

Chief Johnny Jackson
Radical Elders Series

Chief Johnny Jackson Oral History (excerpt)
Or Hist 6208

JJ = Johnny Jackson

PH = Piper Hackett

PH: You mentioned feeling that this is your home on the river [Lyle Point, Washington], and you don't want to leave. Didn't the government serve you an eviction notice...?What was that about?

JJ: Yeah. They wanted me to move out of here and go back to the reservation. They wanted my uncle, David Sohappy, to move out from down there, and go back to the reservation, because they wanted control over this [land]. They felt that if I left here, then they could come around and tell somebody else they could use it until time the fish would come, then I could go ahead and come back and use it again. They used to [burn?] all these buildings down 'til I came here, and I fought to stop it and I stopped it. Because this used to be a village and they never paid for it. What I've gathered from my elders, they never did pay for this. They paid for Bonneville, fifty-thousand. But we've never seen it. There was nothing we've seen that replaced the drying houses and sheds and stuff that they took out of here. The homes. Some people lived here year round. They took them out and told them that they were going to replace them, and promised them a lot, which didn't happen.

PH: The government actually took houses down and took drying sheds down?

JJ: Yeah, because they said they were going to be flooded.

PH: From Bonneville.

JJ: Mm-hmm.

PH: So the people left and they never replaced them.

JJ: Uh-huh....

PH: So when the government gave you that eviction notice, did they send it to you? Did they bring it to you personally? How did you get that?

JJ: Well, they sent me letters, and they made noise saying that they were going to come down. They said they were going to come and if I was not here, they were going to bulldoze me out of here, make me leave. But when they come down here and looked at it, they said they changed their mind because there's too many big boulders here around my house. My house sits on boulders. So if they were going to doze this out, they'd have to push these big boulders out of the way too. But that's part of control. [pause]

I thought a lot about it, and one day I was flying to Reno, Nevada for a meeting, and I fell asleep on that plane, and I was thinking about my uncle and this place here. How we fought for it, argued for it, raised money by having salmon bakes to pay a lawyer to fight to protect this place, protect our right to stay here. I fell asleep, and in my sleep, this person told me, they says, "You have to wake up and look around you and look at the other people, then you're going to get your answer. If you don't, then they're going to control you and they're going to tell you how to live and tell you what you can do and what you can't do, what you can have and what you can't have. But if you look around you and look at the other people who had the same kind of struggles and they pulled themselves out of it, then you're going to be able to stand up and tell your people how to stand up." When I got down to Reno and I got off and I was waiting for my ride to the place where I was supposed to meet, I seen a little Black boy walk up and walk by. He was looking at me smiling and he walked over and come back, and he started standing around, looking outside in front of me. And I says, "That's what that dream was telling me to look at. That little Black boy. They struggled and they fought for their rights and they got it." They used to control them. They'd tell them where they could eat or they'd tell them where they could sit. They could tell them where they could be or where they

couldn't be. But they fought for it and they won. I said, "Now they're trying to tell me where I can be and where I can't be, and what I can have and what I can't have." So I just thought, I think I'm looking at the example and I'm going to analyze it and I'm going to walk with what I feel is right for my people. And I did.

I'm going to start telling you about the river of my people, this land and our way of life, our rights. There's a great misunderstanding by a lot of people, white people and other governmental people, with both the state and the federal government and other groups, on what was in the treaties when the treaties were signed. What they look at and what they understand is that our people came together with the white man, the soldiers and the cavalry and the governors and they says, "We're going to write up a treaty and this is what it's going to be, and this is how it's going to be. And you put your mark on there and sign it and that's going to be it. We're going to give you this, we're going to give you that, and this is what you're going to have to live by. And this is how you're going to have to live." But that's not so. That's not the way that we understood it, that's not the way our ancestors understood it.

