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Nestucca Accounts of the Great Fire of 1845 and First Encounters with White Men

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# Nestucca Accounts of the Great Fire of 1845 and First Encounters with White Men

📅 November 11, 2021 ⌚ 12 min read

👤 Ethnohistory Research, LLC | David G. Lewis, PhD

There are numerous oral histories from tribal people in Oregon about catastrophic events, fires, volcanic eruptions, floods, tsunamis. Many of these stories are fantastically imagined and are likely stories of long ago historic events. These stories feature giant animals and figures like Coyote who is consistently tricking humans in some manner, and the action of tricking helps humans learn the lessons of Coyote. Stories in Oregon of creation and earth changes many-times feature Beaver who is pursuing his role of creating ecosystems on river systems. Coyote and Beaver fighting together, in Wasco and Wishram oral histories, created the Columbia Gorge, their manner of explaining the creation of the gorge by the Missoula floods, or eyewitness accounts of the floods, which occurred some 16,000 to 11,000 years ago.

There are many more recent oral histories, stories, which record events in the past couple hundred years. They are less fantastical and yet still pass-on events to their audience. Several recent tribal histories appear in books of native language texts, and these can be accounts of removals to a reservation, of effects of diseases, of deaths of people, actions of shaman, or eyewitness accounts of the first encounter with white people. The following narrative is of two stories from Chief Harna of the Nestucca peoples. The stories are retold by Peter Belleque to the reporter and editor of the Sheridan Sun newspaper.

Belleque was of French-Indian descent, born in French

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Prairie and had witnessed the fire of 1845 in the Valley. His story is partially reported in the book “Oregon Wildland Firefighting: A History” By Sean Davis (Chapter 7). Davis apparently missed the detailed account of the fire that Belleque had published in the Weekly Oregon Statesman on August 31, 1894 as told by the Nestucca Chief Harna. In this account the narrator relates the origin of the fire to a black man, Johnson, who had deserted a ship and set a brush fire in the valley which got out of control. The early account of a black man in Oregon is significant as not a decade later the Oregon Provisional government disallows Blacks from taking land in Oregon. This account suggests that the fire may have burnt far more than the 1.5 million acres estimated by Davis, as the fire burned on both sides of the Willamette, then burned all the way to the coast and still burned for several weeks until the rains came. Davis states that the extent of this fire is the largest ever recorded in the United States.

The Nestucca peoples lived along the Nestucca rivers and in the bay. To the north of them were other Tillamook peoples, those at Sand Lake may have been called [Nuwoka as Sand Lake’s original name is Nuwoka](#). The people to the south are the Nechesne at Salmon River. There is also the people of Chief Kiwanda, which Cape Kiwanda is named after, the chief was well known in the area by settlers and was associated with the Grand Ronde reservation. The tribe at Nestucca, also called the Nestugga or Staguash people, remained on their lands, even after signing the Coast Treaty in August of 1855, but they remained at Nestucca, centered were the town of Woods is located today until June 1876.

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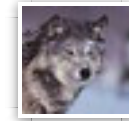
The Coast treaty went unratified and as such there was no law or legal mechanism to formally remove the tribes who still owned their land under U.S. land law which states that aboriginal land claims precede settler claims. It is assumed the tribes were finally paid for their lands in an Indian Claims case after the suit was decided in 1946 ([U.S. vs Alcea band of Tillamooks etc.](#)). They are recorded living there until they are convinced to [remove and then move their belongings by canoe to the Salmon River encampment](#). The last holdout was Chief Nestugga Bill. Most of the Nestucca people became members of the Siletz Reservation, and allotted at the Salmon River encampment, the location of which became Lincoln City in about 1910. A few Nestucca people went to the Grand Ronde Reservation and remained there as members of the tribe.

