

Ramona Bennett/ Suzette Mills
May 2009
Location: Lacy, Washington
1 of 2 notes on recordings

Cecelia introduces Ramona Bennett and Suzette Mills.

Start Interview:
(12:30)

Ramona: Well, thank you Cecelia. I think before you can talk about what we did in the sixties and seventies you really have to have some back on where the tribe was at that time. The Puyallup tribe is part of the Medicine Creek Treaty. We had an original reservation which included, and still includes for that matter-Point Defiance, hence Old Town, that whole side of the bay and that reservation was never abolished. It was replaced with what was suppose to be 23, 000 acre reservation that includes Browns Point, Dash Point, Edgewood, Milton, Port of Tacoma of Fife on into Tacoma, and all the way out past Puyallup. On the first Survey they lost 5,000 acres and so our 23,000 acres reservation was instantly diminished to 18,000 acres. And the markers that they used were trees which they promptly cut down, leaving us with some very gray areas for our tribal land base.

Our people are matrilineal societies, and that means that the women from our long house families always remained, always there at Puyallup, and the man married out. And so the women were all related. And Grandpa Frank used to say, we live in paradise. And we truly did. As you guys all know little kids have a lot of energy-man there just running, running and running, man they want to learn, they want to keep moving. Well, the old people can't move so fast, but they know how to do everything. And so the old people would guide the children and teach them and these little kids could just gather and pick

and carry, and be real happy to do it. And so there weren't any nursing homes, our old people just didn't get thrown away like trash, our old people were really treasured and respected and were very needed, and were a vital part of the community. And there weren't any foster homes or orphanages. Our babies all felt useful. Our children weren't pets, they were...a necessary part of family and the men could hunt, the men could build, the men could fish, they could do things. And the women were by their sides. And this was paradise; everybody had everything that they needed. Beautiful art, beautiful carvings and weavings, wonderful stuff, and we didn't wear moccasins, hello, this is a rain forest (laughs) we wore like wooded platform shoes that were strapped on and we had nice woven socks, we had furry dogs and made, we weaved their fur, we had little nice dog fur socks and nice little platform shoes, because that only makes sense if you think about it. And we lived in longhouses and the longhouses here in the Northwest were hundreds of feet long, they were whole communities. And you know? What do you give somebody that has everything? Well, you could give them a song. And Our Puyallup people, we were- we are special, we always were special. We were really special in the sense. We were very gregarious, friendly, generous, witty and inventive, imaginative, cool, cool people, with a very good central location. And so we had lots and lots of company, people from Alaska, people from California, people from Hawaii, and we used to make sixty-foot canoes, and we knew all of the currents. And we could travel back and forth to Hawaii-that's what I've been told. And when Jacque Cousteau went all over the world looking for the biggest devilfish the octopus, they were here! We had them right in the Narrows, The biggest octopus, and we used to harvest those, and we used to prepare them in our smokehouses, and they were trade goods for us, and nobody else had the

devilfish like we did. And you know- I didn't know that until I was campaigning to get our hospital property back. I went over to flathead; I went over to Salish Kootenai. And I was just going to all different tribes, telling them about how our property was being missed used and taken from us, and I wanted all the Indian people to know what had happened, so they could help us and stand with us. And so, I went to Salish Kootenai and I went to the office and I said who I was, and I told them I wanted talk to some of your people here. And they said, "AH the council is going to be back with the elders having lunch in just a few minutes, where don't you just go on back there?" And so I went on back there, with my bib on of course.

And there were council peoples, and there were elders. And I said, hello my name is Ramona Bennett and I'm here representing Puyallup Tribe from over there in Washington, State on the coast. And one of them elders got up and said, "Ah, our elders told us about you. Your one of the devilfish people, your ancestors used to come here with the smoked octopus. And they used to trade wit us and they told us if ever anyone from Puyallup, from Spwiya'laphabsh to make sure that we...spent time with you, because the Puyallup's know everything that's going on, you people are like a newspaper. They know everything, and they used to tell back here, and they used to tell us what was going on with the other Indians." And then they all said, "What's going on?" And it happened to be 1973 and so I said, well there's an Alaska oils claim going on right now, their calling it a Native American land claims, but its not, it oil companies are trying to steal Alaska from them Natives. And so, I told them what was going on in Alaska how all the Alaska Natives, the Indians, the Eskimos, the Elutes they had all come together

and they had formed a Alaska Federated Natives and they were campaigning in Washington, D. C. Just trying to hold on to anything, anything, because half of Texas had moved to Alaska and they were doing what Hitler done to what s that other country?...that they Annexed?...um...Germany annexed...(guesses) they did that by physical force...its starts with an A.

