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HistoryLink File #8929

Frank, Billy, Jr. (1931-2014)

Billy Frank Jr. served as chair of the Northwest Indian Fisheries Commission (NWIFC) for most of its first 30 years. He committed his life to protecting his Nisqually people's traditional way of life and to protecting the endangered salmon whose survival is the focus of tribal life. Beginning with his first arrest as a teenager in 1945 for "illegal" fishing on his beloved Nisqually River, he became a leader of a civil disobedience movement that insisted on the treaty rights (the right to fish in "usual and accustomed places") guaranteed to Washington tribes more than a century before. The "fish-ins" and demonstrations Frank helped organize in the 1960s and 1970s, along with accompanying law suits, led to the Boldt decision of 1974, which restored to the federally recognized tribes the legal right to fish as they always had. Following the Boldt decision, Frank was a leader in the work to save the river and its fish. Billy Frank Jr., who was honored with national and international humanitarian awards, overcame personal tragedies to help save a precious resource, not only for his people, but for the broader society that was heedlessly destroying it.

From Confrontation to Cooperation: a Journey

“We aren’t going anywhere!” shouted Billy Frank Jr. It was a rallying cry. His Nisqually people and other Northwest tribes were determined not to assimilate into urban American, but to live as they had for centuries. Theirs is a life bound up with the rivers that flow from the mountains to Puget Sound, and the gentle land beside it -- and most of all, to a physical and spiritual connection with the salmon that have traveled from stream to river to ocean and back, from time immemorial.

Over the past 60 years the struggle of the Nisquallys and other Northwest tribes took on many dimensions -- legal, political, environmental, racial, and cultural -- but whatever the issue, whatever the fight, Billy Frank was near the center of the action.

The Nisquallys are a sovereign nation by law. Like other tribes, they are the nation’s first citizens. Although forced to withstand the land grabs and environmental depredations of the white society that surrounded and overwhelmed them, they became determined to claim and protect the few rights reserved by them under treaties with the United States.

For years, the State of Washington regarded the 1854 Treaty of Medicine Creek as an irrelevant nuisance. The State insisted that it could impose its fishing regulations on the tribes, notwithstanding the treaty. It tried to do so forcefully, destroying property and making hundreds of arrests. But the traditions and training passed on to Billy Frank Jr. by his father -- which in turn were taught to him by Billy's grandfather, and on into the past -- were ingrained. The tribes had given ground and shed blood over the years, but they were determined to fight for what was rightfully theirs.

A Nisqually Boyhood

Billy Frank Jr. was born in 1931, the son of long-lived parents. "Dad lived to 104 and Mom into her 90s," he recalled. Left unsaid was that he also expected to be around for a long while and, knowing that much still needed to be done to clean up the waters and save the salmon, he remained active and involved into his eighties, exuding the energy of a man with no thought of retirement.

"The people need to know the truth," he said, "but the government won't tell them the truth. The rivers and the Sound are still being poisoned, and now the state is cutting \$40 million from its fish and wildlife budget. I used to swim in the Nisqually River, but I wouldn't swim in it today" (Frank interview, February 2009).

Billy Frank had no way of knowing as a boy how crucial his role would become as a leader, resisting strong-arm tactics of state officials, providing a base of operations for Nisqually fishermen at Frank's Landing, and insisting that treaty rights were supreme over state law.

His training began, as his father's had, with stories of the land, and the river, and the salmon runs that provide much of the tribe's subsistence and livelihood. He described his father's life as a young boy:

"I can picture my dad riding on a horse with his dad. He'd be five or six years old, standing up on the horse's rump, holding on to his dad's shoulders. They'd be riding across the Muck Creek Prairie. The grass would be blowing. I know what it was like, because my dad did it with me when I was a little boy" (Wilkinson, 20-21).

The young son standing behind the father on horseback is a potent image for the sharing of tribal tradition, the passing on of stories and practices -- of how salmon are caught, cleaned, dried, smoked -- and celebrated. Of how habitat is nurtured. Of how things are done.

"We had everything back when Dad was a boy," Frank said. "The sound was close, only eight miles downriver. Dad would take a canoe down to the mud flats at low tide for the clams, the oysters, the geoducks. He'd always say, 'When the tide goes out, our table is set'" (Wilkinson, 22).

His father, Willie Frank -- born Qui-Lash-Kut -- called that time and place Paradise. The salmon runs were strong. The process of harvesting a share of the salmon runs and preserving the fish was passed down to Billy as it had been to his predecessors for the millennia his people had lived in the delta. The same was true for the wild berries and camas roots that had fed the Nisqually people through the years.

