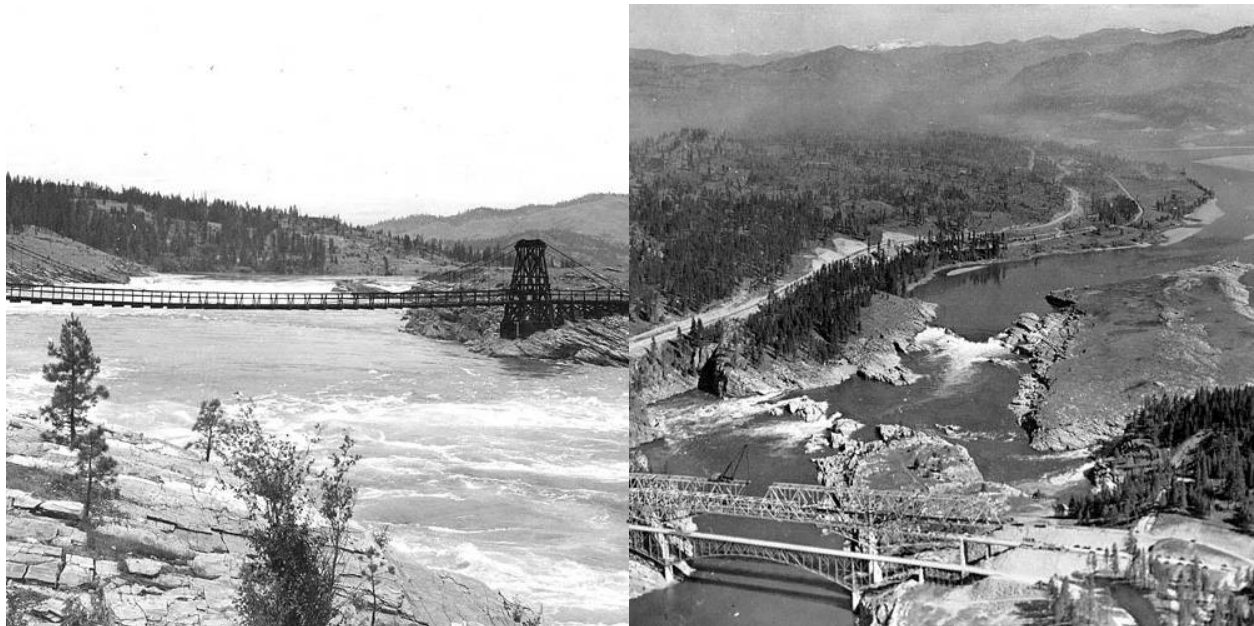


The Kettle Falls - “Shwan-ate-koo”

Compiled by David Bull

The Kettle Falls, which today are under water, must have been magnificent to look at, plummeting 40 feet into the mouths of huge stone caldrons. They were one of the most important Indian fishing sites on the Columbia River. Historical eyewitness accounts suggest the fishery at Kettle Falls might have been larger than the one at Celilo Falls several hundred miles downriver. Between 1,000 and 2,000 Indian fishers regularly used the site.

At least seven local tribes depended on the fish that struggled up the roaring falls of the wild Columbia River. They referred to the waters that have always been an important site to Native Americans as “Shwan-ate-koo”, meaning “deep-sounding waters”. For centuries Kettle Falls was the site of a vibrant fishery. Local Indian bands caught salmon and steelhead for their own use and to trade for buffalo robes, horses and other goods brought by Indians who traveled to the falls from as far away as present-day Montana. The Colvilles, Spokanes, San Poils, Okanagons, and Kootenais are some of the tribes that gathered at the falls to harvest the plentiful salmon. The women wove fish traps out of green hazel branches and men and boys speared salmon or used the basket traps. The salmon were not only crucial to their survival, but a very significant part of their culture as well.



