal process we now call ethnic cleansing, sacred sites are typically hit the hardest, and Ti’lomikh was no exception. Only by a miracle did the Story Chair survive, and the Siletz Tribal Council still fear their fellow Americans may destroy it. Grandma Aggie, however, believed her photo on the Story Chair could help change all that. Her ultimate vision is a Dragonfly Bridge just upstream

of the Story Chair to symbolize the return of Dahl-Dahl. She sees it as a powerful symbol of peace not just for Native Americans, but for all people.

How do you say no to that?

As we talked, I realized that I had two new friends who would likely help. Oliver Fix is a whitewater kayaker from Germany who won the 1996 Olympic Gold Medal. His wife Gilda, from Costa Rica, was an Olympic kayaker as well as a professional raft guide. I was on Team USA for rowing in 1980, and had just received a notice from USA Olympians asking athletes to raise public awareness on Olympic Day, which coincided with the Salmon Ceremony. Part of the modern Olympic mission is to support indigenous peoples, so it would be fitting to put together an international Olympic Team to take Grandma down Ti’lomikh Falls.

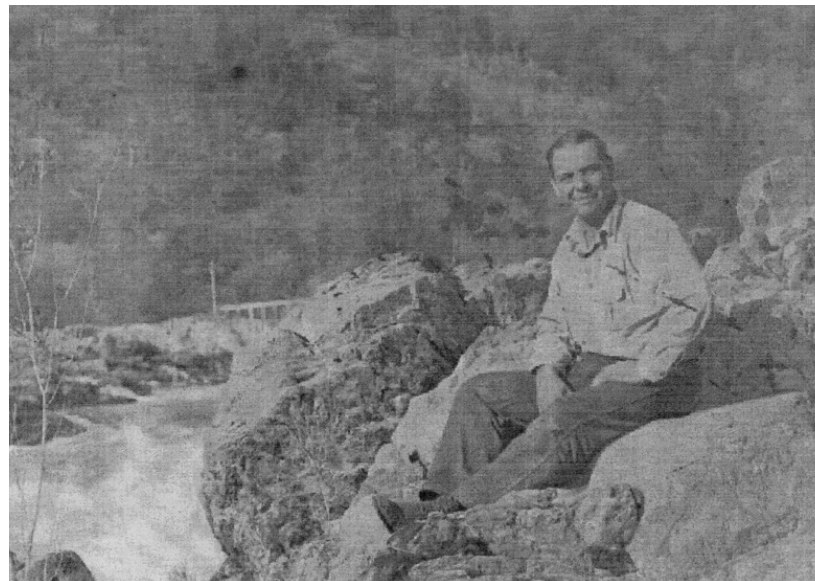
So I said okay, I’d get on it. But as I walked out of the rehab center I inhaled sharply. This adventure could prove lethal. What took my breath away is that Grandma knew it too. That was part of the ritual. To insure that the fish always return, someone has to dive into the falls to offer his or her life to the salmon.

THE PEOPLE OF THE RIVER

Takelma means “people of the river,” which is not the same as “people who happen to live along the river.” In Takelma mythology, the Rogue is the main artery of a living animal with its head at Mount Mazama, its ribs along the Table Rocks, and its tail through the Pacific sands of Gold Beach. Our lives follow the river’s path, bursting forth from the Boundary Spring below Mount Mazama, growing fast and tumbling through the upper Rogue gorges, then widening and slowing—and finally flowing into the Pacific. It is the salmon that bring life back.

To the Takelma, salmon equaled survival. The pound of flesh they ate each day was their primary protein. Dried salmon was also their currency, and their major source of trade. The deep pool below Ti’lomikh Falls was where the fat spring Chinook would gather and hold through the summer before their final dash to the spawning beds upstream—and so the pool swirling with fish became the navel of the Takelma universe. It is said that when a man dipped his net

To insure that the fish always return, someone has to dive into the falls to offer his or her life to the salmon.



Grandma Aggie’s father, George Baker, on the Story Chair (left),

from the Story Chair, it would take two men to lift it.

To get a sense of what happened at Ti’lomikh Falls, imagine it is early spring. You are hungry, perhaps starving, and you are among other hungry people from tribes that sometimes kill each other and have walked as far as one hundred miles. As the rushing race of spring Chinook fills the pool, the leader of the Takelma takes to the Story Chair. His job is to judge the number of fish in the run and to decide how many can be taken. Once that crucial decision is made, he dips his net into the pool to take the first fish of the season. Those first fish were ritually prepared as a sacrament and shared among all the people. Finally, at the culmination of the ceremony, the leader takes the bones and skin of the first salmon and dives into the falls. Only then does the real fishing and feasting begin.