Billy Frank was first arrested in December 1945, when he was just 14. He'd set a net on the Nisqually River the night before to snare fish from the late chum run headed for the Muck Creek freshet which burst forth around that time every year. He hid his canoe under a fallen maple and arose early the next morning, while it was still dark, to claim and clean his catch. But while doing so, there came a shout: "You're under arrest!" Billy tried to

scramble away but two game wardens soon had him by the arms. "Leave me alone, goddamn it," he screamed, "I live here!" (Wilkinson). It was his first arrest. More than 50 arrests would follow over the years, as they would for many other tribe members.

Billy's formal education ended when he finished 9th grade at a junior high in nearby Olympia, but continued in the company of his fellow fishermen. He worked construction by day -- mostly highways and sewers -- and fished by night, suffering occasional rough treatment, arrest, and confiscation of his precious gear.

The Marines and After

After World War II and the population boom the Boeing Company had lured to Puget Sound, the paradise Billy Frank had grown up in began to change. Suburban subdivisions sprouted. The Northwest timber industry harvested trees by the tens of thousands. Runoff from newly barren land destroyed fish habitat. An urban mega-community, stretching from Everett to Olympia, grew. And so did arrests of Indian fishermen.

In 1952, at age 21, Frank fulfilled a dream and joined the Marines. He was proud of his two years in the corps, but in 1954 he returned to his roots -- fishing and the six acres of trust property along the river that his father had acquired in 1919. Frank's Landing, as it came to be known, became the family's base just two years after the Nisqually people were ousted from their reservation land in mid-winter of 1917 by the Army's expansion of Fort Lewis. The sudden eviction was hard on all and fatal for some. Willie's first wife, Josephine, died within a year of the removal.

Disappearing Land, Degraded Water

The story of the Nisqually, as with many native peoples, is one of increasing encroachment by a large, alien population with different values. The pristine river the tribe had depended on for centuries, and the land beside it, was taken away, in broad strokes.

The first and largest bite from traditional tribal territory came in the form of the federal government's treaties with Northwest tribes. The treaties were the work of Isaac Stevens (1818-1862), Superintendent of Indian Affairs and governor of the new Washington Territory (which included northern Idaho and western Montana). The treaties, drafted by Stevens and quickly consummated, secured virtually all the traditional tribal lands of the region for the United States, 100,000 square miles in all.

The first of the treaties was the Medicine Creek Treaty of 1854, with the Nisqually, Puyallup, and Squaxin tribes. Governor Stevens, a compact and determined man, arrived at the treaty site west of the Nisqually River with a fully drafted document. There was little discussion, none of it in the tribes' native language, and no negotiation. Stevens got all 2,240,000 acres, leaving the Nisqually people what their leader, Leschi, considered an insult: 1,280 acres on a bluff west of the river. None of the riverside land was included. The exchange was so unfair that the reservation was later expanded by President Franklin Pierce to 4,700 acres, on both sides of the river.

In return for the vast land grant, Stevens promised the tribes the one thing he knew they would insist on -- a clause in Article 3 granting them the right to take fish "at all usual and accustomed stations ... in common with the citizens of the Territory." The tribes were also to be paid \$32,000 by the United States over the ensuing 20 years.

A smaller but more painful land grab came years later during World War I, when Pierce County condemned the east bank portion of the remaining Nisqually reservation and deeded it to the Army to become part of Fort Lewis's 60,000 acres. The action was patently illegal. Treaty land could only be taken with Congress's consent, which had not been given. But tribal members -- "dispirited, disorganized, and dispossessed" (Wilkinson, 27) -- failed to challenge the suit and was forced to leave their abodes in mid-winter of 1917. A doubtful Congress ratified the taking years later.

The final insults were to fish habitat and survival, the result of runoff from extensive logging and development, and from the damming and diversion of the Nisqually River by the cities of Tacoma and Centralia. Diversion of water and the dams' off-and-on pulsing of the river's natural flow disrupted salmon migration, destroyed spawning habitat, and depleted oxygen the fish needed.

Protests and Tear Gas, Arrests and Litigation

Non-Indian salmon fishing soared after World War II. By the late 1950s there were hundreds of commercial gillnetters and purse seiners. Although non-Indian commercial fishermen caught salmon by the millions of tons in the Pacific and Puget Sound, ironically much of the public blame was attributed to "Indian lawlessness." In fact, the tribes, who fished only the rivers, caught just what was left over. By the state's own figures, Indians captured less than 5 percent of the harvestable salmon at the height of the fish wars. Even to catch that, "we had to go underground," Billy Frank recalled. "To survive, to continue our culture, we had to become an underground society" (Tizon).

