

Billy Frank Jr. at his home, Frank's Landing, on the Nisqually River near Olympia.



River Revolutionary

BILLY FRANK JR. IS THE CONSCIENCE OF SALMON COUNTRY BY SHAUNNA MCCOVEY

Honoring Our Leaders

In 2003, Ecotrust honored Billy Frank Jr. with the Indigenous Leadership Award. The award celebrates Tribal and First Nations leaders dedicated to improving the social, economic, political and environmental conditions of their homelands.

On November 13, Ecotrust will recognize five new leaders at a ceremony and dinner. Please join us. To purchase tickets, visit ecotrust.org/indigenousleaders.

When you grow up fishing for salmon on Northern California's Klamath River, where I was raised, you often hear the name "Billy Frank Jr." For people back home, he is a legend—someone who stood up, not just for his people's right to fish the Nisqually River, but for the salmon themselves. But many still don't know the entire story.

Fortunately, a new biography, *Where the Salmon Run*, published by the Washington State Heritage Center, traces his life story, moving from his childhood into the contentious 1960s and 1970s, when Frank was an activist and renegade, fighting to uphold tribal fishing rights. During those years, a period known as the “Fish Wars,” he was arrested more than 50 times. His unwillingness to give up, along with others, eventually spawned historic reform. The 1974 decision from U.S. District Court Judge George Boldt affirmed twenty western Washington tribes’ treaty rights to fish and to co-manage salmon. Today, Frank leads from within the system, as the chairman of the Northwest Indian Fisheries Commission (NWIFC), winner of the Albert Schweitzer Prize for humanitarianism, among many other awards, and one of our country’s most sincere and effective voices for healthy watersheds, clean water and flourishing salmon populations.

I recently had the honor of visiting with Frank in Olympia, Washington, near his home on the Nisqually River. He greeted me with a big, loving hug and a wholehearted laugh

that jumped right into my heart. At 81, he is as handsome and charismatic as I imagine he was at age 14, when he was first arrested for catching salmon on the banks of the Nisqually by Washington State police officers.

Throughout our conversation, he talked about the importance of partnerships, patience and deep commitment. He joked that that very morning, “One of the boys up at Nisqually says, ‘Hey Billy, what are you going to talk about today?’ He said, ‘I’ve heard everything you’ve talked about.’ And I said, ‘I’m gonna tell it the same as I did 50 years ago. I keep telling it over and over, how important the salmon is to our people.’”

That is why telling Frank’s story is so important: It shows that perseverance and focus can bring about change, and that food is not just a substance to fill our stomachs; it can be the sinew that connects people to place, history and their sense of self.

These are some excerpts from my conversation with Frank, edited for brevity and clarity.

“You have to give a lifetime to what I’m talking about. You can’t just be here today and gone tomorrow. You have to tell this story of change continually for the rest of your life.”



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Salmon is who we are.

“It’s so important that we have our salmon. That’s who we are. We’re salmon people. We ate salmon all our lives. We smoke him. We dry him. We put him in jars. We depend on him. We have a big ceremony when he comes back. We draw pictures about him. We talk about him all the time.

We try to educate our younger people because we’ve got to change what’s going on. Right now, we’re going down. There hasn’t been no change. And there ain’t gonna be no more salmon if we keep going down. But if we could get a change, then the salmon is going to come back. We’ll see it come back in the next hundred years. We’ll [have to] work on it every day.

That’s what I tell our national Indian kids: ‘I need you guys to continue to do what you’re doing in natural resources. Don’t get off track and start going this way or that way. We need environmental engineers. We need all the skills of the professional world to protect this watershed of the Puget Sound. Commit yourself to a life.’”

I talked to the general.

“I went over and talked to the general [at Fort Stephens]. ‘I know what your mission is,’ I said. ‘You protect all of us. You train troops here. But you don’t know what our mission is—Nisqually Tribe.’ I said, ‘We protect everything on this watershed, all of our salmon and all of the animals.’

His troops were shooting from Mt. Rainier over to the impact area across the river, and you could hear the rounds go. He was driving his tanks through the river. And he was blowing up our spawning beds. Just out of hand, but he didn’t know any better. He’s a war guy. And he said, ‘I’m gonna quit doing that. We’re going to build bridges. We’re not gonna drive tanks [through the river] anymore. We’re not gonna shoot over that reservation. We’re gonna work with you side by side.’ And they are today. That’s a big step for all of us. We’re stepping forward, very slow and very effective. These are things that have to be done in our time, so we’re doing it.”

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The Nisqually: People, Land and River

The 81-mile-long Nisqually River, home to five native salmon species, begins on the southern side of Mt. Rainier, flows west through the Nisqually Indian Reservation and empties into the Puget Sound just a few miles southwest of Fort Lewis. The Nisqually Land Trust, established in 1989 to protect wildlife habitat from rapid population growth, now conserves and restores more than 3,400 acres in the watershed.

