

# The Kootenai tribe declares war

'The closest thing we had to a weapon ... was a fly-swatter'

*The Kootenai Tribe of Idaho put up road blocks on Highway 2 and Highway 95 and charged a ten cent toll to pass through them. Rex Aitken, son of Amy Trice, collects from a vehicle.* The Valley Studio, Edgar B. Stephenson Photo

By Lucia St. Clair Robson

In 1855, Washington Territory extended across present-day Idaho and was attracting an increasing stream of settlers. With securing land for settlers as his first priority, Territorial Governor Isaac Stevens sent agents to Indian villages to select individuals who could represent their people. Stevens ignored federal government instructions to limit talks to areas where Indians and newcomers were living in proximity or where settlers were intruding on the Indians' territory. Instead, he decided to settle the problem by giving all of the more than 20,000 original inhabitants a choice: comply or be obliterated as a people.

In numerous treaty councils with dozens of tribes and subordinate bands he convinced them to give up millions

of acres and move to reservations. At the Hellgate treaty talks, six of the seven bands of Kootenai ceded their lands in Montana and Canada in exchange for the Flathead Indian Reservation. The government also promised to provide annual education, health care and financial support.

The leaders of the Idaho band of Kootenai did not sign the Hellgate treaty, but the government took their land anyway. It left them 12½ acres, but did not recognize them as a tribe or give them any assistance. By 1974 the isolated, impoverished band had been reduced to 67 people living in deplorable conditions. When an elder was found dead of hypothermia in his crumbling, unheated house, members of the Tribal Council realized their people

faced extinction.

Amelia "Amy" Cutsack Trice, then



*Amelia Cutsack Trice*

34 years old, had graduated from a U.S. government high school and had served as one of the five members of the Tribal Council. Other council members asked her to run for the office of chair, a first for a traditional woman.

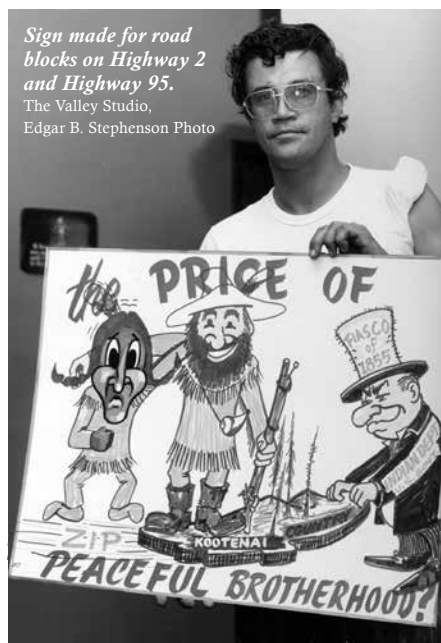
Once elected, she and the council hired Douglas James Wheaton to be Tribal Representative. Trice described him as her "right hand man." The two of them wrote a letter to the Bureau of Indian Affairs, asking for grants to build houses and a new road so people wouldn't get stuck in the mud every spring. The Superintendent of the BIA replied that the tribe had to have a minimum of a 125 members to qualify for aid. He said there was nothing he could do. They would have to make their appeal to a higher authority.

After a lengthy discussion, Trice and Wheaton concluded they were left with one choice. As she put it, "So we said, 'Let's go to war.' We said it jokingly, but it turned serious."

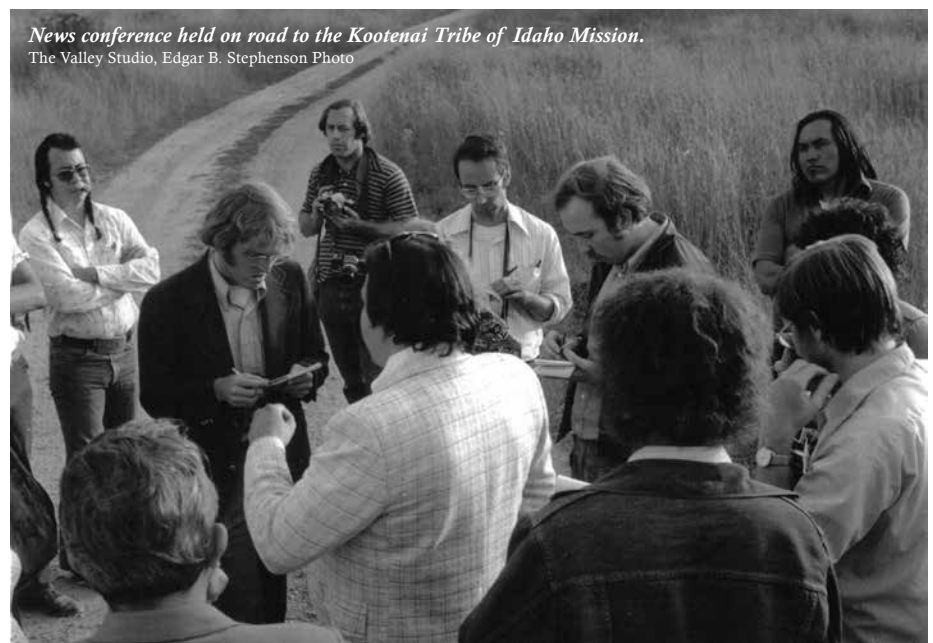


*President Gerald Ford*

She wrote to President Gerald Ford demanding the return of 128,000 acres of tribal land and \$3.2 million as payment for the loss of hunting, fishing,



