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The Quiet Warrior: Russell Jim's Struggle Against

Nuclear Colonialism

The following is an excerpt from the award-winning *Atomic Days: The Untold Story of the Most Toxic Place in America* (Haymarket Books, 2022).



Illustration by Becky Grant.

He was the catalyst in my belief that Indian tribes should be treated as full, equal participants in the process.

— James Asselstine

There are not a lot of heroes out here. Few in recent memory have risen to the daunting challenge, immersing themselves in Hanford's scientific complexities and its historic and cultural implications. If there are any champions of the cause, Russell Jim (Kii'ahl) was certainly one of them. The "Quiet Warrior," Jim was a lifelong advocate for the Yakama Nation. The "conscience of the cleanup," Jim was considered by many to be the spiritual

leader of the Hanford resistance. Jim served as the head of the Confederated Tribes and Bands of the Yakama Indian Nation's Environmental Restoration and Waste Management Program (ERWM), a position he essentially created. In 2018, Jim passed away after battling heart trouble and pneumonia after a long bout of cancer, which he believed was a direct result of the time he spent in and around Hanford's radioactive haze.

"I think he's been a major player in the Hanford cleanup and he's been one of the sharpest critics of the process and a very constructive one," said John Bassett, president of Heritage University, when Jim was awarded an honorary doctorate in 2017.

By all accounts, Jim had an unwavering moral compass and was the rare advocate who possessed the ability to peer through the layers of Hanford's bureaucratic stratum. He was able to envision its future while never losing sight of the past and the gainful lives that the region provided his people over many centuries. The Yakama Nation, in defiance of their forced relocation, refused compensation from the federal government. They have never stopped fighting back against the settler colonialism that has destroyed their Native lands.

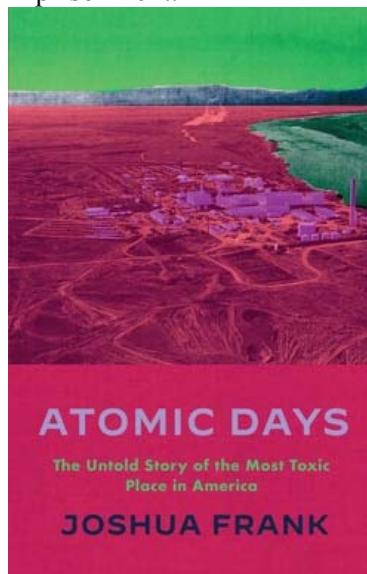
"The Hanford area was our wintering ground, the Palm Springs of the area. And the winters were milder here, and so, therefore, we moved here and dispersed to all other parts of the country when the spring came. And our usual custom places involve Canada, Western Montana, northern Arizona, northern California, and the Pacific coast," Jim said in an interview with the Atomic Heritage Museum in 2003. He continued:

So consequently in the Treaty of 1855, we included such language as accepted by the United States of America, in a contract called a treaty. And as a consequence, we thought that we would forever have the right to utilize the natural foods and medicines and to hunt and fish and all use of our custom places. We lived in harmony with the area, with the river, with all of the environment. All the natural foods and medicines were quite abundant here. And as the snows receded, we followed back up clear into the Alpine areas, into the fall season. And then storing our food that we had gathered all spring and summer, we picked it up on the way back here to Hanford.

Beacons of Destruction

When the Yakama weren't wintering, they were often downriver at Celilo Falls, known to them as Wy-am, which acted as the Columbia River's great trading post. Today, as you travel along the Columbia, the mammoth river below has an almost lake-like stillness. It appears to be barely moving, if at all. Dams have discouraged and interrupted this giant river's natural flow, slowing it down, widening it, restricting its enormous power. Engineers would call the dams' creation an ingenious act of energy cultivation. The dams stand as a testament to the white man's prowess. But environmentalists and Indigenous tribes don't see the Columbia River dams, of which there are fourteen, as feats of human ingenuity. They rightfully view them for what they are: monuments of colonialism and beacons of destruction. They are, no doubt, efficient—efficient at killing off native salmon and the humans who have lived off

their sustenance for millennia. And while the wild salmon that once nourished the great tribes of the Pacific Northwest barely hang on, the spiritual rhythm of the river faintly beats, hoping to one day be released from its imprisonment.



