

The “Indian Trail”: The Poor People’s Campaign of 1968 in the Pacific Northwest

Part I: Regional and Historical Context

The Pacific Northwest of the United States and Canada has been a target region for radically diverse social movements throughout history. Its great natural wealth in terms of fish, wildlife, timber, and agriculture, its temperate climate, and its pivotal coastal location and numerous in-land waterways have caught the attention of politically and economically savvy movement-builders for thousands of years. Indeed, the earliest human inhabitants of the Pacific Northwest are now believed to also be the earliest human inhabitants of the entire country (and beyond); in 2007, at the Paisley Caves Complex in southeast Oregon, researchers identified the oldest samples of human DNA ever discovered throughout the entirety of the American continents.

Prior to the European invasion of native lands, the Pacific Northwest was likely to have been home to the largest population of Native Peoples on the North American continent. Even 500 years after colonization, this region (along with the Southwestern U.S.) continues to be home to the highest number of Native populations (and thus also Native lands, languages and cultural groups) in the country. It follows logically, then, that much of the heart of the Native Rights struggle in the U.S. has taken place here and elsewhere throughout the West.

What follows less logically, perhaps, is that the Pacific Northwest U.S. has also been the heartland of white supremacist organizing in this country for several decades. This includes not only grassroots neo-Nazi militant groups but also federally initiated projects such as the forced displacement and imprisonment of Japanese-Americans during World War II. The Wing-Luke Asian Museum in Seattle documents both the history of the internment camps and the process by which this history of injustice has been erased. Facilities, for example, in Puyallup, WA that are used today as grounds and buildings for the Puyallup State Fair were previously the site of “Camp Harmony”—an internment camp for Japanese-American citizens, just 35 miles from Seattle.

In spite of these local histories of stark inequity and conflict, the Pacific Northwest is also known as a site of resistance to structural and social violence. Northwestern participation in the 1968 Poor People’s Campaign was crucial; it brought the particular struggles of First Nations People to the attention of a wider movement, and in turn fulfilled the late Dr. King’s promise of a truly multiracial movement base—one which included Native communities in the U.S.

Part II: Profile of a Leader—Esther Ross

Two main contingents are listed in Northwest regional history as participant groups in the 1968 PPC. African-American community members from Seattle who advocated for educational equity in low-income schools and for greater city-wide accountability to the poor were present. Florestine “Flo” Ware was a key figure in this group—today a small public park stands at the corner of 28th and South Jackson in Seattle

in memory of her life and work.¹ Also present were Native leaders from the Northwest—Esther Ross of the Stillaguamish tribe in Washington, her son and co-organizer Frank Allen, and Hank Adams, a member of the Sioux. Esther Ross was a long-time organizer in the struggle for securing the fishing rights of Native people, particularly the Stillaguamish people. Frank, a son from Esther’s second marriage who may have been autistic, often worked as his mother’s driver and later as her translator when she began to lose her sense of hearing. Mother and son regularly protested together and both were arrested on more than one occasion. Esther’s family participated even more heavily in the 1968 PPC—

Throughout May and June of 1968, [Esther] joined what was called the “Poor People’s Campaign.” Frank, his stepdaughter Barbara, his daughter Lois, and his son David accompanied Esther and a group from the Pacific Northwest on a three-thousand-mile journey to Washington, D.C., to air their grievances against the government [...]. Esther, now sixty-three, and Frank, now thirty-seven, were among an Indian and black delegation from the Pacific Northwest led by Florestine “Flo” Ware, a well-known Seattle activist. The fifty-person group was co-led by Hank Adams, who was identified as an Assiniboine Sioux living at Frank’s Landing near the mouth of the Nisqually River. The entire caravan was composed of twenty-six busloads from Washington, Oregon, Montana, the Dakotas, and Alaska. The group was fed and housed in churches along the way.²

Her biographers lay out in some detail Esther and Frank’s personal participation in the PPC, including the family’s press coverage in at least four different citywide newspapers along the route to D.C.—the *Minneapolis Tribune*, the *St. Paul Pioneer Press*, the *Toledo Blade*, and the *Seattle Post-Intelligencer*. Her media savvy, along with her extraordinary skill at wearing out opponents of her tribe at local, state, and federal levels, were staples of Esther’s organizing career. In addition to fishing rights for the Stillaguamish people, Esther Ross also fought for tribal ownership of the Stillaguamish’s burial sites; the right to federal recognition as well as recognition from larger tribes; and greater access for all small tribes to Lyndon B. Johnson’s War on Poverty funds.

Esther’s mother was of Stillaguamish and Portuguese descent (the granddaughter of Stillaguamish Chief Chaddus). Esther’s father was Norwegian, a Seventh Day Adventist lay minister, and died when Esther was nine years old. To the end of her life, Esther continued to attend Adventist services and periodically sent her children to Adventist schools. Esther Ross was a survivor of domestic violence many times over, a mother, and a grandmother. She died in 1988. At Esther’s funeral she was eulogized not only by family and co-workers in the movement but also local government officials. Her family was even presented with a folded flag from a member of the American Legion, who wished to recognize Esther as a “warrior.”³

¹ <http://www.flowarepark.org/>

² Ruby, Robert H. and John A. Brown. *Esther Ross: Stillaguamish Champion*. University of Oklahoma Press: Norman, 2001. 74.

³ Ruby and Brown, 245.