

UNSUNG HEROES: Esther Ross, magnificent pest, victorious.....

It was at a 1973 meeting of the Affiliated Tribes of Northwest Indians that I first met a strange, remarkable elderly woman named Esther Ross. The first impression was truly lasting. Using a walker, she struggled along in the line for the open microphones in the center aisle of the crowded assembly. Finally getting to the front, she stood waiting to be recognized, as the presiding chair, a younger man, appeared to not see her, or more accurately, preferred to not see her. He would call on other speakers at microphones on either side aisle, overlooking her.

I asked my good friend, NCAI President Mel Tonasket of Colville, why she was being so rudely ignored. He responded, "You'll see."

Finally, she was recognized, and went into her long, long presentation in her "high, crackly, strident voice," as it was described by one biographer, on why her tribe, the tiny Stillaguamish, should be recognized by the Federal Government, and why the ATNI should support her effort to get the tribe recognized. Short of cutting off the microphone, there was no way the chair could get her to shorten her talk, so she talked on for several minutes.

"She does this every time," said Mel, "That's why any chairman dreads seeing her come up to the microphone. I really feel sorry for her. She's working alone with no financial support." Then he suggested, "Why don't you help her?"

After the session was over, I introduced myself to Esther as Executive Director of the National Congress of American Indians, and promised her that I would help her and that, before I leave office, her tribe would be recognized. Eyeing me suspiciously, she responded that she had heard that line before, and she'd wait and see if I could deliver on big talk. That was a challenge to me, and it pulled me into her cause.

That was her style.

It was a time of tension in the Northwest, between large and small tribes, especially those not recognized by the federal government. Such tension was felt in the eastern part of the country as well. Some leaders of larger tribes felt that restoring more tribes to federal trust status, thus adding them to the BIA's responsibility for trust protection and services, would mean a smaller cut of the already-limited budget for all tribes. The tribal leaders opposing the smaller tribes comprised the core of the newly formed National Tribal Chairmen's Association. This made the struggle of the small tribes like the Stillaguamish all the more difficult and frustrating.

As opposed to the NTCA, the National Congress of American Indians did not require tribes to be federally-recognized for membership, although they had to have a representative government, and a resolution of the tribal governing body authorizing application for NCAI membership. At that time, NCAI had 22 unrecognized tribes on its membership roll. Stillaguamish wasn't one of them because it was not an organized tribe, but we got Esther.

One might say she pestered her way to victory for her tribe. On her trips to the nation's Capitol, she was known to "camp out" in the waiting room of whatever Congressman, Senator, or

administration official she had come to see, wanting answers. Senator Henry “Scoop” Jackson of Washington State was known to hurry off when warned by staff that she was heading for his office. Others on Capitol Hill presumably did the same thing. But Esther knew the tricks and on more occasions than not, she would head them off and hold them long enough to make her point, ignoring their pleas that they were needed on the floor for an important vote, or some other excuse.

Even the Secretary of the Interior, Rogers C. B. Morton, “the jolly green giant,” as he was known, finally had to come out of his office and face the music after she sat waiting for hours to see him.

She hadn’t come to Washington to see the sights or attend receptions. She meant business, the business of getting her tribe recognized for implementation of their fishing rights and federal trust protection and services. The Stillaguamish was not a terminated tribe, it was abandoned and forgotten in the Diaspora resulting from the 1855 Point Eliot Treaty and subsequent treaties, and Stillaguamish members had to find refuge in other tribal groups. She was called back by some force of fate to bring them together, as when they were under the leadership of Esther’s great grandfather, Chief Chaddus.

Her rounds to various intertribal meetings in the Northwest, to government offices throughout the area, and to the National Congress of American Indians were difficult in that she had virtually no money for travel, and never learned to drive. But she always managed to get to them, and to say her piece. Mel Tonasket tells of feeling some guilt, “The rest of us (tribal delegates) were kind of spoiled. Here I come from a large tribe, with a lot of resources and always recognized, and here she was with a dream and a mission and traveled really poor.”

Her travel to Washington was usually with a one-way ticket, which was all she could afford out of her Social Security check. She had faith in providence to lodge and feed her while she was there, and to get her home safely. And providence usually came from NCAI’s meager budget of discretionary funds, or some other Indian organization in Washington, or someone from another tribal delegation, and sometimes, even collected from the pockets of staff at the Bureau of Indian Affairs. These personal donations were given as an expression of pity or admiration; but much of it, I suppose, was also given to “get her the hell out of here.”

I recently read her biography, “Esther Ross: Stillaguamish Champion,” by Robert H. Ruby and John A. Brown (University of Oklahoma Press), and got a much larger picture of the life of the remarkable woman, and her activism since the 1920s. It’s a book that provides valuable historical insight to the activism that led the Northwest coastal tribes to the victorious fishing rights and land rights struggles.

Mention of her name still brings a broad smile to those who knew her or were active in Indian affairs in the 1970s and 1980s. My own experiences are mixed in a jumble of memories of those exciting times across the country. My wife and I recall her staying at our house in Virginia, and eating hardly anything, and her stories of family and forebears; stories that I finally understand after reading her biography. We remember her late night phone calls, and me trying to reason with her that there is a four-hour time difference between Washington State and Washington,

DC, and that it was four o'clock according to my bedside clock. "Esther...Esther... Esther..." I would implore, knowing that she had turned off her hearing aid and would have her say. But she was one I could never hang up on.

She was victorious, after fifty years of struggle, when the Stillaguamish finally received federal recognition in 1976. At the end of that year a celebration was held, which, although it was to celebrate the tribe's victory, was to all people there a celebration of Esther Ross. People attended from the Northwest mainly, but organizations from throughout the country were represented as well. The crowd included tribal leaders who opposed her efforts early on, as well as a legion of those she had pulled into her cause: attorneys, federal and state bureaucrats, planners, and political leaders, all youthful. I don't know what the ceremonial requirements are for bestowing chieftainship, but she was installed as such by Lummi spiritual leader, Joe Washington. After the installation, he asked, "Who wants Esther Ross to be Chief?" The response was positive and unanimously deafening.

The biography ends with a series of short chapters that tell a somewhat sad story of the intratribal politics that followed the victory for federal recognition; these add an anticlimactic element to the story, even in their titles: Recognition Brings More Trouble; A War of Words and Wills; Exit and Exile; and an account of her death on August 1, 1988, a month shy of her 84th birthday. But, in the end, these chapters don't diminish the real story – that of Chief Esther Ross, the cantankerous, persistent, never-give-up, and magnificent woman, victorious.

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