The tribes claimed that the real culprits in the salmon's decline were commercial fishing, the dams, and logging. Research would eventually prove them right.

Journalist Alex Tizon summed up non-Indians attitudes toward Indians in Washington in an article commemorating the 25th anniversary of the Boldt decision: "For most of the twentieth century, white society did not look kindly upon Indians, when they looked upon them at all. They were viewed as a nuisance, a hindrance to progress. In the Northwest, tribes were widely seen as poaching communities -- lawless and primitive, skulking around in the dark" (Tizon).

Billy Frank and other tribal leaders said that the treaties gave them the right to fish as they always had, but the state insisted that its authority to regulate fish and game was the controlling law. Frank told stories "of having boats and nets confiscated, of being chased and tear-gassed, tackled, punched, pushed face-first into the mud, handcuffed and dragged soaking wet to the county jail" (Tizon). Like others before him and alongside him, Frank lived like an outlaw, fishing at night, always on the lookout for men in uniforms.

Throughout the 1960s, declining salmon runs and aggressive state policing forced militancy on the Puget Sound tribes. Their determination reflected broader changes in the country. In the African American and Latino communities, Martin Luther King and Caesar Chavez led movements pressing government for fairness and justice. Social beliefs and the very culture were changing.

Billy Frank was the public face and spokesman for the tribe's resistance, but in 1964, a bright, fiery young man named Hank Adams, an Assiniboine and Sioux from eastern Montana, showed up at Frank's Landing and became a key behind-the-scene worker, leading strategic and legal planning that complemented Frank's more public role. The tribes decided to go public with their struggle and attracted help from young people who broadened support; many camped out and watched over Nisqually fishing nets when tribal fishermen could not.

In 1964, the first “fish-in” was staged at Frank’s Landing. Later, the National Indian Youth Council organized a large demonstration in Olympia. The same year, Marlon Brando showed up for net fishing on the Puyallup River with tribal leader Bob Satiacum (1929-1991) and was arrested, but released and never tried. In October 1965 there were two skirmishes on the Nisqually. First, an Indian boat was spilled by state agents. Later there was an attempted raid on Frank’s Landing; officers tried to make arrests and a battle broke out, with paddles, sticks, and stones flying through the air.

The following spring, comedian and activist Dick Gregory showed up for a series of fish-ins and demonstrations. He was arrested, convicted, and served 40 days of a 90-day sentence. On his release, Gregory observed, “If more people went to jail for rights, fewer would go for wrongs” (Isely, 111).

“The changes in the law -- the Boldt decision -- never would have happened without the fish-ins,” Frank believed. (Frank interview, March 2009). “We’d gone up to see the U.S. Attorney to get him to protect out treaty rights,” but got no help. “Every day there was a fish-in -- on the Puyallup, the Green, the Nisqually, whenever the fish were running. One day we were drift-fishing along the Puyallup and there were these potato farmers, and they were cursing us and throwing potatoes at us. But we were never gonna quit. We were gonna stay here and fish” (Frank, 2).

Billy’s first wife, Norma, was “one of our great wives and great ladies on the watershed of the Nisqually.” Together the two raised a lot of Indian children -- other people’s kids. “Norma fought for our rights just like the other wives who put themselves on the line. When we were in jail they were on the river fishing” (Frank, 2).

In 1968 the situation became so threatening that the Unitarian Fellowship in Olympia sent a telegram to the Department of Justice saying that the federal government “has not exercised its responsibility” to the tribes. They were “appalled at the legal abuse and injustice exercised by state agencies and local courts” and expressed fear that “loss of life is more than a probability” (Layton).

Toward Vindication: the Boldt Decision

But the tide was turning. Hank Adams had organized the Olympia demonstration and much more. He had a hand in three film documentaries of the salmon crisis, attracted CBS correspondent Charles Kuralt to the Olympia demonstration, and sparked production of a highly regarded study prepared for the American Friends Service Committee and titled *Uncommon Controversy: Fishing Rights of the Muckleshoot, Puyallup, and Nisqually Indians*.

