THE COQUILLE INDIANS:

Yesterday, Today and Tomorrow

Roberta L. Hall

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BY

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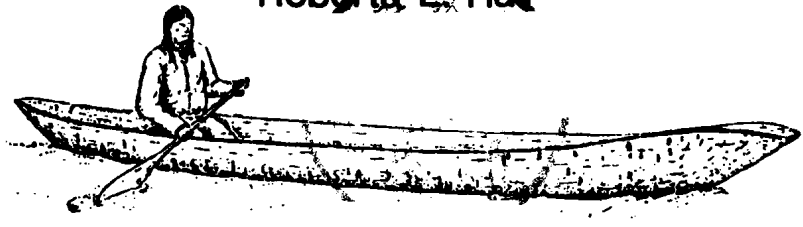

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THE COQUILLE INDIANS

DEDICATION

To Jo Anne King (1933-1981)

Who helped record the Legends and Stories of the Coquille Indians in August, 1979, and who, like the ancient Coquilles, left an oral tradition of her quest for a life in harmony with the forces of the cosmos.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

The purpose of this book is to present the culture and history of the Coquille people of the past and the present in such a way that the effect of the Euroamerican encroachment upon them will be felt as well as understood. It is my hope that the book will encourage other Indian people to study their own history with special concern paid to the life histories of their immediate ancestors.

Though I accept full responsibility for flaws in this monograph, I want to thank those who have helped. At the top of the list are Coquille tribal members who asked me to work with them in reconstructing this history; second comes EARTHWATCH which provided funds and volunteers to conduct field projects in 1978 and 1980. Additionally, I want to extend special thanks to the following: Alison Otis, who supervised collection of genealogies and family histories in both EARTHWATCH projects; Kathy Whitwer and Tony Walters, who were staff members on the 1978 and 1980 projects, respectively; Claire Younger and the Oregon State University Department of Anthropology for preparing my very rough manuscript; Don Hall and Bruce Hamilton for editorial suggestions; and Harriet Smith for preparing the index.

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COOS BAY AND THE COQUILLE PEOPLE

Along southern Oregon's Pacific coast, which excites the tourist even as it repels the sailor, one bay stands out as a potential haven. This one bay, Coos Bay, opens the land to the sea. Not only does it unlock the resources of the ocean for the land dweller, it makes the land approachable to the mariner. Between Portland, 200 miles to the north, and San Francisco, 400 miles to the south, this bay is the most important natural port. For these assets, beginning in 1850, it was rapidly developed by entrepreneurs from north and south (see Map 1).

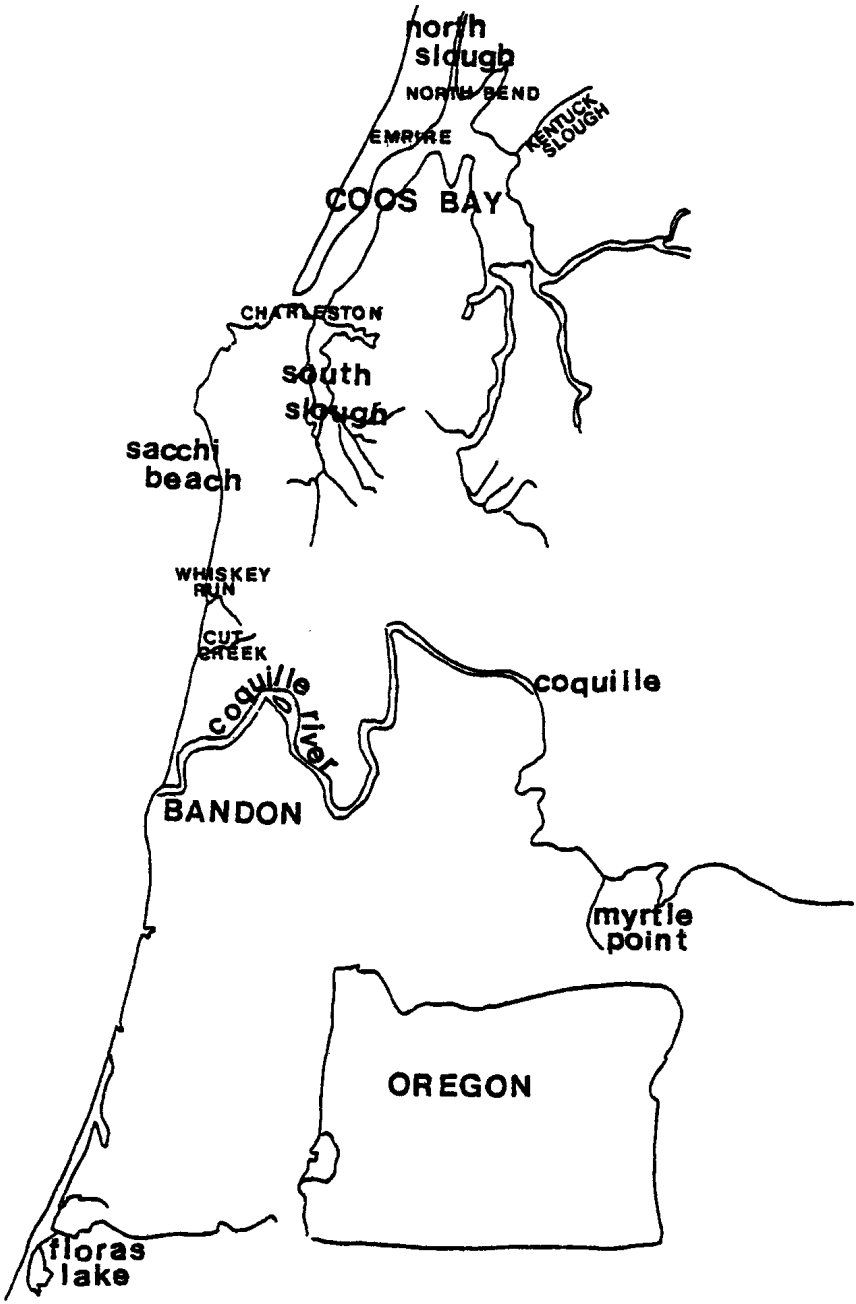
The bay and the complex of waterways associated with it dominate a 100-square-mile area of land. The largest bodies of water appear on Map 2: North Slough, Pony Slough, Haynes Inlet, Kentuck Slough, South Slough, Joe Ney Slough, Isthmus Slough, Catching Slough, and the Coos River, but the 100-square-mile area also is dotted with small inlets and lakes. On the rugged bluffs which rise just south of the bay are three Oregon state parks, each with an intriguing name, a rich history, and a magnificent view: Sunset Beach, Shore Acres, and Cape Arago.