### The Story of Chief Bill Nestugga

When James B. Uptown from Oregon City tried to take possession of the [Native] cabin [*more likely a plank house*] on the claim he had selected, Chief Nestugga Bill refused to leave it, claiming it as his. After considerable pow-wowing, Joe Woods, who was present and could speak Jargon, persuaded Chief Nestugga Bill to leave if Upton would pay him \$30.00 cash. This sum Upton did not have. It was finally settled by Upton giving Joe Woods \$15.00 cash and Joe Woods gave the Indian a Cayuse (horse). Joe Woods filed on a claim on what is now the town of Woods on the Big Nestucca River. Although the Government had allotted the Indians lands of Salmon River in exchange for the Reservation they were forced to give up, they refused to

Tribal History

## OREGON INDIAN TERRITORY



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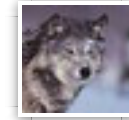
depart until the tides were right to move by water. In June, 1876, they, with all their possessions in their canoes, paddled out over the bar into the Ocean and made a landing at the mouth of the Salmon River. (Short History of the Little Nestucca River Valley and Its Early Pioneers” written about South Tillamook County, Oregon p.4)

It was common enough for tribes to describe the large masted sailing ships in fantastical terms. Other accounts suggested the schooners were monster whales, and the bearded men monsters themselves. The Nestucca account is quite reasonably proportioned as a “big stick canoe with wings.”

The trader Joseph Frambois, noted in the second account of Chief Harna, is assumed in the narrative, and if so it was likely Michel La Frambois who was a fur trader and trusted employee of the Hudson’s Bay Company in Oregon during the period mentioned. Joseph La Frambois was a famed fur trader and explorer in the old Northwest of the the east, specifically around Chicago and the Great Lakes. Its unclear if these two men are related.

[Google map of The Nestucca bay and rivers](#)

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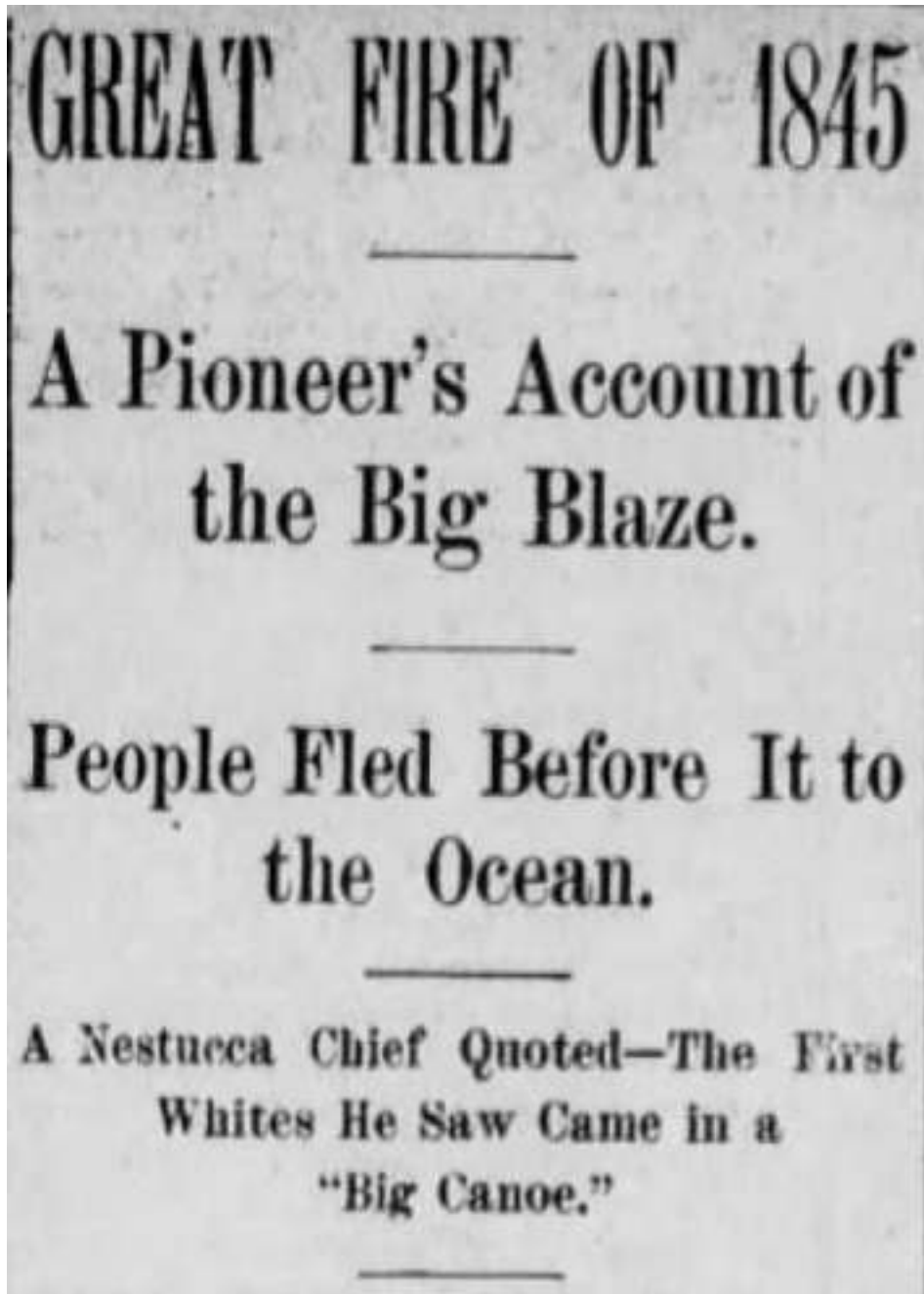
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Great Fire of 1845