Wy-am, like the giant chinook salmon and the tribes that once gathered there, has been forced to adapt or face extinction. Until the 1950s, this stretch of waters, which flows down from the Canadian Rockies, was home to sacred fishing grounds, where skilled tribes used industrious nets to catch salmon as they swam upstream en route to their mating grounds. For thousands of years, wild salmon, after fattening themselves in the ocean, swam up Wy-am's narrow channels between its large pillar-like rocks, leaping out of the water and over tumbling waterfalls, working their way upstream to the pools for breeding and hatching. If they could make it. Tribal fishers utilized wooden platforms and dip-nets for their catch, which they would submerge below the water in turbulent areas, hiding between the forty-foot-high rocks. As the salmon swooshed against the currents, they would be caught in nets and yanked to the shore. It's a sustainable method of fishing that is now all but extinct in this region, since Wy-am was mercilessly flooded after the completion of the Dalles Dam in 1958, twelve miles away. No longer could tribes fish using their traditional fishing methods; the falls were gone. The rocky chutes where they'd drop their dripnets had vanished. Their way of life—what little remained by the 1950s—was eliminated.

Roll Over Columbia

As a settler, it's hard to imagine what Wy-am meant to these Indigenous nations. It's also difficult to ponder what lies beneath the Columbia today, below its controlled current. The amount of water that rushed over Wy-am during spring melt is estimated to have been ten times greater than the amount of water that spills over the picturesque Niagara Falls today. Wy-am was a sanctuary to the half-dozen Columbia tribes and thousands more that congregated here to celebrate the salmon, their shared spiritual heritage, and the love and respect they had for one another and the land.

Archeological records indicate the area's first human inhabitants date back at least eleven thousand years. And the first recordings by Meriwether Lewis and William Clark estimated that by 1805, upwards of ten thousand people lived along the Columbia River. Wy-am acted as a nexus of a great Native trading network that stretched from the Alaskan interior to the coasts of Southern California, where buffalo meats, hides, salmon, obsidian, pipestone, and much more were exchanged among tribes.

The Yakama were originally made up of five tribes from the mid-Columbia Basin that spoke the same Sahaptin dialect. After losing the Yakama War of 1855, the tribes were forced into a single, defining tribe known as the Yakama, and expelled from their lands and onto the present-day reservation located in south central Washington state. Today, the Confederated Tribes and Bands of the Yakama Nation is a federally recognized tribe that is made up of Wallawalla, Wanapam, Wenatchi, Klikitat, Palus, Wishram, and Yakama peoples.

As a teenager, Russell Jim would trek with his family to the ancient fishing sites of Wy-am. The place etched itself into his spiritual psyche. "It was quite an experience," remembered Jim, "I was very young.... Gee, I was happy." When Jim was in his twenties, Wy-am was flooded by the electric machinations of the Dalles Dam, which no doubt left Jim with a firsthand account of what the white man and their vicious government were capable of in the name of "progress." Wy-am served as a better education than the organized schooling Jim received in his youth.

"When I came home from the Chemawa Indian Boarding School," recounted Jim, "I described the horror stories to my aunt, and she went to my father and said, 'You can send the rest of your children back to that school if you want to. This one is not going.' And she said, 'If he has to go to school, you find a place close by here where I can watch him. If you do not, I'll take him to the hills and you'll never find us.'"

Even the folk music hero Woody Guthrie, long viewed as an anticapitalist champion of the working class, played an organizational role in destroying the Columbia River and the people who called it home. After Guthrie left New York City in 1940, he landed in Los Angeles and soon headed north to Portland, Oregon, where he became a hired gun for the US Department of Interior. In a one-month span, Guthrie penned twenty-six songs while on the Interior's payroll, including his well-known, overtly patriotic "Roll On, Columbia, Roll On," which acted as a rallying cry for the construction of electricity-producing dams on the river. While Guthrie may still be viewed as a socialist champion to some, his music acted as the soundtrack of colonialism for many others.

