

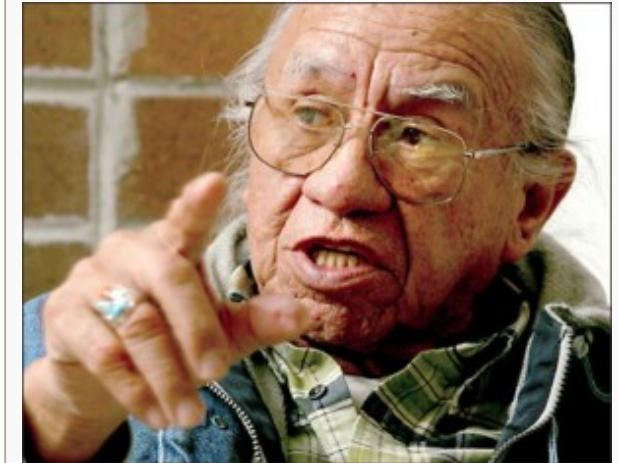
## Billy Frank Jr.: Appreciating a Northwest civil rights legend

By Joel  
Connelly

Billy Frank Jr., was once considered an outlaw, poacher and scofflaw, arrested some 50 times — starting at the age of 14— for “illegally” fishing in waters where he had his home on the Nisqually River.

When his life ended Monday, at the age of 83, Frank had become a preeminent Washington civil rights leader, a Native American who replaced confrontation with cooperation in restoring the salmon runs that help define the Pacific Northwest.

“When a bunch of Really Important People get together in a conference room,” author Timothy Egan once wrote, “you can always tell Mr. Frank even from afar. Amid the government and corporate executives, all tasseled loafers and silk ties, he’s the one with the long pony tail, the gold salmon medallion, and the open necked shirt.



Bill Frank Jr. died Monday. Photo: Grant M. Haller/Seattle Post-Intelligencer

“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.”

It’s a visage of Billy Frank seen just a week ago, when tribal leaders met in Suquamish with U.S. Interior Secretary Sally Jewell and U.S. Rep. Derek Kilmer, D-Wash.

“When Billy spoke, you listened: We saw that firsthand just last week when he commanded a room that included tribal leaders, fisheries officials and the Secretary of the Interior,” Kilmer recalled Monday.

Frank had tough words for the game wardens who arrested him at age 14: “Leave me alone, goddamn it! I live here.”

He was speaking not only to that time and place, but also to the 1854 Treaty of Medicine Creek, which took vast swaths of land from Indians but did guarantee them the right to take fish “at all usual and accustomed stations . . . in common with the citizens of the territory.”

Civil disobedience has become as American as apple pie. As the state scoffed at “usual and accustomed,” Frank refused to be cowed, and fishing protests of the 1960’s became THE civil rights issue of the region. Marlon Brando was arrested on the Nisqually. So was comedian Dick Gregory, who was jailed.

Frank gave clear voice to the confrontations. “He said simply, ‘Treaties are the word of America, and America should keep its word,’ ” said former Gov. Mike Lowry.

A seminal moment in Northwest history came in 1974, when conservative U.S. District Judge George Boldt ruled for the Native Americans, that treaty Indians were entitled to 50 percent of the salmon catch and could fish in “all usual and accustomed grounds and stations.”

Appeals, politician grandstanding, and protests followed: Fishing boats tried to blockade President Gerald Ford’s

Coast Guard cutter during a 1976 waterfront rally in Seattle.

But Frank took the debate to a new level, namely that white and Indian fishers shared a common peril — decimation of salmon runs.

“He was a great Native American, but became a great environmentalist,” Lowry said. “He explained that the real reason salmon were disappearing was the overcutting of forests, pollution and the silting of streams, and that was the real danger to those for whom fishing was a way of life.

“He understood and articulated that habitat made salmon possible. He presented this so well that you could see Billy changing people by the way he made his presentation.”

Not bad for a guy with a ninth-grade education. But Billy Frank had a way about him. He made friends, one of the first being powerful longtime (1944-80) Sen. Warren G. Magnuson. “He would say that it was time to stop fighting, sit down and start working together,” said Spokane attorney Tom Keefe, a onetime Maggie aide.

Keefe recalled sitting with Frank along the Hoh River, as Frank thought out loud: “What we have wasted. We need to focus on habitat, where the salmon are born, where they grow up, how they go to sea and the rivers to which they return.”

State Sen. Kevin Ranker, D-Orcas, joked on his Facebook page about Frank the friend — the friend with a message.

“I will sincerely miss his wisdom, advice (solicited or not), his incredible humor and his hugs,” said Ranker. “Billy Frank’s incredible influence on the Salmon Nation, our state and the United States will be everlasting.”

The onetime renegade became a much-honored citizen. “I’m thankful Billy was here to see the 2014 Legislature pass a bill helping to overturn convictions from treaty protests: Billy was right on this issue and the state owed this gesture of justice to him and others,” said Gov. Jay Inslee.

Frank headed the Northwest Indian Fisheries Commission for more than 30 years. He won an Albert Schweitzer Humanitarian Award, an American Indian Distinguished Service Award and the 2006 Wallace Stegner Award.

“Today, because of the Boldt Decision, the state and tribes are partners in the management and preservation of resources that are foundational to the economy of the state,” Sen. Maria Cantwell, D-Wash., said in a tribute to Frank.

But the foundation for the Boldt Decision was laid in the protests and arrests of the 1960’s, and the Indian leader who insisted that America keeps his word.

Frank lived to see such benchmarks as dikes coming down at the mouth of the Nisqually River, with estuary habitat restored where salmon can grow up. He lobbied to get millions invested in restoring Puget Sound and upgrading streamside habitat.

Billy Frank was a man of singular focus. Keefe once asked why he didn’t immerse himself in other problems of Indian Country, to which Frank replied:

“Thomas, I know there are other problems, but the one I know about is the salmon, and when these politicians see me coming I want them to know that’s what I am here to talk about.”