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A Nestucca Chief Quoted- the First Whites he saw

## came in a “Big Canoe.”

*A trip through the Coast Range Mountains reveals to the eye of the traveler a vast expanse of dead timber, whose tall charred trunks are the sepulchral statues of a once green and luxuriant forest. The Fire that devastated so much valuable timber on both sides of the Willamette River occurred in 1845. The summer of that year was exceptionally dry, and the trees and underbrush burned like tinder.*

*While at Woods recently says the editor of the Sheridan Sun, we met Peter Belleque, a fisherman, who was born on French Prairie in 1836, of French parents. The writer found Mr. Belleque a ready raconteur of pioneers events, who among other things threw light upon the origin of the great forest conflagration of 1845, not hereto published.*

*In the Fall of 1845, “N....r Johnson,” a cook, who deserted from an English Man-o-war, at the mouth of the Columbia a few years previous, set fire to slashing on a ranch upon which he had “squatted,” near Champoeg in what is now Marion County. Johnson succeeded in getting a good burn on his slashing, but unfortunately for the forests, the fire spread in all directions. On the east side of the Willamette it swept a path through the valley as black as midnight. Reaching the mountains it mowed a terrible swath through the Cascades clear to the summit. Crossing the Willamette, it blazed out a path through the valley to the Coast range, the principal trail being confined, however to the mountain ranges. A hot dry wind fanned it day and night, and the*

*whole valley was filled with a pall of smoke. So dense did the smoke become that the settlers were forced to eat their midday meal by candle light. Travel was largely discontinued. Navigation off the Oregon coast became dangerous, and the ships lay at the mouth of the Columbia for weeks waiting for the fearful cloud of smoke to leave. Many of the settlers became apprehensive that the end of the world was at hand. Stream flowed red with lye and ashes, and many water courses of no small size became stagnant pools, or dried up altogether.*

*Mr. Belleque, some years ago interviewed old Dick Harna, now on the Siletz Reservation, about the fire in Tillamook County. Harna was chief of the Nestuccas, a small tribe of Indians who lived along the coast at the time. Harna, according to Belleque, gave a vivid description of the fire, as witnesses by himself. He and a portion of his tribe were encamped on the Big Nestucca River about four miles from the present site of the town of Woods. For several days, according to the Indians, there had been a great deal of smoke. Each day it grew denser, and filled the Indians with no little alarm. Finally, one night, the Nestuccas were awakened by a bright red glare in the Eastern sky which grew more and more brilliant. By sunrise, great flames were seen leaping skyward from the summits of the hills and the air was resonant with a roar a hundred times louder than the noise of the surf on the Ocean beach. Nearer and nearer came the fierce sea of flame. So rapidly did it approach that the terrified Indians had no time to remove their scanty belongings, but hastily jumping into their dugouts, paddled down the river to the ocean beach with all possible speed.*