In July 1810 David Thompson, director of the North West Company's Columbia Department, became the first European to view Kettle Falls. He observed fishing at Celilo Falls, The Dalles, the Cascade Rapids, the mouth of the Sanpoil River and various locations on the Spokane River and on the Methow Rivers. Thompson observed Indians fishing with basket-like nets, catching the salmon as they fell back after trying to leap the falls. Later, he wrote that “Kettle Falls had by far the largest population of Indians all heavily dependent upon the salmon.” Thompson named the falls Ilthkoyape Falls and the Indians who fished there Ilthkoyape Indians. These are among the

forebearers of Indians who are today organized as the Confederated Tribes of the Colville Reservation. The origin of the word Ilthkoyape is unclear, but some believe it likely came from “Ilth-kape,” the Salish word for “kettle,” and “hoy-ape,” the Salish word for “trap” or “net.” At the falls, Thompson was the only one to use this designation. Other explorers who came later, among them Ross Cox, Alexander Ross and Gabriel Franchere called the falls La Chaudiere (The Caldron) because of the boiling appearance of the water as it plunged into pools below the falls.

David Thompson wrote “The Salmon are about from 15 to 25 to 30 pounds weight here, well-tasted, but have lost all their fat, retaining still all their meat. Their flesh is red, and they are extremely well-made. . . . Whatever the history and the habits of the Salmon may be, they form the principal support of all the Natives of this River, from season to season.”



In 1841 Explorer Charles Wilkes also observed Indians trapping salmon in baskets at the falls. He wrote that the Indians frequently caught as many as 900 salmon in 24 hours.

In the summer of 1845 a Jesuit missionary Pierre-Jean De Smet traveled to Fort Vancouver for supplies. His return journey took him past Kettle Falls. “The beautiful falls of the Columbia,” as he called them, were a two-day journey over the mountains from the St. Ignatius mission in the Flathead valley, and Indians from that area were among those who fished at Kettle Falls. De Smet estimated 800-900 Indians were gathered at the falls that August to fish for salmon. He spent nine days there. The respite afforded him the opportunity to carefully observe the salmon fishery. In a letter dated August 7, 1845, he wrote about his travels through the Oregon country, and described the Kettle Falls fishery:

“My presence among the Indians did not interrupt their fine and abundant fishery. An enormous basket was fastened to a projecting rock, and the finest fish of the Columbia, as if by fascination, cast themselves by dozens into the snare. Seven or eight times a day, these baskets were examined, and each time were found to contain about two hundred and fifty salmon. The Indians, meanwhile, were seen on every projecting rock, piercing the fish with the greatest dexterity.”



Colville Indians and others from the upper Columbia River continued to fish at the falls until the late 1930s, when Grand Coulee Dam finally exterminated the upper Columbia salmon runs and the falls were inundated by Lake Roosevelt. The dam wiped out runs that spawned in tributaries that drained into the Columbia from that point, river mile 596, to the headwaters, a distance of 645 river miles.

Before the rising waters flooded the falls, "...five Native tribes gathered in a last encampment to mourn the loss of their ancient fishing grounds. Salmon ceremonies at Kettle Falls in 1940 and Celilo Falls in 1956 were bittersweet, as the rising reservoirs behind Grand Coulee and The Dalles dams, respectively, would drastically change the historic fisheries. At Kettle Falls, there would be no more salmon. Lake Roosevelt, the reservoir behind Grand Coulee Dam, had flooded

the falls and the Colville tribe feted the annual spring return of the salmon for the last time at an event they called the Ceremony of Tears. At Celilo, the falls are gone but the fishery and village endure, and tribes still celebrate the first salmon every spring. Salmon remain a venerable source of cultural identity, and also food, for Columbia River tribes.

From time to time, when the level of Lake Roosevelt is extraordinarily low, the river again plunges over the rocks, creating a brief reminder of the falls that once were there. For the past few years the Confederated Tribes of the Colville Reservation have gathered at the site, most recently at the Kettle Falls Historical Center to continue the spring salmon festival. This year, it will be held on the weekend of May 29-30.