*Sign made for road blocks on Highway 2 and Highway 95.* The Valley Studio, Edgar B. Stephenson Photo



*News conference held on road to the Kootenai Tribe of Idaho Mission.* The Valley Studio, Edgar B. Stephenson Photo



*The Kootenai Tribe of Idaho received government housing in 1931 to replace old shacks they were living in. These homes were in horrible condition at the time of the 1974 war.* Boundary County Museum Collection

mineral and water rights. The letter stated that if their requests were not met, the Kootenai Nation would assume the United States had relinquished its “power of domain” over the land and a state of war would exist. The phone did not ring. No letter typed on White House stationery arrived. The president did not respond.

Trice’s next move was to send teenage members of the tribe, including her son, to stand on the sides of U.S. Highway 95 to the north and south of the nearby community of Bonners Ferry. They held up hand-painted cardboard signs that read, “Entering Kootenai Reservation, ten-cent toll.” The money was to be used to house and care for elderly tribal members. Donations came in from as far away as France, Germany, Israel and Ireland. Within a week they collected more than \$3,000 and made national news.

The tribe also issued War Bonds, designed by Western artist Emilie Touraine and printed on heavy paper stock. They were signed by Trice and Wheaton. Reporters and television crews began arriving in Bonners Ferry, which had a population of approximately 2,000.

The Kootenai’s declaration of war happened at a time of social upheaval in the 1970s. The efforts of the American Indian Movement to address past and present wrongs had caused an often violent backlash. Physical attacks and human rights violations against Indians and AIM members increased in cities and on reservations.

In February 1973, the

hostilities escalated when Lakota tribal leaders gave AIM permission to make a stand at the town of Wounded Knee on the Pine Ridge Indian Reservation in South Dakota. For 71 days, approximately 200 Oglala Lakota and members of the American Indian Movement were surrounded by FBI agents, the U.S. Marshals Service, BIA police and an army of law enforcement officers. Law personnel were equipped with armored personnel carriers, automatic weapons and 133,000 rounds of ammunition for the M-16 rifles alone. Two AIM members were killed in the ensuing gunfire.

Rumors began circulating in Bonners Ferry that the local Indians were smuggling in guns and rocket launchers. The government’s response to the Kootenai’s action was not as extreme as at Wounded Knee, but a procession of 44 State Police cars pulled into town to maintain order. The troopers outnumbered the Kootenai, but those 67 men, women and children were probably not their main concern. What if this situation escalated into another Wounded Knee?

That possibility worried Trice, too. The police came armed, but she told

her people not to carry guns. “The closest thing we had to a weapon in our tribal office,” she said, “was a fly swatter.” AIM co-founder Dennis Banks offered to send men to stand with them, but Trice declined.

Idaho’s two U.S. senators, Steve Symms and James McClure, listened to the tribe’s grievances and promised to arrange for negotiations with the federal government. The “war” lasted three days. A delegation that included Trice and Wheaton and an attorney for the tribe went to Washington to present their case to Congress. As a result, President Ford signed a resolution giving the Kootenai Tribe of Idaho federal recognition and the transference of 12½ acres as a reservation.

With this incentive and government aid they were able to hire local carpenters, plumbers and electricians. The water and sewage systems were improved. The old houses were torn down and new ones built. The once dying community began to thrive.

In 1986, the Kootenai River Inn with a restaurant, gift shop and spa opened in Bonners Ferry. In 1996, the tribe added a casino that employs half the residents of the town. A clinic provides health services.

The tribe now owns 2,695 acres. It has more than 165 enrolled members. It operates a hatchery to restore the endangered Kootenai River sturgeon and markets Northwest Wild Huckleberry Jam made from fruit gathered on the reservation. The small print on the jar labels declares the contents “Slightly Sinful.”

In 2006, filmmaker Sonya Rosario learned that Trice had double pneumonia. Several Native women urged her to record the former chairwoman’s story before it was lost. Their encouragement resulted in the documentary titled *Idaho’s Forgotten War*.

Amelia Cutsack Trice died of cancer in July 2011. She’s survived by her husband, David, six children, all of whom are college educated, and 16 grandchildren. About her declaration of war and the benefits it brought to everyone in the tribe, she said, “I’m hoping that my children and grandchildren will know how at one time their grandmother was crazy.”

*The Kootenai Tribe of Idaho sold war bonds for \$1 to help finance the war.* Boundary County Museum Collection

