
History of the Cow Creek Umpqua Tribe: First Contact

The first outsiders to visit Cow Creek territory were a group of fur seekers who came in 1819. The Tribe was not interested in trading its furs for the goods these strangers had to offer. When the Tribe did not want to trade, the fur seekers opened fire on them, killing at least 14 members. Despite this tragic event, Tribal members and later fur seekers were able to have peaceful interactions over the next several years.

Encounters between the Cow Creek and non-Indian whites did not happen often during these years. This changed in 1826 when the Hudson Bay Company created a permanent trading post near the present-day town of Elkton. Open trading between the fur trappers and Native people resulted in the introduction of new goods and technologies and in intermarriage. Some of the new goods included needles and thread, beads, and wool and cotton.

In 1850, the U.S. Government passed a law called the Oregon Donation Act, which stole the land from the indigenous people and gave it for free to white adult males or to married couples who would build their homes and settle upon the land. This was done without the permission of the Native tribes of Oregon and it created conflict. Ancestral territories used for seasonal hunting and gathering were overrun by horses, cattle, and log cabins, disrupting and limiting the Cow Creek Tribe's access to food resources and resulting in widespread starvation.

The following year, gold was discovered in Southwestern Oregon, and this brought many white people called miners who were seeking fortune. Mining for gold created many additional problems for the tribe. Mining destroyed important fishing resources by covering the bottom of rivers and creeks with mud. In addition, many tribal members were forced from their villages as miners took over their land. As a result, the Cow Creek Tribe's way of life was disrupted. Food and shelter had once been plentiful; now they were scarce.

Cow Creek tribal ancestors tried to remain peaceful with the newcomers. Miwaleta, a leader of the Cow Creek, asked his people to act peacefully and to avoid going to war with the white settlers. In 1852, however, a young white settler stabbed and killed a Cow Creek boy. The State of Oregon refused to punish the white settler, and Miwaleta learned that his people would have no protection under the law. White settlers also brought with them illness and disease. In the winter of 1852-53 several tribal members, including Miwaleta, died from a fever outbreak.

As a result of these conflicts, in 1853 war broke out in the Rouge River region. The Takelma tribe sent a runner to Cow Creek to encourage them to join in the battle, but the Cow Creeks continued to hope for peace.