Mid winter 2012, in Grants Pass, Oregon, the oldest living Takelma Indian was in bed at her usual rehab center, tethered to an IV bag as she recovered from yet another joint replacement. At 87, Agnes Baker Pilgrim could barely sit up, let alone walk, and she was reminding me of my one crucial task at her annual Salmon Ceremony on the Rogue River: securing the golf cart. “Grandma Aggie” is famous for racing around in a golf cart with one hand on the steering wheel and the other holding a bullhorn, blasting everyone out of their teepees and tents at 6:00 a.m. for the sunrise prayer circle.

“The cart is no problem,” I said. Laurel Acres, our local golf course, always donates one.

“Good!” She smiled sweetly. “And I want my picture taken on the Story Chair.”

Grandma Aggie wants to sit in her family chair. Who could say no to that? But Grandma Aggie is no ordinary grandma and her chair is not the front porch rocker.

BY STEPHEN KIESLING
“But Grandma!” I said finally, picking up my jaw. “The Story Chair is in the middle of a Class IV waterfall. In fact, Ti’lomikh (ti low meekh) Falls is the largest falls on the middle Rogue.” I shook my head. “You could get ripped up like one of those old salmon that’s already spawned.”

Grandma just smiled and patted my hand. She had made up her mind—and nobody says no to Grandma. She is like one of those old salmon that’s already spawned. “I middle Rogue.”

“Story Chair is in the middle of a Class IV waterfall. In fact, Story Chair is the midpoint between two sacred sites are typically hit the hardest, and Ti’lomikh even want a roadside marker.

“So I said okay, I’d get on it. But as I walked out of the rehab center I inhaled sharply. This adventure could prove lethal. What took my breath away is that Grandma knew it too. That was part of the ritual. To insure that the fish always return, someone has to dive into the falls to offer his or her life to the salmon.

The Story Chair is where Dahl-Dahl, the Great Dragonfly, created the Salmon Ceremony to bring peace to the tribes who were killing each other over fish. Grandma Aggie’s ancestors were elders who sat in the stone seat and managed the fishery. No one knows the date of the first Salmon Ceremony, but tribal stories hold the memory of Mount Mazama blowing up to form Crater Lake more than 7,700 years ago—and moccasins were found buried under the volcanic ash. To look into Grandma Aggie’s eye is to peer into a ritual perhaps older than Christianity, Judaism, and Hinduism.

If the Story Chair were in Europe, or Israel or India, this symbol of peace and sustainable fisheries management would appear in guidebooks and inspire highway signs. The deep pool below Ti’lomikh Falls was where the fat salmon was also their currency, and their major source of flesh they ate each day was their primary protein. Dried salmon that bring life back.

Miners banded into militias of “exterminators,” beginning a time of terror that ended in 1856, when the outnumbered tribes were finally defeated by the United States Army. All the Native Peoples of Southern Oregon were marched two hundred miles north to reservations at Siletz and Grand Ronde. In 1883, photographer Peter Britt published a photograph of Lady Oscharwas in a beaded buckskin dress that she had sewn for her own burial. The photo, printed nationwide, was entitled, “The Last of the Rogue Rivers.”

A CEREMONY REBORN

The story of Ti’lomikh, however, was not completely obliterated. In 1993, Takelma elder Frances Johnson—who attended the Salmon Ceremony and fought in the war—travelled from the Siletz Reservation to Ti’lomikh with John P. Harrington, a linguist from the Smithsonian Institution. It was a time of low water, and Harrington waded out to the Story Chair, made some measurements, and didn’t make the trip to Ti’lomikh. She attended the Salmon Ceremony and the photograph of her father sitting on a rock, but she didn’t know the two were connected. In 1993, when Agnes Baker Pilgrim had a spiritual awakening and resurrected the Salmon
The bones and skin of the salmon are wrapped in the cedar before the dive into the pool. The young man dove into the slack water channel as their part of the ceremony instead of the pool below the falls.

