
History of the Cow Creek Umpqua Tribe: Sovereignty and Perseverance

In September 1853, General Joel Palmer, superintendent of Indian affairs for the Oregon Territory, arrived in Southwestern Oregon to bring an end to the Rogue River War by negotiating peace treaties with the tribes. A treaty is an agreement or arrangement made between two groups. General Joel Palmer negotiated a treaty with the Cow Creek Umpqua Tribe, which required the Tribe to give up its ancestral land to the U.S. Government. In exchange for the land, the Tribe was promised peace, reservation land, and goods and services totaling approximately \$12,000.

A temporary reservation was created, and General Palmer promised that the Tribe would be guaranteed food, medicine, shelter, and protection from hostile settlers. As Palmer recounted:

The reckless habits of a portion of the mining population from whom the natives have received so many severe chastisements and wrongs together [with the] prospects of being provided with a home, an asylum for their aged and infirm, protection for their women and children, as well as the prospects afforded by cultivating the soil, of an abundance to guard against hunger, induced the more conservative to listen favorably to our proposals.²

The temporary reservation was the only part of the treaty that the U.S. government upheld. The Cow Creek Tribe did not receive the promised food, medicine, protection, and other services. This created bitter feelings, and on October 8, 1855, the massacre of a Takelma tribal village on Little Butte Creek again led to war. This massacre was carried out by a group of volunteer white settlers and miners whose goal was to get rid of the Tribes and take their land and resources. The attack on the Takelma village led tribal families to flee the reservation and seek safety in the mountains. On the way, the Takelma attacked every white settler they encountered, killing an estimated 17 people. On October 10, the Takelma reached the Cow Creeks and asked the tribe to join in the fight. While the Cow Creeks expressed their respect for the pioneers who lived peacefully on the land, they could not allow the actions of the Indian exterminators to continue. The Cow Creeks left the reservation and fled into the hills.

The conflict in Southwestern Oregon brought Joel Palmer to supervise the removal of all Indians that were under the protection of the Army at the Umpqua and Calapooya Reservation. While other Umpqua Tribes and some Cow Creeks in the area were forced to move to the Grand Ronde and Siletz reservations in January 1856, most Cow Creek Tribal members continued to hide in the mountains of their ancestral homeland. These Tribal members raided farms and isolated cabins in order to feed their starving populations, and they did manage to stay one step ahead of the exterminators.

¹ O'Donnell, p. 183.

² Ibid, p. 183.

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The final battle of the Rogue River War was fought on May 28 and 29, 1856, and there were many deaths on both sides. When the battle was over, the U.S. Army reportedly removed 1,175 Native people from the area, including 33 members of the Cow Creek Tribe.

After the Rogue River War, most of the Cow Creek population lived in the mountains surrounding upper Cow Creek and the North and South Umpqua Rivers. One way that the Cow Creek survived was by marrying French Canadian trappers and other settlers. Having white family bonds gave the Cow Creek some protection.

In the early 1900s, efforts to require the U.S. Government to honor the Cow Creek Treaty was led by Ellen Furlong Crispen, a Cow Creek tribal member. Unfortunately, her efforts were not successful. However, in 1918, the Cow Creek elders did create a tribal government and were able to negotiate an agreement that allowed them to receive the same benefits as other tribes living on nearby reservations.

In 1954, the United States Congress passed the Western Oregon Termination Act. This law ended federal recognition of the Cow Creek Tribe and stated that the U.S. Government would withdraw its services and support to tribes in Western Oregon within two years. In the following decades, members of the Cow Creek Tribe continued to fight for federal recognition and to work for the good of the people. For example, in the 1970s, tribal members met with members of the Confederated Coos, Lower Umpqua, and Siuslaw Indian Tribe to work on important issues such as education, job training, and land claims.

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