The Nisqually Reservation is made up of 5,000 acres on both sides of the river. The northeast portion (3,300 acres) is under the control of Fort Lewis military base and serves as an impact area. The remaining portion is in a combination of tribal ownership, private Indian allotments, and non-Indian ownership.

Frank’s Landing, where Billy Frank Jr. was born, raised and fought many battles of the Fish Wars, is outside the Nisqually Reservation, just before the river heads into a National Wildlife Refuge that carries it into the Puget Sound.

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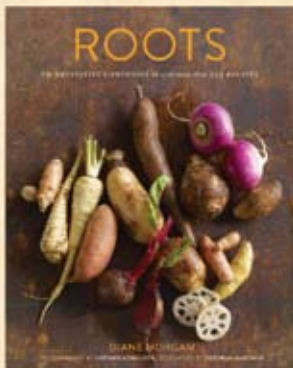
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Our goal is zero pollution.

“I wrote the plan for [restoring] the Nisqually River, and for 40 years, we [with the Nisqually Land Trust] put the Nisqually River watershed together, from the mountain to the sea. Now, we’ve just taken the dikes out. We have built in-stream flows; all of our springs are active. That river’s the best I’ve ever seen it.

But now our salmon are migrating out of the river right here, and they don’t get to the Narrows Bridge, which is 20 miles down the [Puget] Sound. They just swim this 20-mile stretch and they die. There’s so much pollution in the water. We have them all monitored and tagged and everything.

I’m on a partnership council, so I brought up [the goal of] zero discharge to the council, and they didn’t go for it. ‘Zero discharge,’ I said, ‘is only a goal that goes out here a hundred years. And what you do is you’re working on it.’ Like I’m working right now with the army, here. Fort Lewis has got a pipe that goes out in the Puget Sound, right in the mouth of the Nisqually River, and that’s their sewer system that goes out in the Sound. So what I tell them is, ‘We’ve got to get rid of that great big giant pipe spitting sewer out there.’ How do you do that? We redo this secondary treatment plant at Fort Lewis.”

You have to give a lifetime.

“The directors of the federal government, the directors of the state of Washington, they’ve retired. And I’ve watched them. I went to their retirement ceremonies. They’ve all left. They’ve left us with poison. Us tribes, we can’t leave. The Lummi are there. Makah there. Quinault. Duwamish. Nisqually. We can’t move where the sunshine is or nothing. This is our home here, so we got to stay here with the poison. That’s not a good documentary for the people who run this country, but that’s what happened.

But we’re on a course; we’ve been on a course; we’re trying to make change. And we will make that change because

we have to survive. For our children, our grandchildren, and all of us together.

You know, you have to give a lifetime to what I'm talking about. You can't just be here today and gone tomorrow. You have to tell this story of change continually for the rest of your life.... This is a big giant picture that we're talking about. And it isn't no easy one, and it's not gonna be done overnight. There have to be increments of change. We'll be way out—100 years of planting trees, getting our watersheds back, getting our oceans clean...but we're gonna do it. We've got to do it.”
eP

Shaunna McCovey is the Tribal Affairs Policy Associate at Ecotrust. McCovey, a member of the Yurok Tribe of Northern California, grew up on the Klamath River across from the old village of Kepel.



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A large photograph of a chef with a mustache, wearing a black cap with 'chef' written on it and a black shirt with the Oregon Culinary Institute logo. He is holding a large, vibrant red rooster. The background is dark.