But the ocean is not the only natural resource in the area. Coal, gold, and other minerals have been taken from the land nearby; and just east of the bay the landscape is dominated by great forests of firs, cedars, spruces, and hemlock, which, especially in primeval times, were home to elk, deer, bear, and many smaller mammals and birds. The bay provides sea mammals, ducks, crabs, clams, and fish for coastal residents; off the bay, the quieter waters of the sloughs teem

with several species of clams, mussels, oysters, harbor seals, and fish. Larger mammals, such as the northern sea lion, the California sea lion, and the northern fur seal, frequent the rocky Pacific coast and were especially plentiful in prehistoric times.

Fifteen miles south of the opening into Coos Bay lies the mouth of the Coquille River, which provides a bridge into the interior of the continent and offers its own unique set of resources. Among them are salmon--the Coho, Chinook, and the chum--as well as steelhead and eels, all of which the native people of the coast caught and dried for winter use. Vegetation, as well as animal life, abounds at the meeting place of land and sea. Native people relished the seaweeds that can be collected in calm pools along the ocean's tidal zone. On the land near the coast they harvested many herbs and several species of berries, including the wild strawberry, salal, native blackberry, and huckleberry; farther inland they gathered their major starch, the wild camas, which they boiled fresh in the spring and dried for year-round use. Between Coos Bay and the Coquille River many smaller streams spill into the ocean. All of these waterways brought people together with their sustenance, for the food resources of the oceans, though vast, are concentrated at the land's edge. In order to be consumed they first had to be harvested, and they were harvested where they were most plentiful and most accessible. Thus it was that along the bays, sloughs, streams, and rivers that the greatest part of the native population of western Oregon was concentrated.