Perhaps most importantly, in 1966 Adams induced University of Washington law professor Ralph Johnson to teach a course in Indian law. “I came back to my office one day ... after teaching my class in property law,” recalled Johnson. “There were at least 15 Natives in my office. I could barely get in the door” (Wilkinson, 46). Johnson taught the course until his retirement in 1999. He was an important ally and his intellectual involvement was another step toward legitimacy.

In 1968, Yakama fisherman Richard Sohappy, a decorated veteran, and one of his relatives were arrested by Oregon officials for gillnetting on the Columbia River. Professor Johnson and others filed *Sohappy v. Smith* in federal court in Portland. The Justice Department, concerned about the relentless prosecution by states of native treaty fishermen, filed its own suit, *United States v. Oregon*. The two cases were consolidated and assigned to U.S. District Court Judge Robert C. Belloni, who ruled that the treaties with Columbia River tribes were valid and that the tribes were entitled to a “fair share” of fish, 302 F. Supp. 899 (1969). It was a huge victory, but

Judge Belloni stopped short of specifying what the tribes' share might be.

With arrests and strife between tribal fishermen and state fish and game officials continuing in Washington, on September 18, 1970, the Justice Department filed suit in *United States v. Washington*. The suit asked for declaratory relief for treaties covering areas west of the Cascade Mountains and north of the Columbia River drainage area, including the Puget Sound and Olympic Peninsula watersheds.

The tribes' situation seemed to be brightening. With the U.S. committed to standing behind the treaties, funding for expert witnesses was assured, as well as a cadre of excellent government lawyers. The case was assigned to Judge George Hugo Boldt (1903-1984), a tough law-and-order jurist. The trial began on August 27, 1973. Judge Boldt held court six days a week including on the Labor Day holiday. Forty-nine experts and tribal members testified, among them Billy Frank Jr. and his then-95-year-old father.

The state, led by then-Attorney General Slade Gorton (b. 1928), held firm to its position that native treaty fishermen must be treated like any other citizens and were fully subject to state regulation. The tribes and the federal government, citing *United States v. Winans*, 198 U.S. 380 (1905), and other precedent, said that treaty provisions, having been drafted by the government in its own language, must be construed as they would have been understood by the tribes.

The decision in *United States v. Washington*, 384 F.Supp. 312 (1974), issued by Judge Boldt on February 12, 1974, was a thunderous victory for the tribes. The treaties were declared the supreme law of the land and trumped state law. Judge Boldt held that the government's promise to secure the fisheries for the tribes was central to the treaty-making process and that the tribes had an original right to the fish, which the treaty extended to white settlers. It was not for the state to tell the tribes how to manage something that had always belonged to them. The tribes' right to fish at "all usual and accustomed grounds and stations" included off-reservations sites, as well as their diminished lands. The right to fish extended not just to the tribes but to each tribal member.

Finally, the judge ordered the state to take action to limit fishing by non-Indians when needed for conservation purposes. This last was an embarrassment to the state. Until Judge Boldt's ruling, the tribes had been the principal focus of state enforcement.

With its difficult beginnings -- and the jailings, the "fish-ins" and demonstrations of the 1960s and 1970s -- it's hard to imagine the transformative impact of the Boldt decision, which perhaps uniquely in American legal history came to be known by the name of the judge who issued it. The oft-arrested and jailed Billy Frank Jr., once branded a renegade for the civil disobedience he led, blazed a path to the cases that turned it all around. It may have been hard for some to imagine that Frank would ultimately become one of the most respected people in the state.

Restoring the Resource

The Boldt decision was a grand slam home run for Billy Frank and Washington's fishing treaty tribes, but there was now an immense amount of work to do. At first, non-native fishermen refused to obey the District Court's occasional bans on non-Treaty fishing and the Washington Department of Fisheries and refused to enforce them. Outlaw fisheries proliferated, resulting in scores of enforcement orders from Judge Boldt, who was reviled, hung in effigy, and the subject of angry bumper stickers throughout Western Washington. During this time, hundreds of tons of salmon were illegally harvested by non-natives in and around Puget Sound -- so much so that in 1979, the U.S. Supreme Court, in a follow-on decision, likened the state's resistance to the Boldt decision to the

South's unyielding response to desegregation.

The tribes' immense win placed a huge burden on them. They knew the state would be looking over their shoulders. "[Judge Boldt] gave us the opportunity to make our own regulations, our own management systems," said Frank. "[That's] a responsibility we have" (Wilkinson, 62).

