

DOUGLAS COUNTY

New memorial to slain trappers marks a turning point in Oregon history

No one knows for certain what triggered the killings by members of the Quuiich Tribe of the lower Umpqua.

Lori Tobias *For The Oregonian/OregonLive*

One hundred and ninety-five years ago, a trapper arrived in Fort Vancouver with news that 15 of his colleagues had been slain by members of the Quuiich Tribe in what is now Oregon’s Douglas County, their horses, furs and personal belongings stolen; their bodies left to rot.

On Saturday, local history buffs will gather near Reedsport to dedicate a monument to the men who were part of the business partnership of a Smith, Jackson and Sublette trapping party led by Jedediah Smith. Recently listed as the Smith, Jackson and Sublette Burial Site, it is believed to be the oldest cemetery in Douglas County recognized by the Oregon Commission on Historical Cemeteries and among the oldest in Oregon.

The Quuiich Tribe of the lower Umpqua were among the communities decimated by disease brought by white trappers and traders starting around 1820. Survivors were rounded up and removed from their lands starting in 1860.

For the people behind the Umpqua Memorial Project, the trappers’ burial site is important not only in memorializing the deceased men, but for what it represents in Oregon’s history, said Bob Zybach, historian and program manager of Oregon Websites and Watersheds Project.

“It’s one of the key reasons we’re the U.S. and not Britain now,” Zybach said, explaining that after the incident Smith “rediscovered” South Pass on his way to the Missouri River. Smith, Jackson and Sublette in turn promoted the route “to top government officials as a possible wagon route for American emigrants to the Willamette Valley,” Zybach said. “A decade later, Americans were following this opportunity for ‘free land’ and the Hudson Bay Company soon moved their operation to Vancouver Island.”

In the 1820s, Native Americans were trading goods with the Hudson Bay Company, either directly or through trade with neighboring tribes, said Patricia Whereat Phillips, a member of the Confederated Tribes of the Coos, Lower Umpqua and Siuslaw Indians and whose late father Don Whereat wrote the 2010 book “Our Culture and History,” on local tribal history. They were also going through “social upheavals from introduced diseases like smallpox, for which they had no effective treatments. By 1828, they were already suspicious of the white men and their intentions, which in the end were borne out, more deaths and loss of one’s home lands.”

ESTABLISHING A MEMORIAL

The effort to establish a memorial was started by Wayne Knauf, a member of the Confederated Tribes of the Colville Reservation in Washington and also of the California-based Jedediah Smith Society. Others, including Don Whereat, a historian for the Confederated Tribes of the Coos, Lower Umpqua and Siuslaw Indians, soon joined in the research. Eventually, Zybach took up the project under the auspices of the Oregon Websites and Watersheds. David Gould, whose family pioneered the Elliott



A new memorial marking the 1828 killings of 15 members of a fur trapping party is about one mile north of Reedsport on Smith River Road, the area where it is believed the killings took place. *Courtesy of Bob Zybach*

State Forest, selected the stone from a local quarry and donated it for the monument.

“These people were buried and forgotten about,” said Knauf, who first learned of the deaths about 30 years ago. “Buried fur trappers in the West, in my personal opinion that’s horrible. ... The memorial is honoring history and people and it’s nice when we can do that.”

A tribal linguist, Phillips recalls hearing stories passed down by family elders. In the Chinook language, white Americans were called “Bostons,” and the British trappers, “King George’s men,” she said.

“Smith’s party didn’t make themselves popular on Coos Bay,” Phillips said. “There was an older man who felt he’d been mistreated by Smith’s party. He went up himself to tell the Umpquas that these people were rude. Smith’s party had a number of unpleasant run-ins with Native people.”

STILL A MYSTERY

No one knows for certain what triggered the killings by members of the Quuiich Tribe (pronounced Queech) of the lower Umpqua. A letter dated Aug. 10, 1828, by John McLoughlin, head of the Columbia District at Fort Vancouver, suggests that it may have involved an altercation over an ax days before the killings. What is known is that of 19 in the trapping party, only four survived. No resources indicate deaths among the Quuiich. Smith escaped with two others in a canoe and a fourth fled on foot. Twenty-eight days later, “an American by the name of Black,” according to McLoughin’s letter, reached Fort Vancouver with the news. A party of men returned to the site to bury the dead, of which 11 were found, and to reclaim their property.

There are numerous opinions about what happened between the trappers and Native Americans leading up to the killings, Knauf said. “I don’t want to give an opinion. I don’t have the facts or the knowledge and hearsay isn’t good. I can imagine when Jedediah’s group got there and not being able to talk to the people. ... In my opinion that added to the conflict.”

The site is about one mile north of Reedsport on Smith River Road, the area where

it is believed the killings took place. A cadaver dog recently signaled that remains were found at the site, Zybach said. The memorial will include a monument with the deceased’s names, along with a sign featuring historical reports of what occurred, including the 1828 account by Umpqua Chief Starnoose.

“No one knows there was a burial there,” Zybach said. “These were 15 men who were adventurers trying to make a living and explore. They were beaver trappers working for an American business and we are the Beaver State. The men deserve a memorial.”

MIXED FEELINGS

Not everyone agrees.

Phillips has mixed feelings about the memorial, she said. While she has no objection to the cemetery being marked and protected, the period in history is a dark one for Native Americans. “It’s complicated. On one hand, it is great when you are trying to solve a history puzzle and find an answer and have it recognized,” Phillips said, referring to recent access to data that helped home in on the location of the killings. “On the other hand, depending on what stories you believe, some of the men who worked for Smith were not very nice people. For Native people, that fur trading era was not a pleasant time. It’s all tied to all the very bad things that happened. Whether these guys intended it, they brought diseases, colonization, forced displacement, violence. It’s just tied up with a lot of very bad things.”

Doug Barrett, vice chair of the Confederated Tribes of the Coos, Lower Umpqua and Siuslaw Indians Tribal Council, said he will not attend the dedication. “I don’t support this,” Barrett said, noting he speaks for himself and not the tribe or tribal council. “They don’t mark the mass graves all over the coast where our ancestors are buried. Everybody wants to glorify Smith and all he did and the same with Lewis and Clark, but really, the damage they did to the tribes was irreversible.”