*Between Mr. Malaney's ranch and the ocean below Woods, the Nestucca makes an angle and between the river and the ocean beach there is, at its greatest width, a bare sand spit of half a mile. Here, Harna and his braves took refuge, and subsisted upon fish for some weeks until a heavy rain put out the fire.*

*All that remained of the vast forests of fir and spruce and larch were blackened trunks that reared their seared forms heavenward as if in mourning for their loss of verdure and foliage. Paddling up the river to their old haunts, gruesome sights met the eyes of the Indians at every turn. Here and there piled up in groups were bands of elk and deer charred crisp; bear were found nearly barbecued; and panthers, with their bodies still in the water, showed their ghastly cooked heads-denuded of every hair, and sightless before death came.*

*Another band of Indians retreated before the flames to Sand Lake between Cape Kiwanda and Lookout where they found a safe asylum until the welcome rain came. Luckily. There were no white settlers in Tillamook at that time. The fallen debris previous to the fire was undoubtedly the accumulation of a century. In many places, young growths of fir are springing up in the mountains, while the water courses are fringed with a dense growth of alder. But it will take another century to replace the grand forests in the line of the great conflagration of 1845.*

*Harna, who is now an old and feeble Indian, told Belleque that the first white man he ever saw came in a "big stick*

*canoe with wings” and anchored near Cape Kiwanda. While the Indians were gazing at the huge canoe out upon the then calm ocean, a small boat filled with men dressed in buckskin, came ashore, and traded with them, the Indians exchanging such skins and dried salmon as they possessed for beads, hatchets, etc. From Harna’s description of the “hyas tyee” and his companions. Belleque believes that the white man was Joseph Flambois, a Hudson Bay man, who traded with the Indians along the coast from Fort Astor to California, somewhere about 1838. Flambois was a good navigator, and visited many of the inlets and bays of the Oregon Coast with his staunch little schooner.*

Belleque, and perhaps the article author, somewhat overstate the effect of the fire on the growth of the forests and overestimated how long it would take them to recover. Even the most severe fires only slow down the growth of forests which normally rebound within a few years. Some fire scars can last a decade or more, but in a highly productive area like the Coast Range with plenty of rain and sunlight the forest would recover within a decade, and not the 100 years estimated in the narrative. This is different from areas of the high Cascades which have been severely burnt and it can take several decades for a rebound. Normally forests subjected to cool burn annual fires, set by tribes, would rebound in a matter of months because of regular burning. It may be the case that the Tillamook peoples were less apt to initiate burning cycles on their lands. There is later recorded another large Nestucca burn in about 1860, and then there is the well-recorded series of

Tillamook burns which happened nearly every year and lasted for some 40 years in the early 20th century in the area. The Museum at Grand Ronde is named Chachalu, after a known location in the forests of the Grand Ronde valley burned by a Tillamook fire, meaning “Burnt place.”

Transcribed from the account in the Weekly Oregon Statesman on August 31, 1894.

There were reprints of this story in the Oregon Historical Quarterly volumes 35-36 (Forest Fires in Western Oregon and Western Washington, William G. Morris), the Daily Oregonian, as well as Inventory of the County Archives of Oregon, Issue 29, and Historical Records Survey (U.S.) OREGON, 1940, from search results on Google Books.




The story was also compiled and transcribed by Leonard Whitmore at <https://cliffhanger76.tripod.com/c2sea/fire/>.



The story is also partially told on [A Bridge to the Past](#).

The story has been well referenced and is known, but still belongs in the Quartux Journal collection as a Oregon Native oral history.

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