"Guthrie's was a voice of the displaced and dispossessed, yet this down-to-earth propaganda music helped to dispossess and displace people that had for millennia lived on and from the river he sang about," writes Cornell professor and musicologist David Yearsley. "Perhaps the broadest irony is that Guthrie's bardic gift—flowing if not with the power of the Columbia,

then at least with unsurpassed fluency—yields ‘natural’ music that praises the destruction of nature.”

Yes, the dams created jobs. They created electricity. They laid the ground for the white, liberal Pacific Northwest lifestyle of today. And as the Columbia’s waters were tamed, the region’s great ancient forests, with trees ranging from 250 to 1,000 years old, were also ravaged in the name of US expansionism. Today, only around 10 percent of these old-growth trees remain in Washington and Oregon, a grotesque patchwork of clear-cuts that are visible from nearly every hilltop. In less than one hundred years, 87 percent of the old-growth forest was razed. The Columbia River dams and the government-sponsored exploitation logging came at a great cost to the Indigenous peoples of the area. Cinder block by cinder block, as the dams were constructed, the way of life that Russell Jim and his ancestors enjoyed for thousands of years was quickly demolished. They were removed from their ancestral lands. Their fisheries were gone. They were victimized, demonized, and relegated as second-class citizens in this new cruel world, dominated by capitalist greed and the white man’s Christian entitlement. Natives, in short, were expendable. Today, the very dams that Woody Guthrie once championed remain as fanciful colonialist landmarks, not unlike South Dakota’s Mount Rushmore, where the chiseled faces of white men are carved into the Lakota’s sacred Tunkaslia Sakpe Paha.

“The false religious doctrine of Christian discovery was used by the United States to perpetrate crimes of genocide and forced displacement against Native Peoples,” says Yakama Nation chairman JoDe Goudy.

The Columbia River dams were built on this false legal foundation and decimated the Yakama Nation’s fisheries, traditional foods and cultural sites. We are calling on that action (removal of the dams) to happen, because when you go back, and you understand the truth, with regard to what has materialized—this lake behind us all—once one of the greatest, one of the mightiest big rivers in the world. Our way of life, of the Natives, is fading. What we can collectively do to sustain our way of life from now to as far as we can see into the future, because if we do not, then we will cease to be.

Once your eyes are open to the pain and sorrow these dams have inflicted and continue to inflict, not only to the mighty wild salmon that spawned in its waters but also to the Natives who cared for the river for eons, there is no looking away. The reality is just too brutally honest and emotionally fraught. The dams, by whatever means necessary, must go.

Finding His Voice

While Jim’s early connection to the Columbia River began during his teenage voyages to the sacred grounds of Wy-am with his kin, it was the government’s militarist efforts upstream that galvanized him to action. With his long, gray braids and metal-rimmed glasses, Jim’s eloquent and passionate defense of the Hanford area for his people and the environment was unmatched.

The government saw Hanford as an “isolated wasteland” where the people were “expendable ... therefore the Manhattan Project was justified here,” said Jim in an interview with the Atomic Heritage Foundation. “White men look at that place, and they see a wasteland,” Jim said in 1983. “We look and see chokecherries, rabbits and foods that come out of the ground; but who in their right mind, knowing the contamination they have put there, would go and gather that food now?” The Yakama people have also been negatively impacted by Hanford’s nuclear production. “[We] are suffering the consequences, health-wise,” Jim continued.

[Hanford’s land] means our health being affected also as a result of the environment being affected. The health of the Yakama people depends on the health of the environment through today and it will be through tomorrow. There is a concerted effort now by the Yakama Nation to influence the cleanup of the site. We know that it will never be returned to pristine status in the next five hundred years, but at least there should be an effort to set the stage for cleanup ... There is a lot of activity out here but hardly any cleanup.