Brent Anderson: Australia?

Ramona: Thank you. All of the Germans moved to Australia, and then they voted to become part of Germany. And America of course learned from Germany, so they sent half of Texas to Alaska and then they voted to become a state. It's the same thing. And so I told them about all of that. And I told them about Bertha Turnipseed from the Puyallup council had gone to Florida, and started a Bingo Hall. And they all went, "What?" and I said a Bingo Hall. Apparently we got this odd little glitch in our-in the laws that gives Indians opportunities in gaming, in gambling. And so at this time in Florida had agreed to let Bertha Turnipseed start a Bingo Hall, and off she went, and we did see her for years. But anyway I told them-Salish Kootenai all that, and they said, "See you are just like a newspaper." And so, us Puyallup's we were known as the devilfish people, which were the thing that was unique about us.

And so we have this paradise of longhouses, this we got wonderful trade goods, we have advanced art, we have an advanced civilization, and in our society the chief ate last, so that there is always-there had to be plenty for everyone, or the chief ate last, or we went hungry. And of course everyone always had plenty. We had a wonderful fishing harvest, we used traps and wheels, the river used to meander back then, it wasn't levee-d in, and

we took what we needed, and every fall when the silvers came in our boys-our men who were part of our family, they would come with their families from wherever they had moved. And they would bring their families, their new families, their in-laws, out-laws, they'd bring everybody. And they'd help harvest the silver fish. And so they would come and we would have the traps, the wheels, and the smokehouses going, and everybody would be catching fish, and cleaning fish, and smoking fish. But that same time we had foot races, pony races, bone-games, weddings, naming, [and] gymnastics-jump in Suzette. It was a big gathering, it was a big gathering and we'd burn off a prairie there by Puyallup to accommodate this big gathering. ...When the white people started moving in, we invited in a trader, maybe in a farmer and some different person. We invited these white persons to join in because we are the generous people. Today you can still go to that gathering when the silvers come up through the river, there's something called the Puyallup Fair. Its still on our Prairie, it you go into their offices, the founding fathers are a bunch of old white men, and now we have to pay to go to our own gathering. But that's the Puyallup Fair, which evolved from us generous people (Laughs) who just have to invite just everybody no matter what.

So anyway we lived in paradise, there was an allotment Act, and they did allotments on our reservation and they did a, "you use it, or you lose it" situation; forty acres here, eighty acres there. Each family was assigned property and they had to live there, they had to improve it. Now improve it means, cutting down everything, [bull] dozing everything up, paving if possible. Improving in the white mans mind is striping and wrecking everything. And so now we got this Allotment Act. And reservation means reserved. And

the white people didn't give us anything; they came with their hats in their hands. They were homeless, they were displaced, they were desperate, [and] they had nothing. We had everything, so we were assigned these allotments, and we had to build a cabin, and we had to live there with our families. And the white man would get drunk and just now remember our longhouse was mutually protected. Now our little families are isolated, their like hundreds, thousands feet apart. The white men would have a few drinks, go kick in a cabin door, rape everyone in the house, murder the adults and throw their bodies on the railroad tracks. And we have a pile of death certificates-listed as railroad accidents. This is how we were treated. Our fishermen-the way we had fished, the traps, [and] the wheels were outlawed because when the white people started fishing that way, they took everything. So instead of just outlawing that white people fishing that way, they outlawed traps and wheels. For us to- we had fished that way since time and memorial, [and] all of a sudden we aren't allowed to fish is our traditional way. And later on when we talk about fishing, that's quiet another subject. Our means of basic life support was taken from us and our men had to be like thieves in the night fishing, fishing under the cover of darkness, sneaking, treated like thieves.

