Documentary on Federal Recognition ‘Promised Land’ Will Make You Mad

At the September 27 Seattle opening of the documentary “Promised Land,” the writer/director team of Vasant and Sarah Samudre Salcedo recalled their first meeting with Cecile Hansen, Chair of the Duwamish Tribe. They told her about the film they wanted to make of the Duwamish and Chinook fight for federal recognition.

“She said, ‘Is it going to make people mad?’” Sarah Salcedo told the near capacity audience at Seattle’s SIFF Uptown Theatre. “I said, ‘Well, it makes us mad.’ Cecile slammed her hand down on the table and said, ‘Good!’ Then she got up and left and that was the end of our first meeting.”
Now, three and a half years later, the Salcedos have created a film that follows through on that promise. It will make you mad. But it doesn’t happen all at once, it kind of creeps up on you.

The film tells the story of two Pacific Northwest tribes, the Duwamish and the Chinook, and their decades long fight to gain federal recognition. It lets the Native citizens of these two nations tell the story. There is no other narration, just Chinook and Duwamish tribal leaders as well as a few Native and non-Native leaders from other organizations and tribes talking about the effect federal recognition has on Native people.

The Duwamish once lived all over the area now called Seattle. Then settlers came and gradually pushed them off their land through development. They took the name of the greatest Duwamish leader, Chief Si ‘ahl, twisted it into a word they could pronounce, and used it as the name of the city they founded. Much of the remaining land the Duwamish were finally forced to live on was later flooded after the creation of Seattle’s ship canal. Even the Duwamish River, which was named after them, became a chemical sewer as a result of the area’s mid-20th century industrial growth.

The Chinook, whose five tribes inhabited the area around the mouth of the Columbia River, helped the Lewis and Clark expedition survive the winter of 1806. Treaty negotiations with them in the mid-1800s were never ratified by Congress and later attempts to create a new treaty were thwarted when the government insisted, as a treaty requirement, that they move onto the Quinault reservation. The Chinook and Quinault are traditional enemies and the Chinook refused to live with them.

In 1954, the U.S. government terminated relations with four of the five Chinook tribes as part of the Western Oregon Indian Termination Act.

Now there are only about 600 Duwamish and about 2,000 Chinook. Federal recognition can provide funds and other resources that could help them strengthen their identity and sovereignty. The film points out it would provide healthcare and education benefits as well as protection under NAGPRA (Native American Graves Protection and Repatriation Act) for historical and archaeological tribal sites.

The film is about 80 percent interviews, but what it lacks in action it makes up for in character. Hansen, the 80-year-old chair of the Duwamish tribe, recounts how she was drawn into tribal politics in the early 1970s when she was a mom with five kids. Her brother, who was involved in the “fish wars” against the State of Washington told her she needed to get involved in tribal
politics. She became a tribal council member, and in 1975 became the chair. Two years later the tribe began its latest fight for recognition.

Hansen is just a slight woman, petite and bespectacled with an easy laugh and a welcoming smile. She appears like someone you’d meet at a PTA meeting, instead of in the halls of Congress fighting for oppressed people. That is, perhaps, her greatest power, the wonderful “mom” power that can look at absurdity and say, “Hey, come on!” and make even this most stuffy bureaucrat say, “Oh, alright, alright...”

The other endearing character in this saga is Ray Gardner, the former Chinook Tribal Chairman who passed away in February 2015 after a long battle with lung disease. Gardner speaks about how the Chinook received federal recognition in 2001 and how this caused tremendous celebration within the tribe. He then describes how this joy was ripped away from them in 2002 when the Department of the Interior under the Bush administration rescinded recognition due to a technicality.

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This same reversal happened to the Duwamish. On January 19, 2001, just hours before the Clinton administration was about to leave office, the Department of the Interior sent word they had approved the Duwamish petition for recognition. Within 48 hours of that announcement, the DOI, now under the newly inaugurated Bush administration, rescinded the approval, also due to a technicality.

These two reversals form the climax of the film. This is where the Salcedos keep their promise and make people mad. After listening to the struggles of the two tribes to survive colonization, oppression and near genocide, after hearing about all the phone calls, letters, visits to Washington, research, documentation, ceremonies, songs and prayers, we nearly reach the top of the mountain with them, only to go flying off a cliff when we’re told the federal government changed its mind. We glower at the screen in disgust. How can they play with people’s lives like that?

But this isn’t the ending. The film ends on an inspiring note. Gardner, leader of the Chinook, reveals he has a terminal Illness. Throughout the film we see him talking while struggling for breath, an oxygen tube draped under his nose. He talks about how he is ready to die. He’s led a good life and he looks forward to seeing his ancestors. He says he plans to ask them how he did. Did he do okay? He actually seems excited at the prospect of seeing them. He’s ready. We later learn he walked on before the film was completed.

The film is about federal recognition, yes, but on a deeper level it’s about how to be an Indian in the modern world, how to fight even if you’re an elderly lady or a terminally ill man, how to take joy from the fight because of the friends you make, and most importantly, how to face death bravely and with honor, recognizing it as a transition and not an end.

The U.S. will someday crumble into dust and be forgotten like all other empires. But cultures like the Chinook and the Duwamish will endure indefinitely, as long as there are those who love their ancestors and honor them with good work.
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