Summit Synopsis Part II

On October 18th the Fort Colvile Summit was held at the Mistequa Hotel near Chewelah. This is the 2nd article in a series about the talks from15 authors and historians promoted by 2025 being the 200th anniversary of the establishment of Hudson's Bay Fort Colvile, named after Hudson's Bay executive Andrew Colvile, in 1825.

When speaking to a group it is a Native tradition to first introduce yourself by identifying your ancestors. My fathers father and his wife were both from Castelbuono, Sicily. They left to escape from escalating oppression by landlords. My mother's parents were both from Wales and met on a boat coming over as part of the Mormon migration escaping Protestant retribution against that new religion.

I was educated in a Catholic school in Seahurst, Washington. The education in history we received from the nuns was from textbooks carefully edited not to offend anyone. A lot of things that I've learned lately were not in those textbooks.

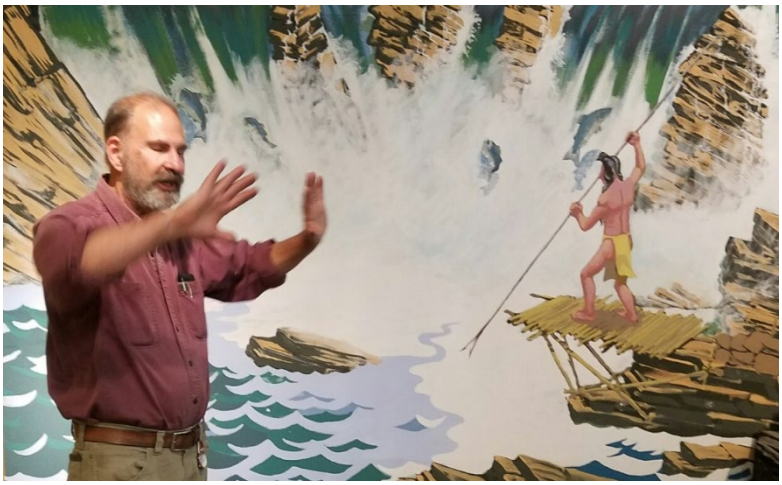


The Enola Gay

I remember reading about the atom bomb being dropped on Hiroshima while I was in the family bomb shelter, which was my room in the basement. At that time, I didn't know that my father was on the island of Tinian, maintaining radar on B52s that were being sent to Japan to drop those bombs. If I'd known that, I would have had a totally different view of what World War II was like and why it should be of interest to me. The point is that history is personal. It should start with each individual, their ancestors and their identity and go back to how that evolved. Otherwise, it is, as it was for me, boring.

What was not boring at the time was television, black and white television, including Disney programs about American History and characters like Davy Crocket and Daniel Boone. Today I have a very different view of those two and many other “American Heros”. Looking at the group of people talking at the Summit, almost every one of them had a tribal connection. History is not just a little summary that you find in a textbook. History is people. It's people and stories about people. And let's face it, people are different. You can't just lump them all into the same category as textbooks tend to do.

Discussing history is personal. We have a lot of tools today that we didn't have when I was a kid. We've got DNA analysis. We have big ancestry and family search archives. We have Google and (God help us) we have artificial intelligence. With some research each of us can learn our personal history. Archives, books and photos have been assembled and preserved with a lot of hard work by historians.



One of the lessons I’ve learned from working on this bicentennial project is that the job of a historian is more than research and preservation. Things have changed. We’ve got TikTok and YouTube and the Summit teleconference. We've got an attention economy where everybody is fighting for your attention. You're getting bombarded with ads and images all the time. If you're a historian and your job is to educate people about what went on here, you're up against a big wall of things you have to do and we haven't figured them all out yet.

I think that's the most important thing you can do is to make sure that your kids and your grandkids know what their great great grandparents did and who they were and know who their parents are and what they did and where they came from. Because that gives you an anchor in this world of spin.

My parents taught us very little about Seahurst Washington and I don’t feel very attached to it. Go out there. Learn about the water. Learn about the air. Learn about the plants. Learn about the people that live here and the animals that survive here. You're going to need that and your kids are going to need that to take responsibility for being this place. We live in a world that is a monopoly board of real estate. Being here is not about buying, selling and moving on. Give our kids roots to put down and grow.



Hudson' Bay people are literally part of the DNA of where we live. But they didn't learn nearly as much about it as the Tribes who lived here for centuries. Eileen Delehanty Pearkes told us about some of the things the fur traders didn't understand. One is that our part of the world is an inland rain forest or more accurately a snow forest since that is when most of our moisture arrives. A main element of that forest is the cedar tree.

Granted, the HBC men knew that you could make boats from cedar to take goods up and down the Columbia. Natives were not about exporting and importing. They found everything they needed to live right here. Cedar could be made into dugout canoes as well as Columbia Boats. It could be made into many kinds of baskets, some tight enough to carry water. It could also be made into clothing. All of these things held up even when wet.

Water held the most precious treasure of all, salmon. Pearkes pointed out that the Tribes were willing to give Hudson's Bay a place to build their fort. But a primary condition was that they could continue to fish for salmon at Kettle Falls as they always had. She showed pictures of how hard Native people are now working to bring those salmon back above Grand Coulee Dam. Even with the tools of science, no one knows the salmon better than the Upper Columbia Tribes.

Another treasure nearly lost to the fur trade and those who followed is language. Although roughly grouped into Salish, there are many dialects and identities embedded in language. Bringing those back into living speech is another closely held project of the people who have always lived here. Eileen showed some examples of English words and the way they look in a phonetic alphabet.



Another historian who brought us stories of people who frequented Fort Colvile is Laura Stovel, author of *Swift River*. She introduced her own history: "*I was born in early '60s in Revelstoke and my parents came in the 1940s and 1950s and we were always told that there was no Indigenous presence there and that there might have been Indigenous people passing through, but they didn't stay because there was too much snow. I always assumed that this was true. And then in 1999 I got a job at the museum. I went through the old newspapers and saw immediately that this wasn't true at all. And that the people who were in the area were the Sinixt.*"

She told us that three other nations claimed Revelstoke land but that wasn't what was in the historical records. In fact, thanks to the travelers who went with the fur traders, including the priests, we actually know a lot of the names of the people who lived along the river from Revelstoke on down.

History is people. These stories and the text of talks from the Summit are now online at http://www.theheritagenetwork.org/. Click on the Fort Colvile Summit link.