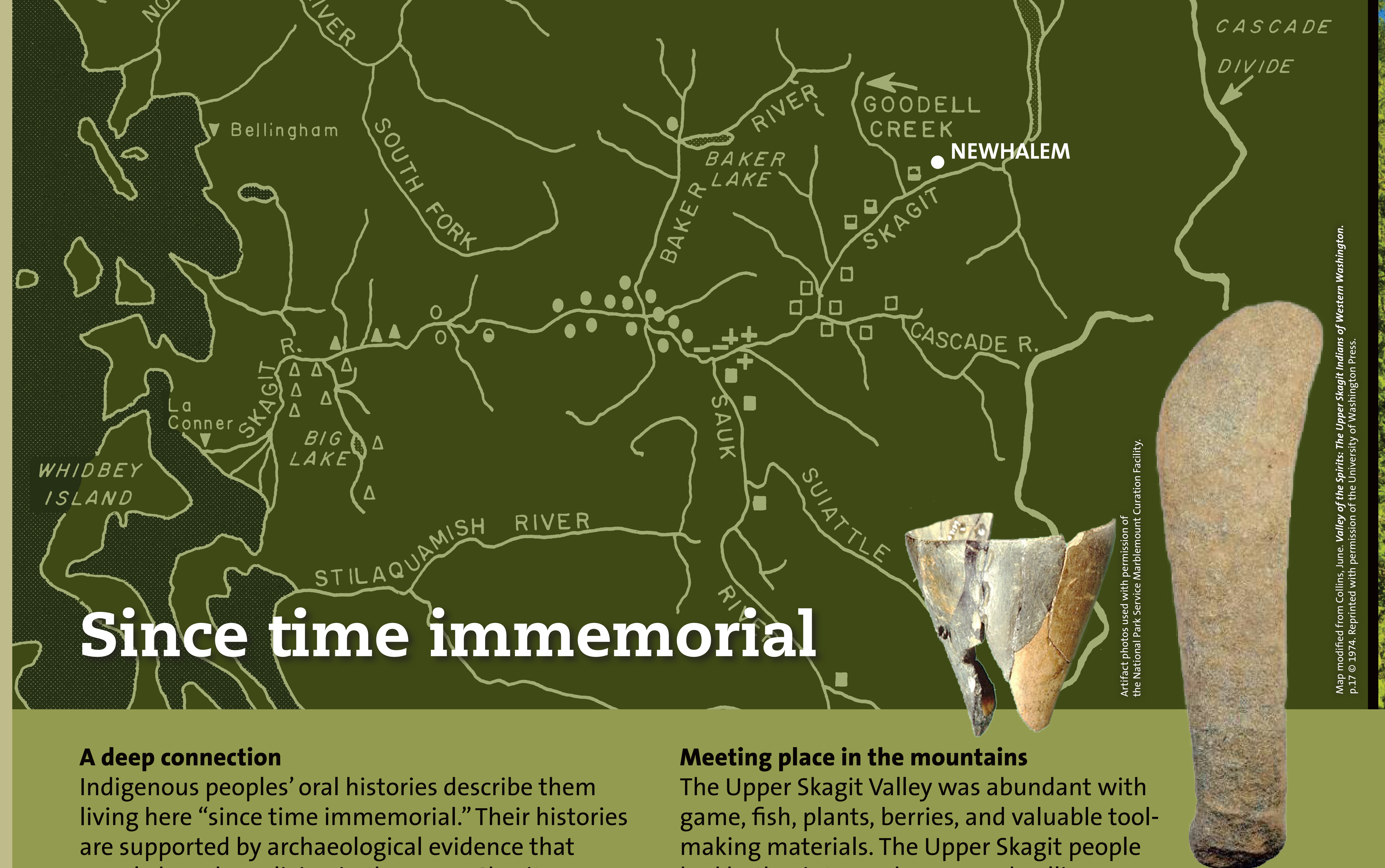
The first peoples of the Skagit

The river and surrounding lands are vitally important to indigenous peoples.

The Upper Skagit, Sauk-Suiattle, and Swinomish tribes use resources and live in the Skagit River watershed between the Ross Dam site and the ocean, as they have for thousands upon thousands of years.



Since time immemorial

Artifact photos used with permission of the National Park Service Marblemount Curation Facility.

Map modified from Collins, June. ***Valley of the Spirits: The Upper Skagit Indians of Western Washington.*** p.17 © 1974. Reprinted with permission of the University of Washington Press.

A deep connection

Indigenous peoples' oral histories describe them living here "since time immemorial." Their histories are supported by archaeological evidence that people have been living in the upper Skagit River watershed continuously for at least 8,000 years, possibly as long as 12,000 years. Evidence includes mountain trails, stone tools, rock shelters, and a hearth dating back about 6,000 years.

Meeting place in the mountains

The Upper Skagit Valley was abundant with game, fish, plants, berries, and valuable tool-making materials. The Upper Skagit people had both winter and summer dwellings between Marblemount and Newhalem, and many others came to hunt, trap, and gather. This area, so near the mountain passes between the west and east sides of the Cascade Mountains, was a meeting place for trade.

Photo © Keith Lazelle

"In our own words": Native perspectives on the Skagit River

Upper Skagit Indian Tribe

"The Skagit River sustained our people for thousands of years with vast numbers of returning salmon. The cold deep water of the Skagit is the residence of the Upper Skagit guardian spirit of wealth. A series of three villages, known as K'wabacáb, began near Damnation Creek and extended to Newhalem."