And so there was something called a Cushman Act. Part of the reservation was Agency Tract, and that's where the boarding school was and where the hospital eventually was. That's a different topic. And I told you that the river meandered, and that's the topic of the old riverbed. These are all different topics we'll get back to.

But there was something called the Cushman Act, and the Cushman Act allowed us to sell our property, which we did not want to sell. But a congressman Cushman went to D.C. and got us permission to sell our property. At that point we were assigned guardians; we could not read, write or speak English. And our guardians were the railroad people, the timber company people, the banking people, the lawyers, [and] everyone got their fair share of Puyallup. And they assigned us our guardians because we were ignorant savages. And the guardian's then-now part of the property was put on the tax roles and seized for taxes. The other portions they were, the guardian's sold the land to each other and kept the proceeds from sales as their probate fees. And the sheriffs took us off the property at gun point. And if anyone didn't mover fast enough, they found themselves on a chain gang, and that's how the county roads were built. There were seven Puyallup men who served on a commission, and they signed off on many of the transactions. And you can tell who they are, because their family's property is still held in trust. In other words, these men sold the rest of our families down the tube. And their reward for selling us out was they got to keep their family's property. And you can judge them, you can hate them, or you can just wonder what you would do. You know, when people all around you are being murdered and displaced, raped and robbed, you know- personally, I think they could have done more, I think they could have done better, I think they could stood for their people. But, should I say the names? ... Sicade, Meeker, it's all the names of the tribal hero's.

The next see- now we're homeless on our own reservation. And now we got this agency tract....and it has a boarding school on it, and it has the Puyallup Industrial School. My

mom was a victim of the Puyallup Industrial School. And it has like a little infirmary and the infirmary kind of doubles as a little hospital. And now there's a campaign to get a hospital, a hospital that's going to be a regional hospital. And that's where Cecelia's (Interviewer) grandfather comes in, his name was Martin Sampson, he was Swinomish, and he was one of my relatives. He helped lobby for a regional hospital and that was the Puyallup's could have the best, most current up-to-date medical care and jobs. Now we're already homeless, but at least we might get a job out of this thing. And that would be a regional hospital for Alaska, Idaho, Montana, Washington and Oregon. This is going to be a regional hospital with updated everything. And so, now they-the government see the need, sees that's a perfect location and so now they come to Puyallup in 1927. Now the Cushman Act was in 1912 and we pretty much sold, lost our land base at this point. And so they come to us, and they say this would be a great spot, you are centrally located, you devilfish people, you little devilfish people. And we want to put up this hospital and so we're going to pay you, we're going to pay you to take this property as United States government Indian Health and Public Health Services is going to do this. And you will all get money. Yah! And your all going to get jobs, and your going to get good healthcare, and so the Puyallup's-we met and them same seven guys, them same seven guys and its decided we're going to do this judgment role. And see, all the other tribes under the Indian Reorganization Act in 1932 had to compile roles later, but we got like the jump, like a head start, because like this Judgment role for this distribution of this money among these Puyallup's. And so these seven men, these same guys get to decide who is [a] Puyallup. Hello? (Laughter). Do we know their crooks already? And so, as these Puyallup's are coming before them, their [saying] you're not Puyallup, you're not

Puyallup, you're not Puyallup because there going to be this money, and if you have fewer people, you can cut your pieces of pie a little bigger. And so, my mom was born in 1907, and her name was, her name was Coco Blue, her white woman name was Gertrude McKinney Brown Church. At that time she was still a McKinney and she goes before them. Now remember what I said about matrilineal societies, her mother was Puyallup, she Puyallup, she goes before these men, who are these men? Are they really even Puyallup? Anyway, she goes before these men and they tell her you must enroll with the tribe of your father. She said, Huh? They said "you're not Puyallup; you have to enroll with the tribe of your father." Well, this is in 1927. That makes my mom twenty-years-old. Wasn't that during Prohibition? I think it might have been. My mom was a Flapper. My mom Charleston into town found herself a lawyer and she did an injunction against them from distributing one nickel until her name appeared on the role. She said, "This isn't happening, my brother and my sister and I are Puyallup and we're going to be on that or no one's going to distribute an f-in nickel!" And many people jumped into my mother's little lawsuit. Let's see there was the Mc Clouds, there was Williams, and my mother doubled the tribe with her little lawsuit. Because these same seven men had denied enrollment to whole groups of real Puyallup's; and so, people joined her little injunction and before the fir and feathers settled all of the names that should have appeared on the role, appeared on the role. Thank you.