Salmon ceremonies managed the Rogue fishery until 1851, when gold was discovered nearby. As it turned out, the Story Chair is the midpoint between two hills now called Gold Hill and Nugget Butte, and Ti’lomikh became Ground Zero for mining. The sloping bank on one side of the Story Chair was blasted into a sheer cliff by water cannon. Another channel was likely blasted with explosives to divert water out of the pool to pick up the gold. Years later, more bedrock would be blasted to create canals for a series of dams for hydropower. Before all this could happen, however, the People of the River had to be driven out.

Miners banded into militias of “exterminators,” beginning a time of terror that ended in 1856, when the outnumbered tribes were finally defeated by the United States Army. All the Native Peoples of Southern Oregon were marched two hundred miles north to reservations at Siletz and Grand Ronde. In 1883, photographer Peter Britt published a photograph of Lady Oscharwasha in a beaded buckskin dress that she had sewn for her own burial. The photo, printed nationwide, was entitled, “The Last of the Rogue Rivers.”

A CEREMONY REBORN

The story of Ti’lomikh, however, was not completely obliterated. In 1933, Takelma elder Frances Johnson—who attended the Salmon Ceremony and fought in the war—traveled from the Siletz Reservation to Ti’lomikh with John P. Harrington, a linguist from the Smithsonian Institution. It was a time of low water, and Harrington waded out to the Story Chair, made some measurements, and drew a rough map for the Smithsonian archives. Harrington also took a photograph of Johnson’s nephew, George Baker, seated on the Story Chair.

Agnes Baker Pilgrim was just a girl then, and didn’t make the trip to Ti’lomikh. She grew up with her Great Aunt Frances’s stories of the Salmon Ceremony and the photograph of her father sitting on a rock, but she didn’t know the two were connected. In 1993, when Agnes Baker Pilgrim had a spiritual awakening and resurrected the Salmon



PETER BRITT



The bones and skin of the salmon are wrapped in the cedar before the dive into the pool. The young men dove into the slack water channel as their part of the ceremony instead of the pool below the falls.

Ceremony, she chose a place on the Applegate River because she didn't know the real location of the original ceremony.

In December 2006, Grandma Aggie came to my home on the Rogue River with Thomas Doty, a storyteller and historian who had copied Harrington's field notes from the Smithsonian. Doty knew the location of Ti'lomikh. He'd known it for twenty years. But he had never been able to find the Story Chair to prove it. Doty brought copies of Harrington's field notes and read aloud the description of the chair. What Doty didn't realize was that the George Baker in the field notes was Grandma Aggie's father. When Doty finished, Grandma burst out laughing. It was then that she realized that the rock in the old photograph was the Story Chair.

A few days later, I put the photograph in a plastic bag, put on a wetsuit and a life jacket, and found the Story Chair—hidden in plain sight. It was, after all, the centerpiece of a very public ceremony. Robert Kentta, the Cultural Officer of the Siletz Reservation, then authenticated the chair, but didn't want any publicity. Too many sites had been destroyed, he explained. Nevertheless, a few months later, a couple hundred Native Americans were camped in teepees and tents on my land. Sweat lodges were fired up and long prayers sung while Grandma Aggie and two of her daughters cooked salmon on redwood planks around an alder fire.

I got to be one of the divers who returned the skin and bones of the salmon to the river. We didn't dive directly into

the falls, and we didn't reach the bottom. What we did do was scary enough—and wild and magical. Afterward, a pair of bald eagles perched for several days in the cottonwood, drawn by Grandma Aggie's cooking fire. I'd never seen eagles here before.

The next year the abandoned hydroelectric dam above the falls was removed. In 2009, the United States officially apologized to Native Americans. In 2010, the City of Gold hill successfully petitioned the United States Geological Survey to officially restore the ancient name of Ti'lomikh.

HOMEcoming

Two weeks before the 2012 Salmon Ceremony, Oliver Fix came for a test run down Ti'lomikh Falls. The Rogue was running unseasonably high, and I had been calling Grandma every couple of weeks to see if she had changed her mind. She hadn't. So Oliver and I first cleared a path to get her golf cart to the edge of the river, and then we inflated my raft. We put on life jackets and helmets, grabbed a couple of paddles, and pushed off. We had never rafted together before, but I knew the route and we had a perfect run down the series of large drops into the pool below the falls. Suddenly the whole adventure seemed easy, and I relaxed. What made me nervous was that Gilda Fix, the professional raft guide, would have no part of it.

