

Claiming the Land

In 2020, my husband and I bought a small house on two acres with two dozen apricot trees along the Columbia River in The Dalles. It's our get away from the routines of city life in Portland. We come out on the weekends and sometimes during the week.

The property sits just above The Dalles facing east where the tops of the golden hills disappear into the distance. The river reflects the sky. It changes colors depending on the season and time of day—sometimes it is an electric silver-blue at sunset and sometimes a slate grey on an overcast or hazy day. We see the sunrise and occasionally the moonrise, which can be a surprise when it appears like an unexpected dinner guest.

Our spot is nestled among acres of commercial cherry orchards. I often hike in the very late evening, in the dark, among the trees—down gullies and over ridges, whether the moon is out to light my way or not. I never use a flashlight. My other senses guide me through the different groves of apricot and cherry trees. I know where the coyotes sneak under the wire fence by the road and where the owl likes to perch in the upper branches of a decaying pine tree.

One night, coming up a rise, I saw two dark figures silhouetted against the night sky. They were cherry trees but to me they were a presence. Not people exactly, but spirits from another time that had joined me here. I wondered to myself, *Whose land is this?* We purchased the two-acre parcel and traced the land back to its original homestead claim, but it doesn't feel like mine.

Sitting in the yard behind our little home, I study the terrain in the distance.

The house has a view of The Dalles, which is well known for its pioneer history. Wagon ruts from the Oregon Trail can be found nearby. Settlers had to navigate the rocky narrows and waterfalls created by Ice Age floods 14,000 years ago. Historic photographs show Native men fishing on rickety wooden platforms over the roiling water at Ceilio Falls—from tribes local to the area like Wasco, Klickitat, Chinook, Wishram and Yakima and many more from distant lands—using nets and spears to capture enormous and plentiful salmon.

Lewis and Clark made a stop here in 1805 when they traveled down the Columbia River. Their journals include stories about the rocky landscape

and the powerful river, noting that in one Native village, more than 10,000 pounds of salmon were set out on scaffolding to dry in the arid east wind.

It is hard to imagine what it looked and sounded like before the Dalles Dam was completed in 1957.

Yet the hills and sky remain mostly as they were for millennia. Golden monochromatic hills covered with scrub grass tower over the rocky edge of the river and reach toward the blue sky. The hills look desolate, almost like the skin of an animal, other than a green patch here or there where a spring or stream nourishes a copse of scrub oak or a lone pine. The color of the land is a bellwether for the season—dark brown in the winter, electric green in the spring, and the rest of the year a bright amber.

I decided to visit the area, which is now Columbia Hills State Park. I remember my first trip up the gravel road to the upper part of the park. Driving along the rutted path that snakes alongside sheer basalt walls, through dried creek beds, reaching successively higher plateaus, I arrived at the Dalles Mountain Ranch. Original barn structures and outbuildings from the 1880s are perched on what feels like the top of the world. It is breathtaking.

At that moment, I fell in love with the land.

One day, I took my older sister up at sunset so we could enjoy the views and explore the small cemetery there that is surrounded by a wooden fence. Another time, my husband and I hiked into the nearby Brune Timber Culture land where there is a small rock house built over a spring that flows into a tub where the sound of frogs can be heard. I brought my teenage son when he was learning to drive and we saw the biggest owl we could imagine fly out of the barn. But I prefer to visit alone or with my dog. That's when I can go at my pace and I don't get distracted by conversation. I just want to be with the land.

I wanted to claim it for myself, in my heart, so I decided to write a fictional story to connect me to this place and help me understand why I feel such a strong sense of belonging here. For my story to be authentic, I conducted hours of research. I visited libraries and museums in the area. I talked with members of genealogy societies and to local historians. I read books, articles, diaries, homestead patents, national historic registry entries and more. I joined a local writers group.

I read dozens of stories about the white settlers who came in search of a new life—fur trappers and pioneers, gold hunters and homesteaders,

cattlemen and sheep ranchers. Their stories speak of the immensity of the land and the bounty of the area. And then lines were drawn. In 1850, the Donation Land Claim Act allowed a married couple to acquire 640 acres with a signed piece of paper. In 1862, as part of the Homestead Act, evidence of a homestead was now needed to claim the land—buildings and trees. Railroads and highways went in along the shoreline. More legislation and more treaties followed, while land was purchased with cash or gold dust.

One day, I came across an article about the pictographs and petroglyphs at Horsethief Lake, which is at the lower part of the Columbia Hills State Park. I had visited before but never really paid attention. My eyes were always on the hills above.

I registered for a guided tour to the Tsagaglalal ("She Who Watches") pictograph and learned about the history above and below the water. When the Dalles Dam was constructed, raising the water table by more than sixty feet and flooding the rocky narrows and falls, much more was lost than a fishing tradition. Here, basalt ridges towered more than 500 feet above the river, forming a natural amphitheater around a sandy beach that had been the heart of a vast network of villages and communities.

Ten miles downstream from Ceilio, the shores of the Long Narrows, now submerged beneath Horsethief Lake, formed one of the nation's oldest continuously occupied village sites. For thousands of years, Indigenous people lived in and traveled through these sheer canyons, caves, caverns, and rocky inlets. The area was home to a community called Colowesh Bottom, a village called Wishram, and a nationally significant cultural landscape that includes Spedis Valley and Wakemap Mound.

These were only a few of the more than 120 sites that disappeared beneath the floodwaters along the twenty-four-mile shoreline of what is now Ceilio Lake. Lodges and homes, baskets and bowls, elaborately carved objects of stone and bone, colorful paintings, and sacred gravesites—all bore witness to the lives of mothers and fathers, sons and daughters, grandparents and grandchildren.

Yet as I conducted my research, these voices were barely present.

Walking behind the park ranger on the trail, a portion of the Eel Trail where people have traveled since the beginning of time, I was overcome with an emotion that is familiar to me. I felt like I was in church. I felt like my

being here was a sacrament. Prayers of gratitude and pleas for grace swirled through my heart and body, bringing tears to my eyes.

While my research and writing focused on the experiences of the white and European settlers on the hills above, directly below is an underwater world hidden from sight. The road up to the ranch is one of many trails that radiated out from the Narrows, where thousands of Columbia River people lived in harmony with the land for ten thousand years. The land retains the evidence of a vibrant civilization, above and below the surface.

The story I am writing has changed. As I imagine what life was like in 1877 for a female homesteader and sheep rancher on the golden hills, I am drawn to the idea of my main character meeting a Native woman who shares her knowledge and wisdom about the land. As the world around them changes, the two women forge a bond rooted in the deep wisdom of their ancestors.

Whose land is this?

The land has its own history and stories to tell if we care to listen. This isn't your land or my land. This land was not made for you and me, despite what folk singer Woody Guthrie famously sang. The land is a shared resource to be respected and honored for its beauty and history. It doesn't belong to us. We belong to it.

Lisa Orkisz Scardina
August 2026