

An Open Letter To Ellensburg Neighbors,

Happy Tiinmamí łkw'i -- translated roughly as Indigenous Peoples' Day, this is likely the first time you have read this name or seen it applied to the holiday on Monday October 12th. There is nothing innately special about the second Monday in October which causes it to be observed by indigenous cultures – the holiday and this letter is a product of the earliest European origin stories in North America all beginning in wooden ships an ocean away. Long before the Niña, Pinta, and Santa Maria sailed or were even constructed, or the trees that made those ships were even planted . . . the ancestors of the Yakama people lived in the Kittitas Valley. We hope to use a piece of time on this federal holiday, October 12th, for the purpose of acknowledging the first people in the Kittitas Valley and their ways of life.

In the context of its traditional meaning Tiinmamí is simply “the people”, as in the humans who cared for this land and were in-turn sustained by all the land offered. Traditionally, the *Pshwánapum* lived in the Kittitas Valley as a sub-band of the larger political and extended family networks of the Yakama tribes and bands. These *Pshwánapum* members, also referred to as the K'títaas (“Kittitas”) band, participated in subsistence patterns, moving seasonally between the low river-lands and high mountain areas to harvest and gather roots, salmon, berries, game, and medicines. The subsistence lifestyle involved wide travel patterns moving throughout the region, including extensive trade networks. Consummate traders and centrally located between the Cascade Mountain range and the Columbia River, the K'títaas hosted numerous other tribes, bands, and eventually west-ward European settlers on trade grounds east of present-day Ellensburg.

These trade grounds included teepee encampments, horse corrals, and a pony race-track for several thousand travelers and traders. The largest trade ground encampments would span several miles and the frequent pony races created physical features that are still visible today on the ground. It feels good to recognize and talk of the long and frequent periods of peaceful coexistence between this Valley's Indigenous People and the travelers, traders, and homesteaders who passed through, and eventually settled in the Kittitas Valley. The legendary trade encampments are reported to be the precursor to the Ellensburg Rodeo - as an opportunity to display sportsmanship and craftsmanship between the gathered people. That exchange of commodities and practices carried the implicit exchange of culture that was beneficial to all of the parties.

It is necessary to also recognize that traditional ways of life for the K'títaas, and Yakama as a whole Native Nation, were threatened in the 19th century when large numbers of miners, ranchers, and land-patent prospectors started pouring into the Pacific Northwest. When competing interests clashed, it was the Indigenous People who lost their cultural and ceremonial sites, access to foods and medicines, and ability to practice religious observances. The ancestors of the K'títaas and their relative Yakamas, born from the hills and valleys of what is today's Central Washington region, were forgotten by the forward march of ‘civilization’. Those ancestors cultivated, stewarded, and thrived on this land for thousands of years in a balance that was preserved by their creator going back to the ice ages.

In 1855, a principle K'títaas leader, Chief Owhi, and 13 other Yakama Chiefs negotiated a Treaty at the Walla Walla council grounds that ceded over eight million acres of indigenous land -- an exchange that enabled the formation of Washington State. For their part, those Yakama leaders negotiated, under threat of war and bloodshed, to reserve the existing rights and privileges that they had exercised as sovereign people since time immemorial. Although Owhi ultimately died as a prisoner of the U.S. Calvary, the descendants of the K'títaas and Yakama continue to live throughout the Treaty territory today as your neighbors practicing, honoring, and teaching the heritage and ancestry that kept the Indegnous People alive through these harsh centuries of conflict.

The complex and multi-dimensional history of this land cannot be fully explored, re-litigated, or settled by just one open letter or on one day; but, you are invited to participate on Tiinmamí łkw'i in the respectful exchange of ideas and culture with those who live differently than you do as a gesture towards a more just and promising future.

Regards,

Your *Pshwánapum* neighbors.