And on my mother's tombstone, which is a bench, I have Warrior Woman. Because, you know Indian women have been put down, Indian women have been repressed, and Indian women have been just treated like pond scum. And my mom just knew it wasn't right,

she wasn't putting up with something with some not right happening, and so she had the personality and the vocabulary and the motivation to do something about it, and she did. Because we are Puyallup; and it wasn't even about money. It wasn't about money at all, because she was eligible for enrollment at Swinomish, Tulalip, they had land and they had money. But she was absolutely determined that we're Puyallup and it's going to stay that way. And that's going to mean something. That's important. And so she won her little lawsuit, and there was the distribution of dollars and other tribal members went out and bought whatever they bought, clothes, pretty things, you know, maybe even a car, who knows? But my mother and her brother and sister bought a piano. And they all played the piano, and we still have the piano. I know where the pretty clothes and cars ended up, but we still have our piano.

And so that hospital was built. The hospital was built and it was beautiful! It was state-of-the-art, so modern, it was up on the hill and it was so beautiful that our white neighbors immediately began resenting us, hating us and wanting to take our hospital away from us. Actually timing is everything, as my husband has always says. The hospital went up just about the time the big- big TB epidemic hit. And so that's how it got used, primary. And so when the TB epidemic finally subsided, everybody loses sight that this is a regional hospital for of the Indians for all of health reasons. They just saw it as a TB hospital that wasn't needed anymore. And so Indian Health let got of our hospital, and it's supposed to go under federal law-if property is surpluses by the railroads, or the government it's supposed to revert back to the tribe. But the government began conveying our hospital and our property to the State to use for a Juvenile Jail they called it the Diagnostic Center.

But really it was the State Bogie-man. And it was used statewide, so if a child got in trouble in Ellensburg or Spokane they would be shipped to Tacoma. Which is awful because it's mostly only poor people whose kids get locked up? And how in the heck are you going to come from Spokane to visit your child that having a hard time already? And how are you going to diagnose a kid that's just been uprooted from everything dear to them? And so we as Puyallup had a problem with the Diagnostic Center, because it was cruel to children and poor people and also because it was swatting on our property; so the whole program was trespassing, because when we sold that property, there wasn't a reversionary clause, but it certainly implied that this was perpetual, forever to be used to the one purpose, and that's the purpose we sold it for, that's the only thing it should have been used for. And one more time they lied to us. And so, when Suzette and I came on council- I'm wrapping this up fast now, because I need a cigarette. When we come on council the State controlled our river, fisheries and game department would not permit Indian fishermen to fish, or fisherwomen to fish. We have been prohibited fishing for ninety years, ninety years, ninety years, think of the families that were disrupted.

At Treaty time, this right to harvest was all important because if you're on your bloody knees bagging for a handout, you can not live with dignity. You have to be able to support yourself. We are a Mariners' societies, we are fishing, and shellfish harvesting, and devilfish harvesting people, that's who we are, and that how we support ourselves. And so, we were completely off the river, our reservation boundaries were being challenged constantly challenged, we were being treated like we did not exist. Our reservation, a lot of the reservations looked like checker board squares because a lot of

the allotment has been sold. We were wiped out. We had tiny little pockets of trust property owed by decedents of you-know-who. And then our tribal enrollment, now this is in [19]68. Our tribal enrollment had not been updated since 1929. The judgment role...that was it, that was the last certified role. And with a medium-life span of forty-five-years, since 1929 to [19]68 you could imagine how tinny tiny our tribe had gotten. And so, we were guaranteed healthcare and educational support by treaty. A physician shall live among them, [and] a teacher shall live among them. That wasn't happening, our property had been...seeing they can't steal the land because the land stays there, but they wrote false titles to it. And so, here we are, we got-we don't know who we are, and we don't even control our own role. We have no money for anything except maintenance for our cemetery. And do we own our cemetery? No! We don't even own our own cemetery!