Early on, Jim noticed that rheumatoid arthritis was rampant among Yakama elders and even many younger adults. He was quick to realize there may be a link between these ailments and the radioactive releases from Hanford. “During my work here on the Hanford Reservation, I was called by a doctor out of Tennessee and asked if I was the guy that was making this statement. I said, ‘Yes.’ And he said, ‘Well, I want you to know that,’ he studied a mining operation, every type of mining operation for years, and he found that uranium causes a malady very similar to rheumatoid arthritis,” Jim recounted in an interview with Brian Bull of Wisdom of the Elders. “But even before that, by 1976 and ’77, I suspect that many of our problems came out of Hanford because of the releases, although they denied there was any major releases out of Hanford.”

Of course, there were many releases, most of which were not publicly known at the time. This was proven in 1986 when the DOE was forced to publish thousands of pages of internal documents, detailing the quantity of radioactive particles that Hanford facilities had knowingly released during their operative years. Perhaps even more than the formally trained scientists themselves, Jim knew that it would take generations of hard work, tenacity, and a willingness to deal with nearly insurmountable bureaucratic hurdles to remediate these lands “You younger generations have to realize what you are going to be faced with and perhaps your children and grandchildren also,” Jim told a small crowd at the University of Washington during a public forum on Hanford in May 2013. “Over the past fifty years, some 440 billion gallons of contaminated liquids were directly disposed to the ground. Enough to create a poisonous lake the size of Manhattan, 120 feet deep.... We have a magnificent problem, and some of you may wonder why the Yakama Nation is involved. As most of you may know, we have a treaty with the United States of America. A contract. We feel it’s supposed to last until the end of time.”

Jim became a full-time advocate when he realized what was really going on at Hanford in 1977. At the time that Jim was immersing himself in all the inner workings and complexities at the site, government officials were starting to consider Hanford as a formal dumping ground for the nation's growing cache of radioactive and chemical waste. They had a lot to get rid of, and still do. The United States has five times more spent nuclear fuel than Russia, the world's second leading producer. The government argued forty years ago that the Hanford land was already so destroyed that dumping truckloads of more nuclear byproducts wouldn't make matters all that much worse. A young Russell Jim saw things much differently.

First, Jim understood the tribes of the area were not stakeholders like the farmers, fisheries, and folks who lived downstream from Hanford. They were, in fact, sovereign nations, independent governments that had legal rights that many stakeholders do not. This gave Jim power to have his voice not only heard but acted upon.

Growing Anti-Nuke Sentiment

While Russell Jim's activism on behalf of the Yakama was sprouting at Hanford, anti-nuclear sentiment was simultaneously growing throughout the world. By the late 1970s, many people were growing wary of nuclear proliferation. The anti-nuke movement, particularly overseas, was rapidly building. In Wyhl, Germany, activists put the brakes on a nuclear power plant that was set to be constructed. This success inspired a robust anti-nuke movement that expanded across Europe. In France, anti-nuke opposition was also taking shape and spreading to the Pacific, where, in 1972, early Greenpeace activists, including David McTaggart, sailed a boat into the heart of France's dangerous nuclear testing zone. There, McTaggart was physically assaulted by the French military, his boat ransacked. But he didn't give up. By 1974, McTaggart's campaign was victorious, and France put an end to their atomic weapons testing program. In Spain, activists were equally successful, helping to quash numerous plans for nuclear development in the country. The anti-nuclear movement didn't find its footing in the United States during this period, as the Vietnam War remained the focal point among many activists. But later accidents like Russia's 1986 Chernobyl meltdown as well as Hanford's toxic legacy (which began drawing national attention during the 1970s, largely thanks to the work of people like Jim) would alter the United States' trust in nuclear technologies, especially among the youth.

Despite growing awareness, the potential for a deadly nuclear accident at Hanford was something still largely unknown aside from a few river advocates and Native tribes. For those keeping tabs on Hanford throughout the 1980s, like the Yakama, the situation was ominous. By 1985, four decades after Hanford began producing plutonium, not a single independent study looked at the cumulative damage the site had unleashed on nearby communities or Native tribes. DOE officials blew off calls for such an inquiry and contended that it would be unworthy of the department's time. They argued that radioactivity was all but nonexistent

outside of Hanford's boundaries. Citizen activists noted an uptick in certain cancers in their communities and believed a longitudinal study on the human population was the only way to get a handle on Hanford's long-term impacts. "I don't know what else as citizens we can do but count bodies," said artist and former Hanford-area resident Joan N. Moortry. In the mid-1980s, Moortry helped found the Hanford Education Action League, an early Hanford watchdog group that was unconvinced by the DOE's assurances that Hanford's atomic demons were continually monitored and safely contained.