Our next test run didn't happen till Friday evening, the day before the public Salmon Ceremony. Grandma wanted Native Americans, as well as Olympians in the boat, and we ended up with eight paddlers. Overloaded, we managed to clear the falls, but failed to reach the Story Chair. We carried the raft back upstream and tried again, and this time one paddler was ejected into the falls. No one was hurt, but we had to face what Gilda knew all along: Keeping Grandma inside the raft would be a matter of luck. Meanwhile, Aggie's family called her doctor to ask what he thought. Apparently, the doctor was perfectly willing to say no to Grandma. He said it was crazy.

By Saturday evening, after the public salmon feast took place, I felt obligated to finally

say no to Grandma, but I hesitated because I figured she would come to that decision herself. Her family, her doctor, and now everyone else were united against it, so she had to change her mind. Exhausted, I fell asleep early that night to the sound of drums from the Bear Dance, feeling sick and discouraged.

When I awoke Sunday morning, however, I didn't want to quit. This was Olympic Day! My own Olympics was 1980, the year we boycotted the Moscow games because Russia invaded Afghanistan. I didn't want to feel that way again.

I had three old USA Olympic t-shirts, and I put one on. I grabbed the other two shirts, as well as an Olympic flag that was signed at the 2010 Winter Games in Vancouver by Dick Fosbury, a local hero who won the Gold Medal for the high jump in 1968, and by Norman Bellingham, a 1988 Gold Medal kayaker. At the Opening Ceremony in Vancouver, all six hundred indigenous tribes of Canada had come together for the first time in history to welcome the world.

Then I found Oliver, who had spent the previous afternoon scouting a different route to the Story Chair. If we screwed up, it would be a disaster, but success wouldn't be a matter of luck. I gave him a USA t-shirt, and the German Gold Medalist put it on. Then Gilda announced that she was willing to do a test run, so I gave her the third t-shirt—we had our Olympic Team. As we prepared to get in the raft, we heard that someone awoke in the middle of the night and

We returned to camp to find that someone had dug a hole for burying compost in the middle of the golf cart path to the river. Volunteers were working to make a bridge, but the sand was too soft. Grandma would have to walk.

reported to Grandma that the river was glowing. Grandma took it as a sign and was getting dressed to go.

So we gathered a former Marine and another experienced paddler from among the group and pushed off into the river for the test run. With Gilda in command and following Oliver's new route, we landed easily on the upstream side of the rock outcropping that holds the Story Chair. Then we practiced for Grandma by carrying Gilda to the Story Chair. It all seemed doable, so we left the two men on the rock to catch the raft when we returned with Grandma.

Then disaster struck. We returned to camp to find that someone had dug a hole for burying compost in the middle of the golf cart path to the river. Volunteers were working to make a bridge, but the sand was too soft. Grandma would have to walk.

The next struggle was with Grandma herself. She showed up in a new buckskin dress and a beaded cap and holding an

The salmon is cooked upright on planks so that the fatty oils marinate and baste the fish to keep it moist.



THE RETURN OF THE GREAT DRAGONFLY

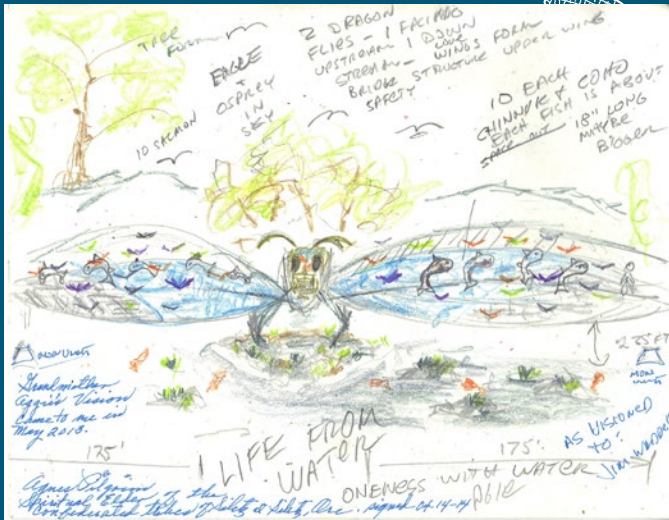
In May 2013, Grandma Agnes Baker Pilgrim woke up remembering what seemed a very strange vision from her dreams: a bridge in the shape of a giant dragonfly at Ti'lomikh Falls. Over the course of the next year, however, the dream began to make sense. Two bicycle trails—the Rogue River Greenway and the Bear Creek Greenway—are expanding toward each other to create a single, fifty-mile bike path connecting the Oregon cities of Grants Pass and Ashland. The “Golden Spike” that will join the two trails is a bicycle bridge over the Rogue River, and one of the potential crossing points is Ti'lomikh Falls. So, thought Grandma, maybe Dahl-Dahl, the Great Dragonfly of the Takelma, is coming back!