We are river people along this river. Our ancestors are, on both sides of this river, our people are buried, on both sides of this river, up on the mountains and in the mountains, along the rivers, in many places. Many of the places that I discuss with the white man that wants to develop or do something, or log in certain areas, like over there in Oregon. He does not understand when we say, "We don't want you logging or doing anything there." It all falls back to when the treaties were signed, what was understood in that treaty and how was it understood and what all was there. How did the people look at it? How native people in that time [viewed it] when the treaty was signed. The understanding they had is they were reserving and keeping the rights that they always had and their way of life, the way they always had it. Because my people weren't educated in that time, they couldn't read or write, and they only understood what was interpreted to them and what they said was interpreted back in the agreements that they made with the white man. And the government in a way is looking at it, and looking at the Indian people as sort of in the puppet way. Saying that, "We come to you tribes one on one, all along, all over and we make these treaties with you. And what these treaties say and what they have is going to be understood that the treaties with these people or those

people.” To me, I don’t look at it that way. I’ve always constantly got my back up against the wall or something about my people or someone, some of my people, for their right to fish, to hunt, or to go out and gather their foods, for our water, our mountains, the land is sacred to us, to protect it....

But they fail to realize that they made treaties with our people in Walla Walla. The reserved rights that the people reserved for themselves, were the things that they’ve always done, the culture they always had, the way of life that they’ve always had. And fishing was one of them, fishing and hunting. They never asked anyone where to go hunting or go fishing. They never asked anyone when they could go fishing. The same way with hunting. They lived off of the land and they lived off of the river. So therefore when the white man decides he’s going to start bringing up new rules and regulations, and feel that the reserved rights should be diminished, that it’s time for them to change, that’s where he’s wrong. Because we’ve given up enough, and if the government, if the agents, the Bureau of Indian Affairs and the tribal councils, do not want to assist and help protect those rights, then we will stand up.

And that’s why I stood up. I didn’t want to see my people going to jail, or pay[ing] for something that they didn’t have to, something that we’ve always had here. Something that the Creator had given us, put here on this earth for us to take care of and use. The Creator’s words were, “I have given you this. You take care of it and you use it, for if you don’t use it anymore, meaning you don’t need it, I will take it from you.” Fish was part of our religion and our way of life. We always gave thanks to the Creator for the fish, same way with hunting. It was very hard for the white man to understand. He felt that we could change. He felt that we could do away with this law that we have, and forget it and live by his laws, a law that the Creator had given us that we’d always lived by and followed. We cannot do that. So when they come and ask me to stop fishing or stop hunting, that’s violating my law. The Creator didn’t tell me that I had to go and listen to a white man, just because he went and made mistakes and depleted the fish.

I don’t own no dams, or I don’t own no big industries that pollute. I don’t own no corporations that pollute – those are what pollutes the rivers, those are what destroys the fish and the habitat, and endangers the ways of the people’s lives. Because once they

build these [dams] they don't know how to manage them to where they can keep them clean, and keep the environment clean. Then they expect me to sit back and ignore that. I can't do that because I have to leave something for the children yet unborn. I have to protect his rights and I have to protect the river. I have to protect these mountains and what we have there. So if I keep my mouth shut and I don't stand up and I feel that it should be taken care of [by] the government, let the government take care of it – then I'm saying it's alright for them to go ahead and do that. And I will not shut up....

When my people were taken away, over the fishing, they were put in prison. I felt that it was not time for me to sit still. When The Dalles Dam was finished and the government felt that it was time to start changing the land in the fishing areas, for his needs and for the needs of his people, so that he could make more money off of it, it was time for me to stand up and let him know that I disapproved. It's time to let him [the government] know that many of the places along this river belonged to my people in the beginning and they were never paid for. Not even the right of ways of these highways and these railroads that have gone through. Yet today, our people have sacred sites, the cemeteries, that they're still standing up and having a hard time protecting. And it still comes back to where I have to stand up and speak out for these people of unrest. Lyle Point, Division sites of Juniper Point, our land base for our food chain, our waterways, our springs. All this that was important to us. We have a song for each one of these items that I'm talking about, when we wish upon somebody, we sing about these things. When these songs are sang, it's the meaning of particular things that the Creator had given us.