Terry R. Strong, who served as head of the Radiation Control Section of the Washington Department of Social and Health Services in 1985, strongly disagreed with the DOE's lack of monitoring and openly criticized the state of Washington for allocating a meager \$87,000 a year to keep an eye on Hanford's environmental impact. The threat was so grave, Strong believed, that the state should have been spending at least \$2.5 million. Others, including British physician Dr. Alice M. Stewart, who helped author a study of Hanford workers during the early 1980s, argued the government was also far too lenient with its radiation safety levels. The study found a connection between low radiation doses and cancer deaths—particularly multiple myeloma—among workers. Hanford employees, the study reported, experienced at least a 5 percent higher risk of developing cancer than the general population. "If they stick to present safety levels," warned Dr. Stewart, "they will have more trouble than they think they are going to have."

Radioactive wastes, however, weren't the only poisons befouling the site; hazardous chemicals were also a byproduct of Hanford's weapon operations. "We have mainly acids and caustics, some solvents, trichloroethylene, PCBs, pentachlorophenol, sulfuric acid, chlorine, fluorine, mercury, chromates," said Carl G. Welty in 1985, who worked as a toxicologist for the DOE's environmental protection division. "You name a problem, and we probably have it."

A Challenging Adversary

Russell Jim knew there was a major problem at Hanford and the government was planning to make it worse. By the late 1970s, Hanford and Yucca Mountain were the two prime contenders to become depots for spent nuclear fuel. While the Western Shoshone stood their ground and tried to fight the use of Yucca as a repository, they ultimately lost. Jim, representing Yakama Nation, took the lead on keeping the stuff out of Hanford. The waste was to sit in man-made tombs for the next ten thousand years. Flabbergasted at the thought of such an idiotic undertaking, Jim took his fight to the United States Senate. Testifying before a Senate subcommittee on nuclear regulation in 1980, Jim made an impassioned plea to the senators about his peoples' connection to the land, hoping they'd consider viewing the Hanford issue from his point of view: "There is something you need to understand that is unique between my people and yours. Yakama Indian people do not get most of their food supply from the local A&P or Safeway store," said Jim. In fact, he later wrote in a newspaper

article, the Yakama still use more than seventy different types of plants as food. “Our religion and culture are deeply interwoven with the gathering of our foods the Creator provided us. Our blood has melted into that particular part of the Earth where our people are buried.”

Jim not only intimately understood the science behind the nuclear mess at Hanford, he also was well-versed in the laws and the rights of his people. The time he spent in Washington speaking at various hearings and meeting personally with numerous Senators and staffers was beginning to pay off. When the Nuclear Waste Policy Act of 1982 was passed, it included specific language that recognized Indian sovereignty. It was powerful language. As a result of Jim’s efforts, tribes like the Yakama, along with states, could veto their lands from becoming nuclear waste depositories. And it would take a majority of both houses of Congress to overturn such vetoes.

“He can be a most challenging adversary when he wants to be,” said J. Bennett Easterling, director of policy for DOE’s civilian radioactive program during the mid-1980s, shortly after the passage of the 1982 act. “Russell has mastered his subject. He knows the law and knows what it guarantees.... He can tell me the department is ‘dead wrong’ on an issue and not make it a personal insult to me.”

Jim had a graceful and emotive way of expressing the traditions and concerns of his people. In a speech, along with a set of written comments, Jim shared these oft- misunderstood views with the Subcommittee on Nuclear Regulation in 1987 when Hanford was being chosen as a dumping ground.

We have learned in the past year of over forty years of both accidental and intentional releases of radioactivity to the earth, the atmosphere, and the waters that are sacred to the Yakama. This is an agency that for nearly three decades used the Columbia River for once-through cooling of its reactors.... This is the agency that for thirty years put liquid, high-level wastes in single-shell tanks just below the surface of the ground, and assured us that the practice was safe, only to have many of those tanks leak their deadly contents ...