Sauk-Suiattle Indian Tribe

"For us, the Skagit River is a part of our past, present, and future. It's a way of life—we use it for food, water, transportation, religious activities, recreation, and even communication as we use it to travel down the mountain to visit the tribes below."

Swinomish Indian Tribal Community

"The Skagit River is the center of our existence. Our wealth is in the salmon that originate in the Skagit River."

Skagit is pronounced Sqaǰət (skaj-it) and means "place of sanctuary" in Lushootseed, the language spoken by these three Native American tribes.

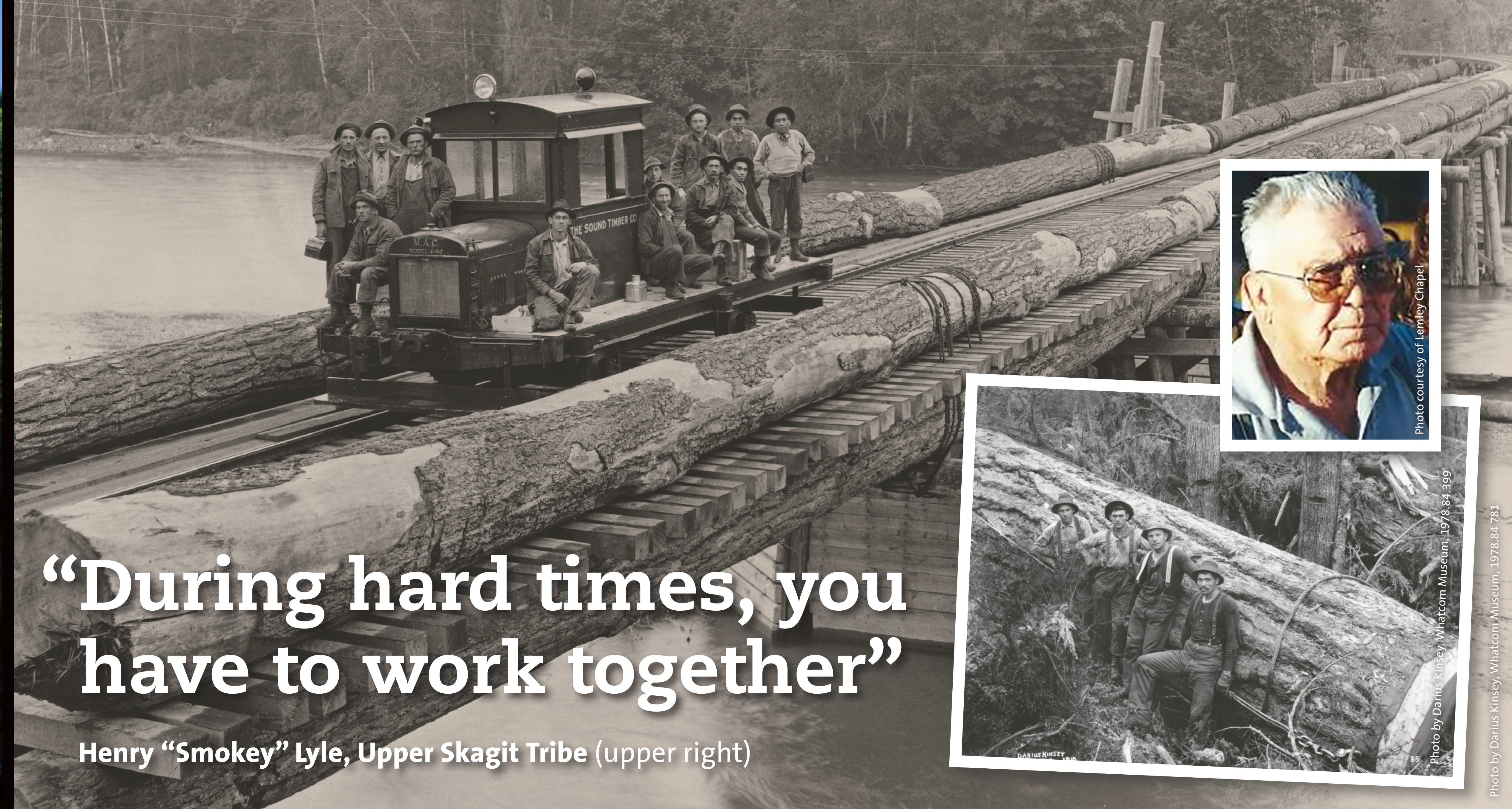

M.A.C.
THE SOUND TIMBER CO.
DARIUS KINSEY
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Photo courtesy of Lemley Chapel

Photo by Darius Kinsey, Whatcom Museum, 1978.84.399

Photo by Darius Kinsey, Whatcom Museum, 1978.84.781

"During hard times, you have to work together"

Henry "Smokey" Lyle, Upper Skagit Tribe (upper right)

Native people from the region continued to live and work here as the Skagit Project grew. Upper Skagit people harvested and smoked salmon at Newhalem in the early years of the project. Later, they came into Newhalem to shop at the Commissary and attend dances, and their children went to high school in Concrete along with children from Newhalem and Diablo.

A handful of native men worked on the project clearing timber (photos above). They were expert loggers, accustomed to harvesting massive trees for house posts and canoes. Some used this knowledge to become riggers, guiding massive equipment into place in the powerhouses.

To this day, some of the Skagit Project's long-serving employees are from local tribes.