Because all the tribes were thrown into a hat, congress threw us into a hat and all the denominations got to pick tribes. And they were given property on the reservation to civilize the savages. And so, we were given to the Presbyterians who owned our ancestors bones. They owned our cemetery and they had a church setting there. We don't own our cemetery, we don't control our river, we have absolutely no property wit clear title, we don't even know who we are because we haven't had an updated role, we've absolutely no money, we have no means to support ourselves, the racism was rampant, because you do something mean to somebody, you got to say something nasty about somebody to justify it. So the dirty, dumb, lazy, ignorant drunken Indians could not get jobs because of the stereotype about the damn lazy dirty drunken Indians. And so we can't fish, we can't get a job, and we're homeless. Now what do you see that as, I ask you guys? I see that as an opportunity! An opportunity, yes, because as a new council can we

make a mistake? (Laughter) It's all gone already! There's nothing, there's absolutely no way we can screw up, because we lost our fishing right in court I the Brown decision. Legally we're down the drain, were financially down the drain, we're like-my kids would say "assed out." We're done for. And so, that how things stood when we come on council. That's the end of this session.

(12:30) Tells history of the Puyallup land loses.

(14:00) "This was Paradise"

Talks about the Matrilineal Culture of the people, the importance of family members, the old people, the little children, and explains family structure and how well the family parts worked together, men, women, children, elders. Ramona talks about the art, clothing and housing styles and customs of the Pacific Northwest Indians.

(18:00)

Tells the story about when she went to campaign for the return of Cascadia property to gain support at Salish Kootenai people in 1973. Tells the story of how the elders welcomed her, and revealed that to their tribe the Puyallup tribe was commonly known for their historical harvest of the octopus and where called by the Salish Kootenai people the "devilfish people".

(24:00) The Fishing customs of the Puyallup tribe, tells about the fishing styles, how the families worked together during the return of the Silver Salmon. The celebration that included games, canoe races, and foot races was held at the return of the silver salmon. The Puyallup fair evolved from this historical celebration.

(27:00) Tells about the Allotment Act", tells how the Indians were supposed to improve the land. -"the white people have not given us anything." Ramona tells how this white custom isolated the once unified Indian families. Talks about the violence that transpired with the land grabs, and how the whites outlawed custom fishing for the Indians. The basic life support system of fishing was made illegal.

(30:00) The 1912-Cushman Act. Allowed Puyallup's to sell their land, the Puyallup's did not want to sell their land; however the Indians were assigned white guardians, which took advantage of the situation and stole the land from the Puyallup tribe. The sheriffs forced families off their land, or arrested to work the chain-gage.

(33:00) there were seven Puyallup men that sold out the Puyallup people and their land, through fear, or whatever. Ramona expresses some of the names of these men. Tells how many of the tribal people became homeless on their reservation.

(34:00) Talks about what is meant the "Agency Tract", the Puyallup Industrial School only had an infirmary. Martin J. Sampson helped lobbied for the best regional hospital, and maybe even jobs. Government comes to Puyallup in 1927 and offers to build this regional hospital. The United States offers to pay the Puyallup for the use of the land.

(36:30) 1927 a judgment role done, and these crooked seven Puyallup men took it upon themselves to name who is and is not Puyallup, and Ramona's mother Gertrude goes before these men, and they tell her "you must enroll in the tribe of your father,". Ramona tells the story about how her mother fought this and places an injunction against the tribe until those who are really tribal members were rightfully placed on the role. Ramona talks about the strength of Puyallup woman and how her mother won this lawsuit. And money was distributed and pretty things were bought, the hospital was build and it was beautiful, and the hospital was used greatly for the tuberculoses epidemic.

(43:00) tells how the government illegally took the hospital away from Indian health and allowed Washington State for a Juvenile Diagnostic center. Puyallup tribe saw this illegal.

(45:00) Talks about when Ramona and Suzette came on Council: talks about wrong of how fishing was made illegal for ninety-years. How this affected the Indians, and how the Indians properties had been dwindled down to almost to nothing by 1968. Ramona talks about how this had broken much of the treaty rights and agreements and what this meant to her and the council in 1968.

(50:00) Suzette Comments on Ramona's talk.

END OF SESSION