Jim was right. He was right about the risks and right about the DOE’s numerous failures. How could these people be trusted to do it correctly? And more importantly, how could it even be done right in the first place? It couldn’t, and Jim knew it. You can’t bury nuclear waste near groundwater supplies; there’s simply no way to keep it from seeping out as the earth shakes, contorts, erodes, and shifts over the course of tens of thousands of years. If water were to ever enter the nuclear-laden cavity, it would likely boil over, causing radioactive lava to spill, or worse, produce a quasi- volcanic eruption. At the very least, Jim argued, the stuff would one day leak, as it had been out of the existing underground tanks for decades. The Columbia River would be impacted. Fish would be impacted. Humans would be impacted, and Jim’s people, no doubt, would suffer the worst of it.

“I wanted to know what was coming through our reservation on Highway 97, leaving Hanford, what was coming through Hanford ... and I could not get an answer,” said Jim

during his 2013 talk at the University of Washington. “We were the only tribe to testify before the Senate subcommittee in January of 1980. And from that point the only tribe to try to contribute to the parent legislation that became the Nuclear Waste Policy Act of 1982 ... we immediately filed for effective status and received it by April 1983.... We eventually showed that Hanford, technically, was not the place to put this material.”

Jim’s activism during this time forced the federal government to drop their insidious idea of using Hanford as a nuclear dumping zone. He had won. His people had won, and so had the environment that had sustained them for generations. While others had joined the cause, without Jim’s tenacious work, Native voices would have been ignored, as many senators admitted they believed the states would speak up in Natives’ interest. Jim, of course, straightened them out, making it clear they were more than capable of speaking for themselves. “Russell had a significant effect on my thinking,” said James Asselstine, who was appointed by Ronald Reagan to the Nuclear Regulatory Commission. “He was the catalyst in my belief that Indian tribes should be treated as full, equal participants in the process.”

A Battle Worth Fighting

This big victory was only the beginning of Jim’s long career as an advocate for the Yakama Nation. His foray with the federal government in the late 1970s and 1980s was not his last. The land, in Jim’s eyes, was worth fighting for. The 1855 treaty had ceded over ten million acres from the Yakama tribes to the federal government. While they signed over the lands, they never expected the seizure to last.

“We could not pick up and move as the transients that work here,” said Russell Jim in 1996. “The Yakama culture and religion [are] directly tied to this land. We can’t pick up our culture out of the ground and move it somewhere else.... We managed the land successfully for countless generations,” added Jim. “And the newcomers managed to defile it in a few short years.”

Jim was being polite. The newcomers didn’t just defile this land, they nuked it and poisoned his people and the landscape they depended upon. “Abnormally high incidence[s] of thyroid tumors and cancers have been observed in populations living downwind from Hanford,” reported Dr. Helen Caldicott, a scientist and anti-nuclear activist. “Strontium-90, Cesium-137, and Plutonium-239 have been [atmospherically] released in large quantities, as was, between 1952 and 1967, Ruthenium-106. People in adjacent neighborhoods were kept uninformed about these releases—before, during, and after—and none were warned that they were at risk for subsequent development of cancer.”

Jim knew the toll on the Yakama was great, not only to cultural heritage, but to their health. No big decision was made at Hanford without input from Jim, and while it didn’t always go his way, he never backed down. He was prescient and brave. He was able to articulate the lunacy of the Hanford project and the government’s continued ignorance and outright

deception. His quest for information and knowledge about what was actually taking place at Hanford forced an immeasurable amount of transparency, which remains all too important if the DOE and its contractors are to ever be held accountable. Up until his death in April 2018 at the age of eighty-two, Jim was working hard to fight the federal government's effort to declassify Hanford's nuclear waste, which would allow the radioactive leftovers to be more freely transported and dumped, with obviously grave implications.