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Two weeks before the 2012 Salmon Ceremony, Oliver Fix came for a test run down Ti'lomikh Falls. The Rogue was running unseasonably high, and I had been calling Grandma every couple of weeks to see if she had changed her mind. She hadn’t. So Oliver and I first cleared a path to get her golf cart to the edge of the river, and then we inflated my raft. We put on life jackets and helmets, grabbed a couple of paddles, and pushed off. We had never rafted together before, but I knew the route and we had a perfect run down the series of large drops into the pool below the falls. Suddenly the whole adventure seemed easy, and I relaxed. What made me nervous was that Gilda Fix, the professional raft guide, would have no part of it.

Our next test run didn’t happen till Friday evening, the day before the public Salmon Ceremony. Grandma wanted Native Americans, as well as Olympians in the boat, and we ended up with eight paddlers. Overloaded, we managed to clear the falls, but failed to reach the Story Chair. We carried the raft back upstream and tried again, and this time one paddler was ejected into the falls. No one was hurt, but we had to face what Gilda knew all along: Keeping Grandma inside the raft would be a matter of luck. I gave him a USA t-shirt, and the German Gold Medalist put it on. Then Gilda announced that she was willing to do a test run, so I gave her the third t-shirt—we had our Olympic Team. As we prepared to get in the raft, we heard that someone awoke in the middle of the night and say no to Grandma, but I hesitated because I figured she would come to that decision herself. Her family, her doctor, and now everyone else were united against it, so she had to change her mind. Exhausted, I fell asleep early that night to the sound of drums from the Bear Dance, feeling sick and discouraged.

When I awoke Sunday morning, however, I didn’t want to quit. This was Olympic Day! My own Olympics was 1980, the year we boycotted the Moscow games because Russia invaded Afghanistan. I didn’t want to feel that way again. I had three old USA Olympic t-shirts, and I put one on. I grabbed the other two shirts, as well as an Olympic flag I had brought to the ceremony instead of the pool below the falls.

The salmon is cooked upright on planks so that the fatty oils marinate and baste the fish to keep it moist.
In May 2013, Grandma Agnes Baker Pilgrim woke up remembering what seemed a very strange vision from her dreams—a bridge in the shape of a giant dragonfly at Ti’lomikh Falls. Over the course of the next year, however, the dream began to make sense. Two bicycle trails—the Rogue River Greenway and the Bear Creek Greenway—are expanding toward each other to create a single, fifty-mile bike path connecting the Oregon cities of Grants Pass and Ashland. The “Golden Spike” that will join the two trails is a bicycle bridge over the Rogue River, and one of the potential crossing points is Ti’lomikh Falls. So, thought Grandma, remembering what seemed a very strange vision from her dreams: a bridge in the shape of a giant dragonfly at Ti’lomikh Falls. On February 24, 2014, Grandma Aggie had a vision of the Dragonfly Bridge coming back to her.

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On April 14, she returned to the spot to draw it. With her was Jim Waddell, an engineer and artist who works with community groups to help turn visions into reality. Grandma recounted her dream while Waddell drew. She then signed the drawing, and it was given to artist Brian Borello to expand the concept. Next the drawings were given to Gary Rayor of OBEC Engineering for a reality check. Soon after that, the Rogue River Greenway Foundation and the City of Gold Hill endorsed the idea.

The next step is a national design competition. (See GoldHillWhitewater.org for details.) The goal is to use biomimicry to engineer a spectacularly beautiful monument to rival Oregon’s premiere tourist attraction, Crater Lake. The ultimate goal is to help heal the past by reminding us that the People of the River were here first—and to improve the future by reminding us that, as Grandma says, “Human Beings are not intruders. We are participants!”

We didn’t have years of practice together, but we did have years of practice, and practice does pay. Only seconds later we were pulling alongside the rock into the waiting hands of the two men we had dropped off. The five of us clustered around Grandma like the soldiers raising the flag on Iwo Jima. We were so proud to be there and so afraid she might fall. She actually walked most of the ten yards over the giant rock to what was now inarguably her chair. Then Gilda unwrapped Grandma’s plastic and took off her helmet and life jacket. As Grandma sat down, Gilda gave her back her beaded cap and her eagle feather fan. Grandma raised the eagle feathers, smiling at first, and then tears streamed down her face. It had been almost eighty years since her father was photographed here and one hundred and sixty years since the last Takelma elder had managed the fishery.

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