A lot of times they ask me why I disagree, [why] I could not be forward and let things change, and be reasonable, and accept what they want to do here. I almost died when I went in the service, with a sickness and a disease that I didn't even know nothing about. They claimed it come out of the fog, and I watched others die. I lived, I was lucky to live through it. I didn't even have to go out of this country. And I thought about my grandfather's words. He didn't want me to go into the service, because he said it wasn't my war. He didn't want me to go and fight against people that didn't have anything of mine, or didn't owe me anything. He didn't want me to go and fight over land that didn't belong to me, that belonged to the people that I'd be fighting, because he

said there was a piece of paper – which he meant the treaty – that his great-great-great grandfather, signed, that he would raise arms no more and fight no more. And I fought, when I went in that service, I felt that I was serving to protect the right to speak, to protect the rights of my fishing, and hunting, all of those rights that it said on that form, that I was gonna protect, serve, and fight for. Not to come back and hear the same government tell me that they were going to take it away from us.

That's why I became an activist. Because when you deal with people that aren't truthful, even the U.S. government, then what are you to believe? Why do people become activists? Because they get tired of being lied to. They get tired of being misled. Then they're criticized for standing up for their rights, standing up for what they think is right. State government, the United States government many times, gives too much to the rich and the development, the big national corporations....

Agreements that they've made in this country with my people, those agreements were made to stand as long as these mountains stand and the rivers flow. And in the Midwest, and in the prairies, as long as the grass keeps growing, and still as long as the sun rises and sets, and the wind blows. And this is the way that nature protects us, it protects our health, protects our rights. As many dams that they've put on this river, it's never stopped flowing. The mountains are still standing. Those are our sacred mountains. They're the ones that provide the water for us, the lifeline that we live off of. The food that we need, that comes back every year, through the water. The food that we have to gather up in the mountains. The mountains are the only ones that protect our food anymore. Everything else is development. I don't think I would have been an activist if my life wasn't tampered with, if my people weren't harassed and abused over the right to fish and hunt. There are many things in this country, throughout this country that I have seen, that have caused people to be getting to the stage of being activists. There are many things that the rich developers do, and the waste that they create, that cause the people to want to stand up and become activists. The reason is that they talk on deaf ears. Even though people elect off[icials], into government, as their elected officials fail to listen to them, because money talks louder than people, especially the poor working man, and his family.

...

PH: I wanted to know how you fought for your fishing rights. How did you fight for your rights?

JJ: I went to our tribal councils, and I went to our government and objected to what was happening to my people, and what would be happening to me. And they did not listen. They didn't seem to pay any attention. And when some of our people started getting arrested, and abused, I start speaking out. Because I got around people that told me that you have to let the people know what's happening to you and why you're against what's going on with the government, the state governments and the federal governments and the law enforcement. So when I start talking to people that wanted to say that we're going to speak out and we're going to get literature out, we're going to write letters, we're going to talk to people. I got in with these people and start working with them. There were many support people that felt that I was right, felt that we were right, felt that state governments were wrong. So they said the only way that you can do that is to start going around speaking to people in different forums, and marching.

I never did march, but I spoke a lot of places. And I got Portland State [University] involved. And Olympia, Evergreen [State] College, Clark [Community] College. Pretty soon I started getting ideas from them. We were working on speech making and demonstrating. I had a lawyer, and the fishermen had lawyers. But the lawyers weren't all that we – we couldn't really depend on what the lawyers were going to do for us, so we had to get out and bring it to the public and let the public hear us, for what we felt was wrong and what they were trying to do and stop us, and harassing us on our fishing.