Out on the cold North Dakota plains, as Indigenous activists, environmentalists, and others gathered at Standing Rock in opposition to the Dakota Access Pipeline, the spirit of Russell Jim was there, his spirit helping to carry on the opposition, despite the rubber bullets and freezing temperatures. His heart, too, would be bleeding with Line 3 water protectors who are battling Enbridge's tar sands pipeline in northern Minnesota, which violates the US treaty rights of the Ojibwe, Anishinaabe, and other tribes. It's Jim's resistance, his connection to these sacred Indigenous lands, and his perseverance, that now runs through the call for a Red New Deal—the Indigenous climate plan that calls for change from below and a replacement of the system that has created the very problems facing our Earth today.

“He's just irreplaceable,” said Hanford's tribal program manager Jill Conrad. “There's just not going to be anyone with his knowledge and experience. He was working on Hanford issues longer than many of the senior managers at Hanford—he will be missed.”

As a result of Jim's legacy, the Yakama Nation will have a seat at the table, and while Jim's voice will no longer be heard, his echoes will continue to reverberate, guiding the future involvement of the Yakama with the site. Along with Jim's tribe, the Nez Perce and the Confederated Tribes of the Umatilla Reservation are active in the Hanford cleanup, largely thanks to the groundbreaking activism of Russell Jim.

The Yakama Fight Continues

“The long history of our ancestral lands started prior to Hanford's establishment. There needs to be a reminder that Yakama Nation was here before Hanford, before Washington became a state, before the Treaty of 1855 at Walla Walla, and before Lewis and Clark,” explains Jim's successor and longtime colleague Alfrieda Peters, who now serves as education and outreach specialist for the Yakama Nation Environmental Restoration and Waste Management Department (ERWM). “Now there is an overlapping and combined history between Yakama Nation and Hanford. The public must realize that Hanford is within Yakama Nation ceded-area lands, and we still have ceded-area rights. The Columbia River, the lands, and the salmon tie us to Hanford.”

The Indigenous movement that Jim shepherded during his decades of work at Hanford continues, and Peters, who labored alongside her friend on behalf of the Yakama Nation for much of that time, believes the road ahead will be more tumultuous than before. Even so, Peters gracefully envisions a land where Hanford was not a nuclear dump, and a white, colonial government kept its word and upheld its treaties.

“[W]e would be there, actively living our way of life. Fishing, collecting our traditional foods and medicines, going to sacred areas,” adds Peters, who is eloquent, soft-spoken, and as fierce of an advocate as her mentor Russell Jim. “I believe our families would still be walking the lands and our elders would be telling stories of the land. I can imagine them saying, ‘You know the moccasins of your great-great-grandparents walked here.’ The prayer songs of our people would drift whatever direction the air carried them over the lands, water, and wildlife. The songs are not just for tribal people. The Yakamas would ask for blessings of all life—not just human life. A cultural reverence.”

It’s this perspective that gives Peters the tenacity to keep the struggle going, despite the obstacles—be they bureaucratic or scientific. Like Jim, Peters considers this land sacred, connecting her people to this place and to the river despite the wounds that have been inflicted upon it.

“I find myself returning over and over to my birthplace: Celilo. Even though Celilo Falls is underwater, I feel the pull and reminisce. I remember the sound and mist from the water. The activity of the fishermen. Families filleting fish. I remember my grandmother’s dried salmon in the smoke sheds—the aroma was very inviting. I knew there would be many enjoyable meals,” reflects Peters. “Now I go down to the water and revitalize myself, wash myself with the water from the river. It is my own spiritual feeling—home.”

Following the death of Russell Jim, his name, out of deference for his next journey, was not spoken for an entire year. “I acknowledge and honor his acute insight on the consequences of the Hanford Nuclear Site in our backyard and his testimony that ensured the Yakama Nation and other tribes have an active voice and input in the cleanup,” maintains Peters. “When we speak about Yakama Nation and Hanford, it is the message of Atwai Dr. Jim, now an ancestral elder, that goes forward.”³³ While these lands will never return to their historic beauty, and while the Columbia River won’t be free-flowing and dam-free in our lifetimes, it is comforting to envision the future Jim sought. It may take a thousand years, but if the conditions of his people, the land, this air and water, are to ever improve, it will largely be because of the dogged efforts of the Quiet Warrior, Russell Jim, and the Indigenous voices he has empowered to carry on his struggle.

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