
Tlma'-qt Chiitl, Louisa Smith

Who was Louisa Smith?

Louisa Smith was a Siletz elder who is well known for helping save the stories of the Quu-iich/Shu'-yuush-tl'a (Siuslaw) language. She worked very hard with language experts even after she was very old and sick.

Early Life

Louisa was born in 1836 and raised in her homelands on the central Oregon coast. Her father was from the Quu-iich (Lower-Umpqua) Tribe and her mother was from the Sha'-yuush-tl'a (Siuslaw) Tribe, whose homelands were along the lower Umpqua and Siuslaw Rivers near the modern-day town of Florence. Louisa remembered, "We lived well. Our house was good. We were always warm in our house. We had lots of food. I knew a great deal."

Louisa was a small person, so her people named her Tlma'-qt Chiitl, which means "short arm" in the Quu-iich language. Louisa's life shows how small people can be tough and strong.

Louisa grew up at a time when the global fur trade was big business in Oregon. This changed the way Native people lived. In the fur trade, settler trappers or local Native people would hunt animals. They would trade the animal skins to big companies who would take thousands of furs all the way to places like New York or London by ship or on horseback. The furs were used to make fancy hats and coats. Louisa remembered her relatives passing along the river with big canoes full of furs to sell.

The fur trade brought money to Native people and settlers for a while. But people hunted too much. There were not enough animals left for a healthy environment. The fur companies could move on to other areas and hunt more, but usually Native people could not. Native people often suffered after fur trading went away.



Tlma'-qt Chiitl, Louisa Smith *(Continued)*

Adult Life

At this time, most settlers were men. Many settler men chose to live with and have children with Native women, but some chose not to claim their Native family as wives and children or protect them. This happened in Louisa's life. She had a son named Spencer. Spencer's father was a white man named Levi Scott.

In 1861, the U.S. government wanted to remove Native people from the land where Louisa and Spencer lived. Soldiers came and forced Louisa and Spencer to move to the Coast (Siletz) Reservation at Yachats, Oregon. It must have been very scary and sad, but Louisa survived and protected her son. After a while, Louisa found a new partner and married William Smith, who was from an Alsea village.

Then, in 1875, settlers came into the reservation and made the Tribal people leave again. Louisa, William, and Spencer had to leave their home once more. This time they went to Siletz to live. Louisa would spend the rest of her days living at Siletz.

Later Life

In 1884, a man named James Owen Dorsey came to Siletz. He interviewed Louisa and Spencer about the Quu-iich language. In 1911, another man, Leo Frachtenberg, came to see Louisa. He wanted to learn about all the stories and history Louisa knew. By this time Louisa was sick and having trouble with her memory, but her husband William took care of her. William and Louisa worked together with Dr. Frachtenberg to translate Louisa's stories and knowledge into English. They put everything in a book so that the language and stories that Louisa learned as a child wouldn't be forgotten. The book was published in 1914.

Louisa's determination to practice her ways and take care of her family continued for her entire life. Her son Spencer remembered how she used to stand in the freezing cold water to fish when she was a very old woman, even though he worried about her.

Louisa died in 1915, just one year after the book based on all her work and knowledge was published.

Sources

Frachtenberg, Leo J (1914). *Lower Umpqua Texts*. Columbia University Press.

Harrington, John Peabody (n.d.). *John Peabody Harrington Papers*. National Anthropological Archives.