When I seen that they could fish, and they catch fish and sell it for a living. And they told me that I could not do the same, or my people could not do the same, it was time to demonstrate, it was time to fight back. I think I was only arrested once, but I was never taken to jail. Because I stood up for what I thought was right, and they would not take me to jail. But they always felt that they arrest those that would not say anything and go along quietly. And I didn't think that was right. So I stood up and argued. I went to courts with these people, I listened and made strong objections, for these rights. After we started speaking out and going to different places to different meetings, and bringing

out our objections, we begun to get bigger support from other places. And we felt that this was about the only way we could fight for our rights, along with what our lawyers may be doing. Because we were never sure whether the lawyers were going to win for us or not.

It's led right up to this day that wherever I go I speak up for my rights and the rights of my people, because I feel that if I educate the public on what our rights are, and what I feel that we have a right to, with the river and the fish, as well as the deer and the elk, then there will be less problems. But it can never be done if a person was just to keep quiet and let them quietly arrest him, and take him and make him pay a fine and take away the rights that he's entitled to. I've been criticized for my way of speaking out, but I've never been arrested. I stood up for my land that I live on, and I stood up for the fish....

They say that gaff and spearing fish, that we spear and gaff and take it out of the river and take it home – some people say it's cruel. But yet I can see a sportsman go out here and he can hook on to a fish all day long, and pull him out of the water, and hold him out of the water a while, while he takes the hook out and throw him back in the river, and that fish is going back in the river to suffer. He has to suffer that wound, and they don't think that's cruel, because he carries a license to do that. Pays a fee and gets himself a license to do that. And also he says that's sportsmanship, it's the sport of it. But the fish doesn't think it's a sport. When my people can go out, they can spear fish and gaff fish, and if they're caught that's a violation. It's a felony. But yet they're taking that fish home to eat, to use for their own....

There are times when I look at my people along this river, especially when it comes to jobs. Working. They used to get denied a lot. They could go up to the employment office, they could stand in that line everyday, and other people could come and get a job. So the only thing that they really knew was fishing. They depended on the fish, even if it was one fish coming up this river. To lead, some person caught that fish. We knew he was going to take it home to feed his family immediately. But he waited to make sure that it was blessed. Just like now, I'm told that I can't fish for a whole month. But my leaders came and talked to me first, says, "We don't want no problems, but the

fish are drastically low. If these numbers are all caught up we won't have a good return next year, in the next three or four years." So I agreed with them. For one month.

But I says, "If my people have to do it, then nobody has to do with it, on this main Columbia. Otherwise I'm going to object and I'm going to raise hell." Everybody says that when I'm objecting to something I'm raising hell anyway, so I might as well use the word. But I've always had the feeling that if you keep your mouth shut, then they say it's alright. Even you as a student, if you guys felt that there was something that you weren't taught right, or was going to be changed on you in your way of learning, then you'd object to it. And if you didn't object to it, it changed on you. But I know myself that a lot of students won't do that, they'll turn around and they'll object, because they don't like to see them changes if it's in the wrong way, done to them. And then somebody on the outside said well, you got all them activists in that school, they object to something. That's the same way we are out here. There's a very few of us. A lot of people get scared of the government, and they get scared of the state governments and tribal governments, they won't say nothing. They're afraid that they'll take something away from them, or do something against them. To me it's the opposite, if they're going to turn around and bring something out that I don't like and if they're going to push it, then I'm going to push right back.

Some people say, "Well that chief, he just likes to fight once in a while." But that's not it, it's for the sake of the people. A lot of times I'm speaking out because I speak for those that are scared to speak.

They're scared to say anything, because first thing they'll say: "I'm going to throw you in jail, and I'm going to take this away from you, I'll take that away from you." They get scared. He can't do that, but he does it. And that's when I like to get in there.

PH: Who told you you couldn't fish for a month? The states?

JJ: The tribes.