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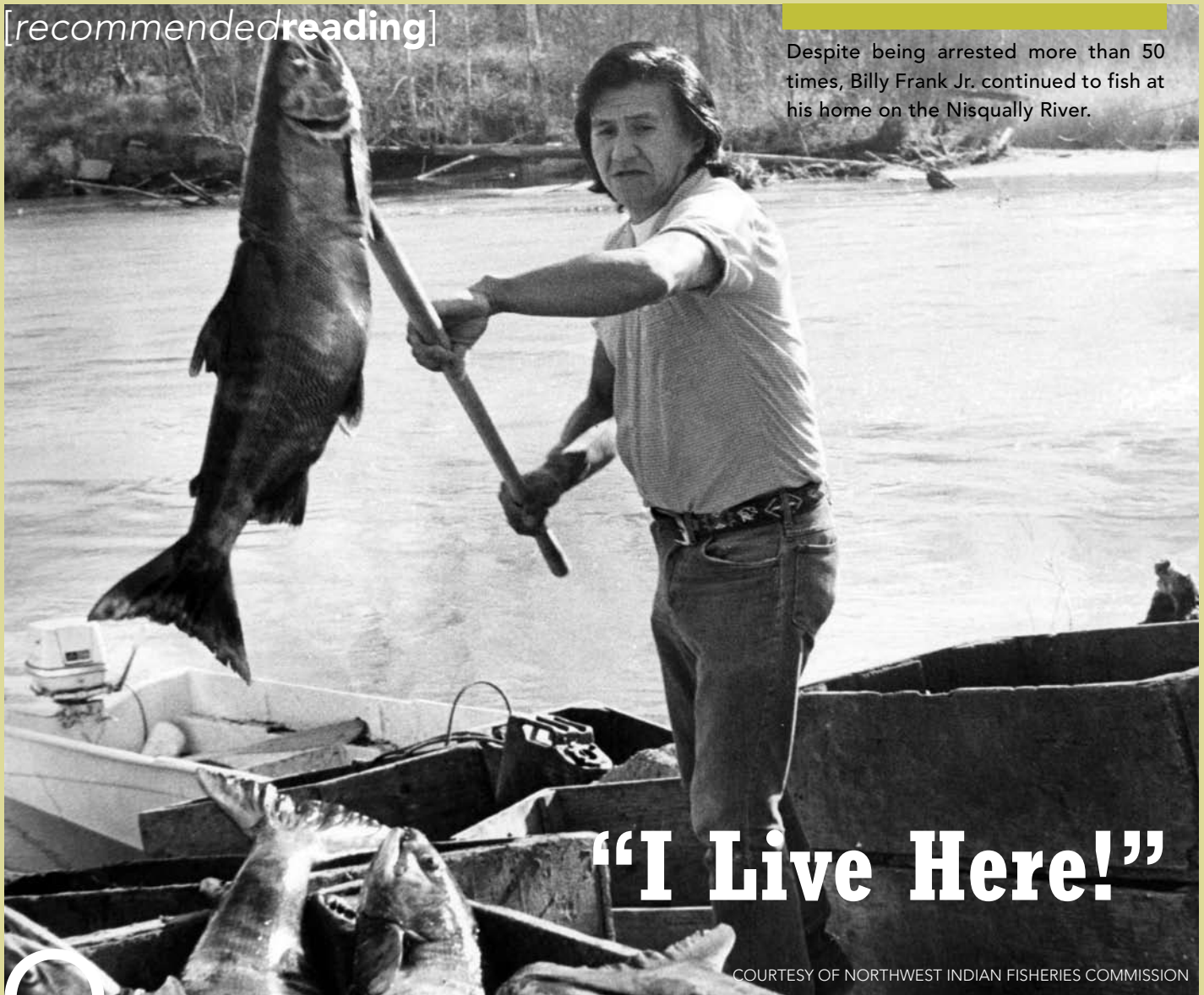
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[recommended reading]

Despite being arrested more than 50 times, Billy Frank Jr. continued to fish at his home on the Nisqually River.



“I Live Here!”

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One day in the winter of 1945, as the temperature hovered in the mid-forties, Billy Frank Jr. became a fighter. Along the Nisqually River, Billy pulled thrashing and squirming steelhead and dog salmon from his fifty-foot net. To avoid the keen eyes of game wardens, he'd set his net in the river the night before. The downed branches of a fallen maple covered his canoe perfectly. But in the stillness of those early-morning hours, as he diligently butchered the chum, a yell pierced the silence. For Billy, life would never be the same.

“You’re under arrest!” state agents shouted with flashlights in hand.

“Leave me alone, goddamn it. I fish here. I live here!” Billy fired back.

That morning, locked in a physical hold by game wardens, a warrior emerged. Billy knew he'd have to fight for his fishing right himself, the culture and heritage he knew. “I thought nobody protects us Indians,” Billy says. “The state of Washington, they protect their sportsmen, their commercial fishermen and everybody. But nobody protects us Indians, not even our tribe. They weren’t capable of the infrastructure to take care of us, take care of us in the political sense of legal and policy and

technical. We never had no technical people. We never had no science people on the river. We had nothing. And I always thought, Jesus, we need somebody to be out there shaking their fist and saying, “Hey, we live here!”

Even with the fishing struggle, ask Billy about his childhood, and it is other memories that stick. He remembers the scents and ceremonies of salmon bakes, placing the fish on skewers and laying them down alongside a fire where they'd bake for hours. He remembers scavenging the foothills for Indian medicine, “healing medicine that is still around the country. We go up to the mountain every year in the month of September and pick huckleberries on this side of Mount Adams.” He can hear the sound of racing horse hooves reverberating across the prairie. He can see himself standing on the back of a galloping horse, clasping onto his father’s shoulders as they charge over grassland around Puget Sound. The patriarch meant everything to the boy; the moment would prove a metaphor for life. By holding onto the beliefs of his ancestors, Billy learned to rise above an impossibly bumpy world.

Excerpted from *Where the Salmon Run* by Trova Heffernan, University of Washington Press, Seattle, 2012.