An immediate result of that responsibility was Frank's decision to give up drinking, as friends and family had urged him to do. His beloved niece Valerie, bright and devoted to the cause, had pleaded with him before her drowning death in the river at age 20: "Uncle," she said, "you can change the world if you would just *stop*" (Wilkinson, 63). It took the weight of the Boldt decision -- a ruling for the ages -- for Frank to honor fully his responsibility to family and tribe. His sobriety never wavered through tragedy. In 1977, he lost his daughter Maureen and his granddaughter Cabaqhud to a car wreck. In 2001, he lost his second wife, Sue Crystal, then age 48, to kidney cancer. She was a brilliant lawyer, advisor to governors, lawyer for several tribes, and mother of their son Willie.

Sue once had this to say about her husband: "Being with Billy is like floating on a steady, easy river. Billy's life is turbulent, but Billy is not. He's the happiest person I know. He's completely at peace with himself" (Wilkinson, 64).

Legacies and Work Continuing

Billy Frank Jr. chaired the Northwest Indian Fisheries Commission for most of the final 30 years of his life. NWIFC, formed following the Boldt decision to aid the tribes in exercising the fisheries management responsibilities that the decision had returned to them, served the 20 Western Washington treaty tribes with a central office in Olympia and satellite offices in Mt. Vernon and Forks. Its staff included fishery and shellfish biologists, biometricians, habitat analysts and managers, fishery geneticists, and much more. It covered all of Puget Sound as well as coastal locations.

Journalist Tim Egan wrote, "When a bunch of Really Important People get together in a conference room, you can always tell Mr. Frank, even from afar. Amid the governors and corporate executives, all tasseled loafers and silk ties, he's the one with the long pony tail, the gold salmon medallion, the open-necked shirt. And he's the one with the scars -- nicks, cuts and slash marks -- from a lifetime of being harassed by people who don't like Indians and from an all-season outdoor life" (Egan).

Billy Frank became a sought-after speaker -- warm, passionate, and candid. He was covered with honors by many organizations, but his mission remained the same as always -- save the resource.

He was involved in the Nisqually Tribe's work to restore the Nisqually River Delta. In conjunction with the federal government, which manages the Nisqually National Wildlife Refuge, the tribe worked for removal of the dike system that held back seawater. The tribe restored 140 acres of its own land, which combined with more than 700 acres of land in the federal wildlife refuge, from which dikes were removed in 2009, to become prime habitat for endangered salmon.

Thanks to the redress granted by the Boldt decision, Billy Frank's focus shifted from confrontation to cooperation. Following the Supreme Court's upholding of the Boldt decision in 1979, the NWIFC and the state had to determine how they were going to co-manage the fisheries they shared jurisdiction over. A long process of creating co-management guidelines and establishing trust between the tribes and state officials began with the

development Puget Sound Salmon Management Plan in the early 1980s. With Frank at the helm, the NWIFC established working relationships with state agencies and other non-Indian groups to manage fisheries, restore and protect habitat, and protect Indian treaty rights.

In monthly articles for *NWIFC News*, the commission's newsletter, Frank addressed issues facing Washington fisheries. In 2007, after Judge Ricardo Martinez handed down a summary ruling in the culverts case (litigation over repairing culverts under state roads that are impeding salmon), he wrote that the tribes had filed the suit because, "We simply could not wait the 100 years that the state estimated it would take to fix the culverts. That would have spelled the end of the salmon" (NWIFC website). Writing in 2006 about the creation of the Puget Sound Partnership, Frank threw his support behind the measure: "It will be no easy task to turn the tide of disrespectful treatment of the Puget Sound. Governor Christine Gregoire has demonstrated great courage in standing up on this issue, and I, for one, will do all I can to help it become a great success. I hope you will, too" (NWIFC website). Frank also discussed Washington's Municipal Water Law and how the economy affected fisheries recovery efforts.

Frank was often the voice of the commission to the public. Newspapers quoted him repeatedly in articles on fisheries issues in the Northwest. He wrote editorials relating to treaty shellfish rights, water rights, and myriad other issues. He served on the leadership council of the Puget Sound Partnership from its inception in 2005.

In March 2011, in honor of Frank's 80th birthday, Salmon Defense, a non-profit organization established by Western Washington's treaty tribes to advocate for salmon, established the Billy Frank Jr. Endowment for Salmon, "to honor and create permanence and action to the vision and work of Billy Frank Jr." (Salmon Defense website). The endowment was to fund scholarships, restoration projects, litigation, educational programs, and an annual award to honor "individuals or organizations that have demonstrated leadership and commitment to the environment through collaborative problem solving" (Salmon Defense website).