PH: The tribes. Who told them? Did anybody tell them?

JJ: They have biologists on the river...

PH: Oh...

JJ: They have biologists up and down the river now, and they're counting the fish that are coming out of Bonneville, and it's very low. And they showed me the count. They says, "Look what's happening. And John Day is bad." So they says, "These numbers going over the river, after they're all caught up then there's not going to be any run for the next three years." When those fish were to come back, they won't be here then.

So, I says, "Well we'll just leave them alone then, let them through. People can go one month without fishing."

PH: Have you seen anybody else fishing? Any commercial fishing?

JJ: No. That's why Intertribal's here. I used to be against Intertribal,¹ but when I see that they control everybody, when they allowed them to control everybody, then I'd rather see them here.

PH: Why were you against Intertribal before?....

JJ: Because the Indians were the only ones being arrested for fishing, and they were the only ones being found in violation all the time. And a lot of people, this time of year and there's no jobs, and they could catch fish. If they caught that fish and they wanted to go and sell it, or their friends wanted to buy it from them, if they got caught it was a violation. But if a sportsman caught that fish, a white man caught that fish and he sold that fish, they wouldn't say nothing. But yet this guy he couldn't sell that fish and put bread on the table for his kids, or get something for his kids that are going to school. He'd

¹ The Columbia River Intertribal Fish Commission.

be in violation by trying to make a little money for that purpose, even if he said [what] he was [doing], they would still say it was a violation. So, since they want to do that, I felt that we'll play the same kind of game. You don't like us, we don't like you. We'll do anything to more or less show that we don't like you. We'll get the people against you... We're going to look at all people alike – if one can't do something the other one can't do it. I just got tired of my people being harassed.

That's the same way [on] this here land here. At one time it was all occupied by my people, but sometimes my people come down here and they ain't got no place to stay. If they see one of my people coming they'd jack the price up so they wouldn't run it. Then they turn 'round, they want to come in here, and then they say, "Well we want to launch our boats, we want to fish in here, because it's all the river open." And I'm saying no, because this land, I'm in charge of this land. This land belongs to the people, and I want it here just for my people.

PH: So you have the right to tell people that they can't.

JJ: Mm-hmm.

PH: Do they listen?

JJ: Yeah. If they don't I'll call Intertribal. [sound of train]

PH: Has that ever happened before?....

JJ: Yeah....

PH: ...When you mentioned before about your people going to prison for fishing – was that a regional thing about Salmon Scam, or were you talking about other times?

JJ: Mm-hmm. Salmon Scam.

PH: So what was your role in Salmon Scam? What did you do?

JJ: Well, they hired lawyers. It was at the same time we had to fight over this place, to protect this place, because they wanted to move us out of here. They wanted to change the whole timeline where people would only come down from the reservation to fish, and when the fishing season would be over they would go out and go home. Well we don't have no homes on the reservation, this is our home. This is our homeland here. It's where we live, we always lived. So we're not going home anyway, we're already home. So we got into a fight over this land as well as the fishing. So when we hired lawyers, the people had to get together and raise the money, and so in order to do that, we had to look around and find out just how we were going to do it and where we were going to do it. When we started talking about it, other people came in, out of Portland, Vancouver, and other places. Even here at Hood River. They says, "You have a right." Well they have to protect that right. So they says, "You have to form an organization and stand up to the government."

And so we did – it was the Columbia River Defense Council. So we started meeting with a lot of different people from different places, University of Seattle got involved. The Portland, USP, was the first ones to get involved. And Clark College, and Evergreen College. And Seattle. The people from up that way all came down and we all formed a [group?] and we started raising [money], having salmon bakes and stuff and speaking engagements to raise money to pay our lawyers, because the lawyers had to have money to fight the case. And that was part of my job was to raise money. And I was having salmon bakes here all the time to pay our lawyers, and so were the others.

