



In Her Weakness Made Strong: Esther Ross and Respect

Handout A: Narrative

BACKGROUND

In 1855, the United States signed the Point Elliott Treaty with a number of Native American tribes in what is now Snohomish County in Washington State. Outmatched by the vastly more powerful U.S. Army, the chiefs could do little but remove their people to the reservations prepared for them. The only real concession granted by the U.S. government was the right of the tribes to return to their annual fishing grounds in the salmon-heavy rivers.

Among them was a small tribe of hunter-gatherers known as the Stillaguamish, or People of the River. Disrespected even by the larger Pacific tribes, the Stillaguamish chief, like most of those who signed the Point Elliott Treaty, could not speak or read English. Therefore, he did not understand that the United States had not even considered them worthy of a reservation of their own. Over the next several decades, the Stillaguamish either lived on the reservation of the more powerful Tulalip tribe or melted back into the forests to live undetected by the federal government. That the Stillaguamish people are still alive today is a testament to the tireless efforts of one woman to bring them the respect due to all peoples: Esther Ross.

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Up to the time she entered high school, there was not much to mark Esther Johnson as a member of any Native A tribe. Her last name bespoke her Norwegian forebears, from whom her father came. It was from the stories of her mother, Evangelina, that young Esther learned to take deep pride in the stories of the Stillaguamish people and her great-grandfather, Chief Chaddus. When she revealed her heritage to her friends, she had, perhaps, her first taste of the disrespect shown to Native Americans, as she was shunned. Eventually, Ross' relatives, who knew that she had a more advanced education than they did, wrote to her and asked her to help them file claims with the Bureau of Indian Affairs (BIA) for their rightful tribal benefits. Leaving everything she had ever known, the newly-married Esther Ross took her husband and newborn and went to the aid of her forgotten countrymen in 1926.

While Esther succeeded in filing 66 claims, she learned that the federal government did not recognize the Stillaguamish people because they were landless. However, the fact was that the Stillaguamish were only landless because the U.S. had not granted them a reservation. To Esther, this was a great injustice. She began her long fight to make the U.S. government reconsider. For decades, no one outside her tribe would know of the hard work Esther was doing to acquire for her people the rights that other Native Americans enjoyed. By 1953, Esther and the Stillaguamish tribal chiefs succeeded in passing a constitution for the Stillaguamish.

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This was an important step because the U.S. government would not recognize any tribe without a formal structure of government.

By the 1960s and 1970s, the cultural attitude toward Native Americans had begun to change. Esther herself had been part of that change. A new spirit of contrition replaced old hatreds among Americans. Yet Esther herself continued to labor under the shadow of disrespect. She made frequent trips to Washington, D.C. to speak on behalf of the Stillaguamish to legislators and Cabinet members. However, they regarded her as merely a pest and a nuisance. Senator Henry Jackson of Esther's home state of Washington told his staff to warn him when she appeared, so that he wouldn't have to listen. Secretary of the Interior Rogers Morton tried to hide in his office until she went away. He soon discovered that she could and would outwait him.

Even other tribes didn't want to listen. Although the BIA was paying out more money to them than ever before, organizations like the National Tribal Chairmen's Association felt that recognizing smaller tribes like the Stillaguamish would mean less money for their own people. BIA officers were known to give money to Esther for a return trip to Washington state so that she would go away!

In 1970, Esther and the Stillaguamish tribe won their first significant legal victory. The U.S. government compensated the tribe for the more than 56,000 acres taken away from them. Although the compensation was little more than a dollar per acre, the precedent had been set that the Stillaguamish had owned land.

In 1973, Charles Trimble, Executive Director of the National Congress of American Indians, promised to help Ross get recognition for her tribe before he left office. Esther was unimpressed. She had heard that line before; indeed, even with Trimble's help, opposition remained fierce, and government apathy remained strong. The Stillaguamish numbered only a few hundred—not enough to wield significant political power. Though the tribe did win land held in trust and the return of their fishing rights in 1974, federal recognition seemed as far off as ever, and Esther, now over 70, seemed powerless.

Her solution? Attack a wagon train.

In 1976, the United States was celebrating its bicentennial. As part of the celebration, a wagon train was scheduled to traverse the West, and its route would carry it through Stillaguamish land. On hearing of this, Esther published her intent to attack the train if the Stillaguamish were not federally recognized. The threat sparked a wave of reaction. Many in the government were nervous. Exactly what would an "attack" mean when promised by a seventy-two-year-old woman whose greatest talent up to this point was being annoying? Meeting her with force would cause the government to become a laughingstock at best. At worst, it might cause a bloodbath. However, no one wanted to appear to yield to threats.

As the wagon train approached Stillaguamish land, the federal government had still not recognized the tribe. Esther's son stepped from a crowd of 200 Stillaguamish and seized the lead horse's reins. Then he stepped aside, and Esther appeared. She bid the wagon train

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welcome. She spoke of her people, saying: “We stop this Bicentennial wagon train, to bring to the attention of the nation that we have no other alternative, short of violence, to bring their plight to light and produce action.” Then she gave the wagon master a good luck amulet, a letter for the Secretary of the Interior, and let them go.

In fifty years of service, Esther Ross showed the nation the power of respect. Despite not receiving much in return, Ross never failed to treat her opponents—even when they acted as her enemies—with respect. Even her “attack” was an exercise in respect and humility. In October of that year, the federal government finally gave Ross—and the Stillaguamish—the respect they had so long been denied. The United States recognized the tribe. In celebration of her success, her tribe elevated her to Chief of the Stillaguamish by unanimous acclamation.