

Gib Eli: A Gentle Yet Powerful Man

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The Spokane Indian Days Celebration has become a tradition. It seems appropriate that the 1979 powwow is dedicated to a traditionalist – Gibson Eli.



Gib, as he is known to his friends, was just one year old when the first powwow was held in 1914. He was born June 5, 1913, the son of Leyton Moses and Jack Elijah.

Eli lived with his mother and grew up near Ford. The family's home was located near the site of the Suntex sawmill.

Times were hard and money was scarce when Gib was growing up. Even schooling was out of the question.

"Board at the school was \$50," Gib recalled, "My mother went to the superintendent and asked for money for board, clothes, and our lunch, but he said no. So I only got to go to school for one month and had to leave."

Gib and his brother, Cole Moses, were very young boys when they first hired out to cut firewood. "We got paid just fifty cents a rick," he said. "That was all for our mother, though. We had to eat. Sometimes she would give us a nickel, or a dime."



Gib and two of his brothers - Mose Williams (L) and Cole Wilson (R).

Eli was 15 years old before he learned to speak English. "Ignace Camille used to interpret for me," Gib explained in the soft accent that reminds you that English is his second language. "I wanted to learn, though, because I wanted to work for the CCC's (Civilian Conservation Corps) down at Yakima. I taught myself how to talk it there ... and how to read and write, too."

The 1930's melted into the 40's and America went to war. Many of Gib's friends and fellow tribesmen went into military service. "I was 4-F with the Army twice," he said. "I was drinking and disappointed with myself. Then I heard one friend was killed, and another one was missing in action. I decided it was time for me to volunteer." Gib's enlistment made the front pages of the Spokane daily newspapers. He was featured as the first American Indian who had volunteered for service in the Army Air Corps.

"I was with a fighter group," Eli said. "I drove a truck, and we passed the fighters." He spent five years in the air corps—two overseas in Germany. "I reenlisted over there for three years because I was going to marry a German girl," he explained. But that didn't work out. Gib was shipped back to the United States and later left the military with a hardship discharge.

During the early postwar years Eli worked briefly for a propane gas company, a job he left when the fumes damaged his lungs. He moved to Montana to take a brush piling job that

lasted for five years. Then it was back to Spokane and a job with the Great Northwestern Railroad that he held for 20 years until his retirement in 1978.

He shared many of those years with his wife Rose (LaRose) a Kalispel, who died in 1972.

The chronicling of Gib's lifestyle may sound very ordinary—like that of hundreds of other people. What makes his extra-ordinary is that all the while he was working and living in the whiteman's world he maintained his traditional Indian ways. Today he is the only known medicine man in the Spokane Tribe.

"This is given to me," Eli explained humbly. He related how playing hooky from work during a family camas digging trip resulted in his becoming aware of the healing powers with which he had been gifted.

"My brother Cole Moses and I were digging camas with mother," he said. "He worked hard. His bag was full, but I was kinda cheating. I filled my bag with bitterroots. They pull up easy. And then I put some camas on top."

When the boys returned to camp at the end of the day and their mother learned of Gib's trick, she punished him. "I'm happy about that now," Gib said in his slow, deliberate way. "It was a lot of whip ... a lot of strap. She hit me on the head and sent me back out. She said don't come back until your bag is full, or you'll get a good lickin'."

Alone in the digging grounds, still aching from the strap, and frightened by the dark, Gib heard a human voice talk to him. "What are you worried about?" the voice questioned. "Look!"

Gib said he looked and there was camas all about him.

"The voice told me when you grow up to be a man, sing this song and you will help people," Gib recalled. "I heard that song, and he told me to use it right." Later, Gib continued, "Animals started to come to me and tell me how to help people. But I had to wait until I was a man."

Through his youth, Eli observed his grandmother, the wife of Joseph Moses, who practiced healing. "Cole Moses, Mitch Michael, and Ben Moses were powerful, too," he added, "I heard Sam Boyd could do it too, but I never watched him."

For many years Eli was hesitant about discussing his voice or the helpful animals. He helped people who asked him but kept a low profile. Gib also led Jeanette Alec's medicine dance each year on the Colville Reservation.

"I have my own dance at Cusick every year," Gib explained. "When the animals come, I set the date."

Gib's reputation grew as word of his successes spread.

"Now everyone knows about it, so there's no use for me to be quiet anymore," he says.

Gib travels all over the Pacific Northwest and into British Columbia – wherever he is called for help. "I've had lots of offers for money, but I don't charge," he said. "If I did, I might get hurt. I wasn't told to be paid; just told to help people."

The modest man was even offered a position in the urban Indian health center. He would be a staff member and available for those who chose traditional methods over western medicine. "I refused," Gib said with emphasis. "No day does a medicine man have an office and a desk."

"Sometimes my friends think I overdo," he continued, "But I don't think so. They told me that was why I had to go to the hospital. (Eli suffered a major heart attack in 1979, and underwent open heart surgery). When I promise to go and help somebody, I've got to stick with my promise."

Gib never promises a cure or success. "It is not me that heals," he says humbly. "It is a gift ... it only comes through me."

During a medicine session he tells those asking for help to never doubt or question the results. "They shouldn't say, I wonder if I will get well. I tell them to thank God and know that he will keep them that way."

Gib said he feels good that the 1979 powwow is dedicated to him. "I really feel proud that they think so much of me ... that there is more love to me."

Reflecting on the differences in reservation life during his youth and

today, Eli commented: “I wish some of the people would change from their drinking to being friendly and good to everybody. We’re all in one. We need to help one another more.”

Then he mentioned the greatest medicine, or healing power, of all – “We need more love instead of hate.”



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Source:

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