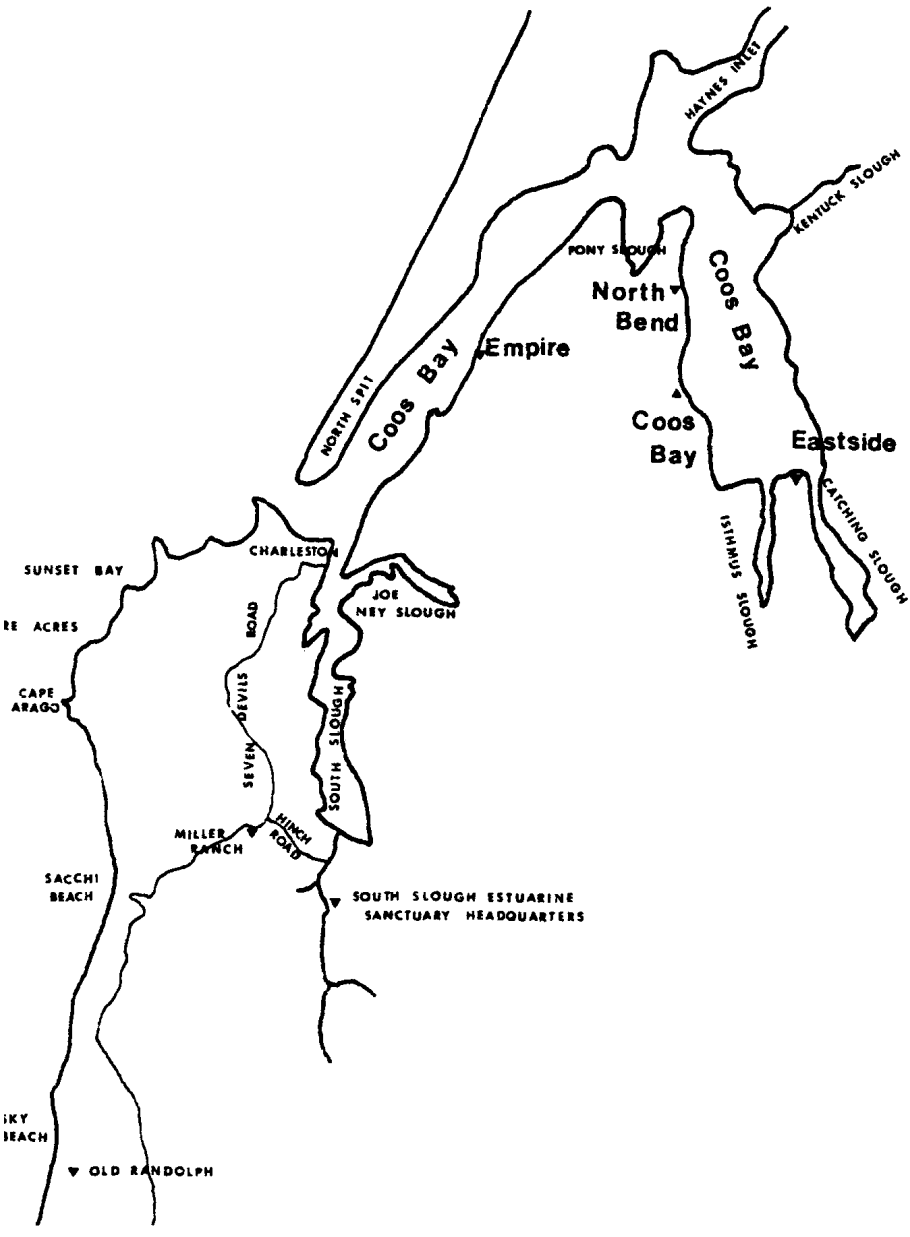
Though the food resources of Coos Bay and nearby coastal streams, rivers, and estuaries appealed to foreigners as they did to natives, the European and American pioneers had other reasons



Map 1. The Coquille Area

to develop the region. Unlike the natives of the south coast, the Euroamericans had ocean-going vessels, and it was as a port that Coos Bay initially was favored for development in the 1850s. Though not an easy port of entry under all weather conditions, the bay made a union of the ocean and the land possible, and offered a safe harbor under good weather; thus Coos Bay became the major port between Portland to the north and San Francisco to the south. Its development made it profitable to extract the riches of the Oregon forests, mines, and coast. From the bay, these riches could be transported to commercial centers where they were highly valued.

Empire City was the first port on the bay and it became a major coal mining center and a trade center for farmers as well; in 1896 the city changed its name to Empire and in 1962 merged with the City of Coos Bay. The city of North Bend, which lies on the peninsula that projects into the bay and produces a bend in it, was founded by entrepreneur Asa Simpson and named by him in 1856. The city of Marshfield, which was bounded on the east and west by the two long arms of the bay, was initially settled in the 1850s as a logging center; in 1944 it changed its name to the City of Coos Bay. A community on the southeast side of the bay, Eastside, now joined to Coos Bay, originally was known as East Marshfield. The unincorporated community of Charleston lies at the point of land between the bay and the South Slough, and is the location for the bay's small boat basin; it was named for Charles Haskell, who is said to have taken up a claim at the mouth of the South Slough in 1853. A final area to note on the maps is the mouth of the Coquille. Pioneer settlements began there in the 1850s around a ferry crossing the Coquille River. The city of Bandon developed just south



Map 2. The Coos Bay Area

of the ferry as a logging center and a port for ships going up the Coquille River, but it never competed with North Bend and Coos Bay as a major industrial or commercial center. For this reason, few Indians of the south coast now claim Bandon as their home, even though some trace their ancestry to people who lived at the village at the Coquille's mouth, or to bands who lived upriver from it.

In 1853, shortly after it became known to San Francisco entrepreneurs that Coos Bay offered a port from which Oregon resources could be exported, gold was discovered at Whisky Run, a creek which lies about eight miles south of the bay. These two developments, the discovery of gold and the discovery of the bay as a safe port, turned the entire bay area into an instant city. At the same time, settlement of interior areas was spurred by the Oregon Donation Land Act, which from 1850 to 1855 offered up to 640 acres to settlers who would live on the land, improve it, and file a claim for it. The region became a magnet for miners and pioneers as well as a center for capitalists and adventurers.