Billy Frank was honored with countless awards for his decades-long fight for justice and environmental preservation. They include the Common Cause Award for Human Rights Efforts, the Albert Schweitzer Prize for Humanitarianism (past winners of which include President Jimmy Carter, former Surgeon General C. Everett Koop, and author Norman Cousins), the American Indian Distinguished Service Award, the 2006 Wallace Stegner Award, and the Washington State Environmental Excellence Award.

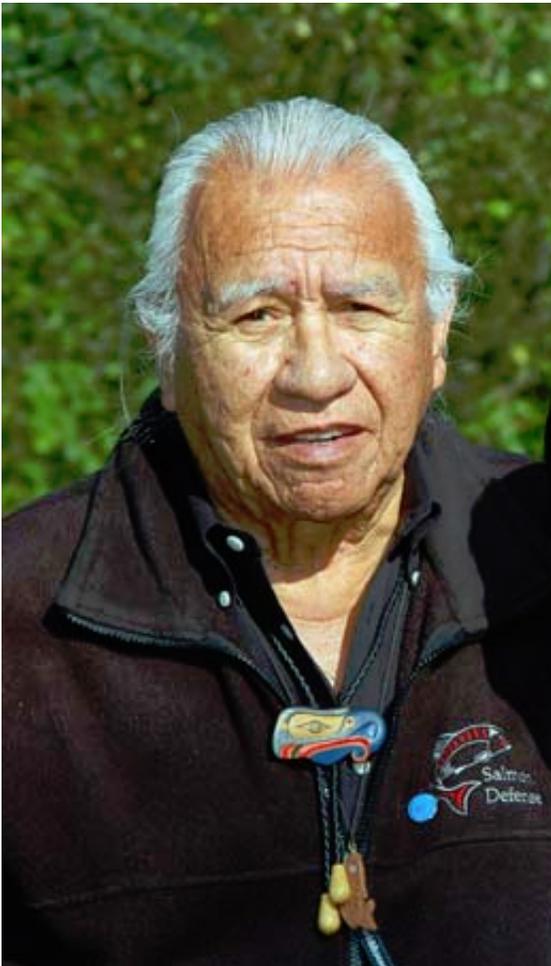
Billy Frank Jr. died on May 5, 2014, at the age of 83.

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Note: This essay was updated on March 30, 2011, and on May 5, 2014. By Robert O. Marritz, March 10, 2009



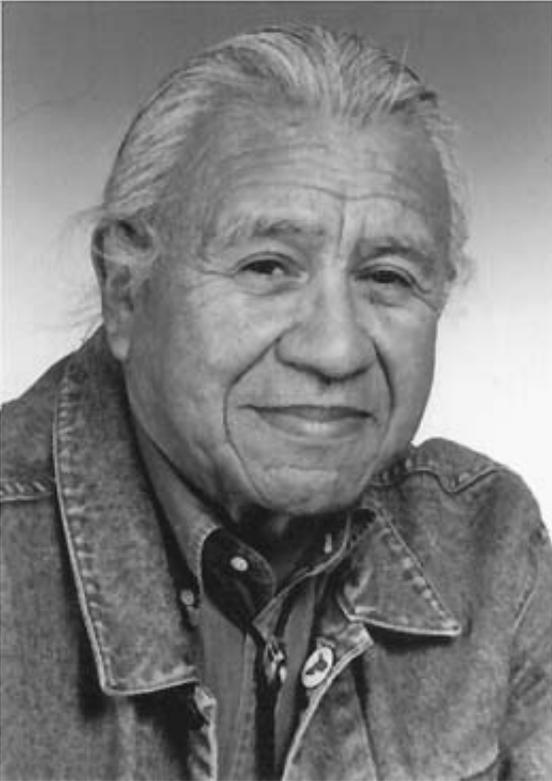
Billy Frank Jr. (1931-2014), 2008

Courtesy Northwest Indian Fisheries Commission



Billy Frank Jr. (1931-2014) at Treaty Tree

Courtesy Northwest Indian Fisheries Commission



Billy Frank Jr. (1931-2014)

Courtesy Northwest Indian Fisheries Commission



Actor Marlon Brando and Puyallup tribal leader Bob Satiacum just before Brando's arrest during a fish-in, March 2, 1964

Courtesy Seattle Post-Intelligencer



Billy Frank Jr. (1931-2014)

Courtesy Northwest Indian Fisheries Commission



Billy Frank Jr. (1931-2014) getting arrested, Olympia

Courtesy Northwest Indian Fisheries Commission

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