On February 24, 2014, Grandma Aggie had a vision of exactly where the Dragonfly Bridge should cross the river, and on April 14, she returned to the spot to draw it. With her was

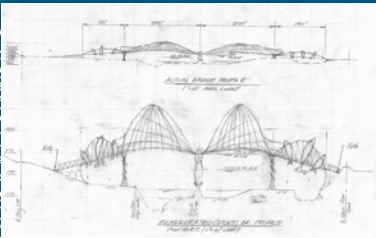
Jim Waddell, an engineer and artist who works with community groups to help turn visions into reality.

Grandma recounted her dream while Waddell drew. She then signed the drawing, and it was given to artist Brian Borello to expand the concept. Next the drawings were given to Gary Rayer of OBEC Engineering for a reality check. Soon after that, the Rogue River Greenway Foundation and the City of Gold Hill endorsed the idea.

The next step is a national design competition. (See GoldHillWhitewater.org for details.) The goal is to use biomimicry to engineer a spectacularly beautiful monument to rival Oregon's premiere tourist attraction, Crater Lake. The ultimate goal is to help heal the past by reminding us that the People of the River were here first—and to improve the future by reminding us that, as Grandma says, “Human Beings are not intruders. We are participants!”



Artist Brian Borello's interpretation of the Dragonfly Bridge.



The first Conceptual Engineering of the Dragonfly Bridge by Gary Rayer of OBEC Engineering.



Granma Aggie's vision of the Dragonfly Bridge.

Engineer/artist Jim Waddell capturing Grandma Aggie's vision at the site where she saw the Dragonfly Bridge crossing the Rogue River.



eagle feather fan—looking eerily like Lady Oscharwasha. This is what she planned to wear through a Class IV rapid!

So Oliver and I took the noble path: Gilda was our raft captain, so it was her job to get Grandma into a life jacket, and helmet. Gilda said no to Grandma, and Grandma backed down, consenting not just to a life jacket, but also to be rolled in plastic to keep her dress dry.

The journey from the beach to the falls takes only a few minutes, but after we launched the raft, we pulled up onto an island to allow Grandma's family and the rest of the group to get to observation places atop the cliff downstream. There Grandma began to tell stories about life with her Dad. Was she telling her life story just in case? Finally, after about 20 minutes, Grandma finished her story and we pushed off toward the first drop. For the next forty-five seconds we drifted downstream. I nervously wondered just how far Gilda would let us drift, and at the same time I knew a perfect run would seem effortless. We were almost over the drop before our paddles got wet, and then we took only a couple strokes before Gilda called a pause. I glanced back and Grandma was singing, in Takelma, I think. Up ahead I could hear the roar of the falls and the pounding of a drum. A few seconds later, I heard more Native singing. Somehow it all seemed too real to be real.

We only had a couple of moves to make in the rapids, and Gilda called them almost before there was time to think.

RORY FINNEY



To watch an Oregon Public Broadcasting documentary on Grandma Aggie's journey, go to GoldHillWhitewater.org

We didn't have years of practice together, but we did have years of practice, and practice does pay. Only seconds later we were pulling alongside the rock into the waiting hands of the two men we had dropped off.

The five of us clustered around Grandma like the soldiers raising the flag on Iwo Jima. We were so proud to be there and so afraid she might fall. She actually walked most of the ten yards over the giant rock to what was now inarguably her chair. Then Gilda unwrapped Grandma's plastic and took off her helmet and life jacket. As Grandma sat down, Gilda gave her back her beaded cap and her eagle feather fan. Grandma raised the eagle feathers, smiling at first, and then tears streamed down her face. It had been almost eighty years since her father was photographed here and one hundred and sixty years since the last Takelma elder had managed the fishery. She had grown up on the reservation at a time when it was illegal to speak her own language, she had returned to her homeland, she had restored her ceremony, she had seen four dams removed, and she had finally taken her place on the Story Chair, singing for the people and the salmon of the river. Singing I believe for us all.

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