Along with immigrant laborers from Europe and from America's east coast, Coos Bay became the second home for many people of Indian ancestry whose native roots were in other parts of Oregon or in other states. With the European settlement of the west, their traditional economies ceased to function, so they joined immigrant laborers in turning to the new mining and forestry towns, such as Empire City, Marshfield, and North Bend, for employment. We do not have figures on the numbers who came to the area in the nineteenth century, but we have estimates for some of their descendants in 1980. Census figures indicate that at least one percent of the population of Southwest Oregon claims native American ancestry,

but this estimate is low for it does not include many persons who have both an Indian and a European heritage. The Indian Education program of Coos Bay in 1983 identified 1,364 school children of Indian ancestry in the southern Oregon coastal area from Florence south to the California border.

According to the program director, these children represent at least 80 different tribes and about 10 percent of them are from tribes native to the southern Oregon coast. In the early years Coos Bay especially attracted native people from the southwestern coast and river valleys. Dislocated by miners and farmers who entered the state in the 1850s, the Indians ceded their land to the government and initially were removed to reservations on the northcentral Oregon coast, first to Yachats and then to Siletz. Though some of the Indians of the south coast stayed on the central coast reservations, and others succumbed to epidemics or malnutrition, many other Indians returned to live near their homes after five, ten, or fifteen years away from them.

Try to imagine the country of the southern Oregon coast in 1865 as the Indians returning after 10 years of absence might have viewed it. Where their villages had once stood there now were trading centers, mines, and homesteads; where the camas had grown wild in valleys there now were farmers' fields; where the natives had gathered eels and speared fish in creeks and rivers there now were homesteaders trying to maintain water and property rights. The bluffs above the coast near Whisky Run Creek had supported stands of timber, but all had been cut to build the short-lived mining city of Randolph, which developed on the bluff a half-mile south of the creek in 1853. Historic records indicate that in 1857 tall grasses dominated the flat bluffs south

and west of Randolph; 20 years later records show that dunes dominated the area, which had been denuded by cattle and sheep. By 1865 many of the grassy, open areas along the coast, where Indian people had set traps for elk, were no longer accessible to them, and the great mammals already were in decline. Many necessities of life now had to be purchased and fewer goods could be gathered from the land and sea. Additionally, the ancient social system of tightly-woven villages, where kin and in-laws cooperated in the food quest and in all aspects of life, had been largely supplanted by the cash economy.

Still, for the returning natives it was better to be near their old homes than to be far from them. For those who had grown up near the Coquille River, that is, for the Coquille Indians who are the subjects of this history, the land between Empire City and Bandon afforded the opportunity to be near their old residences and still work for wages in the woods. Not all the land had been taken in donation land claims, so there still was land where returning Indians might build their homes. Later, some of these temporary properties became legally theirs under the Dawes Act of 1887, which provided allotments of land to Indians, a program that in some ways was similar to land claims offered to non-Indians. Ideally, the returning Coquilles wanted to be close enough to centers of trade and employment that they could work and purchase supplies, but still far enough from European commercial and residential centers to be able to practice some of their traditions, including hunting and gathering traditional fare. Many practical items of European technology including the iron skillet and the gun, for example, were readily adopted, but the old foods which had been cooked on the open fire, in the pit, or stone-boiled in baskets, still were eaten, even

though the methods of capture and preparation changed. Women continued to weave baskets, for a time, but now they frequently served a ceremonial rather than a practical function, and many baskets were made for sale to non-Indians. As many of the Indian people had married persons of European ancestry, the transfer of cultural materials took place in the home as well as in towns or on the job.

By 1900, most people of Indian descent on the southern Oregon coast had either a parent or a grandparent of European origin. This fact posed psychological problems as well as some advantages, for the descendants had to consider which ancestry should receive priority. How would they be viewed by outsiders: as Indians or as Euroamericans? With which heritage should they identify: the Indian one close at hand, which permeated even the air they breathed and the land they walked upon, and which stretched back to time immemorial, or the European heritage which they knew only indirectly but whose economic, cultural, religious, and legal systems dominated their everyday lives?

The answer to these musings was largely provided for them. In order to survive in the new society, the Euroamerican culture had to be given precedence. Though many of their friends and associates continued to be of Indian descent, and their most important emotional relationships were with people who shared their Indian heritage, the everyday language had to be English; even their ancient myths soon were told in English, and the ancient tongue was taught no more. In some Indian homes, parents did not openly discuss their Indian traditions, for they wanted their children to survive in the changed environment and they felt they had to help them accommodate to the reality at hand.