PH: Did you have a lawyer for this site, and for the Salmon Scam? Were there separate lawyers or?

JJ: Yeah. Our lawyers for these sites, this [Lyle Point] and Cooks and five sites here, our lawyers were Stoels and Stoels out of Portland. They fought this whole case.... So pretty soon after, we got this Tom Keith, and he fought the Salmon Scam case, and he won. Stoels and Stoels won this back for me and David Sohappy.

PH: Are you related to David Sohappy?

JJ: He's my uncle. He was my uncle. That's why we stood together on these two sites here. The government said they were going to move us out, they were going to have federals come in to bulldoze us out. I told them, "Go ahead." And they looked at where I lived and decided they weren't going to try it. So my house has got all these big boulders on the outside of it. It would be a job for them to try and doze this house out.

David, he stood firm. Stoels went into litigation 'til they says, "You cannot bother him, leave him alone." Tell the courts. They got the courts to set it so that we wouldn't have to move, leave, and we'd just go to court. And we went to court. We kept on going to court and we won.

PH: Was that state court then?

JJ: Federal court.... But it was one of the senators from Washington State that wanted all this to happen. Wanted us out of here and wanted regulations on fishing, and I don't think he got his wish. It was Slade Gorton, of Washington State. He's still the Indian fighter today. But he won't be there much longer. His time's running out.

PH: What ever happened with Salmon Scam. Didn't they have to go to jail for a while?

JJ: Oh they went to jail, they went to prison. But Tom Keith fought until he got them back. And then they got out, but they didn't go to jail because of Tom Keith winning the case. It was the government relationship that, the Feds turned around and told the tribe, "You have to turn them over to us, because we already found them guilty, even though they won, we say they're guilty and so you got to turn them over." So the tribal governments, without the people knowing, turned them over to them. By the time we found out it was too late, they were already in prison. And then when we were going to go and object to that, they moved them. They kept moving them from different prisons to

prisons. That's how they started their trail from Washington to California, California and all the way down to Texas, and on over to Oklahoma, and back up to Minnesota, where they kept them. There [should have] been a lawsuit on that, but the tribes wouldn't do it...

I go by what my elders have always talked about, within our treaty, the reserved rights. Reserved right was that we could take fish at all times, at all places, usual and accustomed fishing sites. And I educated myself more or less by traveling and meeting with people throughout this country and Alaska, listen to the elders talk, and looking at these documents, and reading upon them, to find where I can understand the real meaning of them. When they say usual and accustomed fishing places, and hunting sites and gathering sites – we live in a country that was once all Indian, throughout this country. We didn't come from nowhere, we were always here. So, therefore, when I look at what they're trying to say to me and what they talk about within the usual and accustomed fishing and hunting, the only place I'd be in violation, to my knowledge, the way I think, is if I stepped out of the boundaries of the United States. That treaty was made within this country and with the Indian people in this country. So therefore I tell them that I can go to other places and fish and hunt, like I fish and hunt here, only with the respect and agreement with the tribal people, native people of that territory. If they say yes, it's fine.

But I believe that the treaties made by the federal government which was representing the president of the United States and Congress, means that anywhere in this country, anywhere in this country, the only time I would be in violation [is] if I do it outside the United States. So I feel that in the treaty and the agreements and the way they were, that it should stand with the native people in that manner. It's like they make treaties with any other country. And the reserved rights that people reserved here, on the fishing rights and their hunting rights and their gathering rights, should be recognized to stand. And the way it was made – the Indian people weren't educated in the white man's ways, so those treaties were made, in a way, with nature, and with the land. Where it reads, "As long as the sun rises in the east and sits in the west, and moon and the stars are our witness, and the river flows, and the mountains stand, this treaty will stand." That means forever.

But now the new governments here say [they] feel that it's not right. They say that they should not be recognized. That's wrong. The treaty, being a signed document, agreed upon in that time for us to quit that fighting, it should stand the way it's written.