THE KOMEMMA

The attempt to find documented information about the Komemma, the Native people of the Yoncalla area is nearly fruitless. For years, students and scholars have searched for sources that might reveal more about the inhabitants of the area now known as Yoncalla.

Although several professional journalists have attempted to put together a history of the local tribes from interviews with pioneers and their descendants, the narratives consistently take on a European slant and interpretation. Historical societies, history buffs and educational groups have also re-hashed the already written accounts and conclude that their writings are 'authentic.' Well-respected writers, historians and would-be ethnographers of the 20th century have also written sparsely about the Komemma but unfortunately, the same European interpretation skewed the actual facts. This, then, has left the general public primarily with information that is inaccurate and often invented to accommodate the need for data.

The majority of the information in the following narrative has been gathered over the years from descendants of the Komemma, their diaries, letters and reminisces. Other recent research has uncovered bits of true data that has fleshed out the information. The research team included descendants of the Headman *Camafeema* and descendants of one of his wives who was Umpqua. Consultation with tribal groups of the Grand Ronde, Siletz, Coos and Coquille also took place.

References to the Komemma are specifically for the tribal group who lived in the area now known as Yoncalla. The present-day town site including the man-made ponds was once a lush valley providing the Komemma with food resources and other materials necessary for every day life.

Citations will be listed at the end of the narrative unless inserted in the text or footnoted as needed.

FIRST WOMAN

You see, the world was made of stone. There were stone mountains and stone valleys. At the very top of the Stone Mountain fire and from the fire something came to life, and that life became known as Le-lu, First Woman, who walked down from that Stone Mountain with two babies clutched to her breast. As she walked, with every step she took the grass began to grow. And as she sat and as she touched the ground, the rivers began to flow.

And she walked until she came to the valley, the valley of the stone. And there she met Quartux, Mother Wolf, who looked at her and said, "Who are you?" And she said, "I am le-lu, First Woman." And Quartux said, "And where did the babies come from?" And Le-lu, First Woman said, "I dreamed of them and they came to me, but I need someone to watch them while I go out and look around in the world." Quartux looked at her and smiled and her teeth flashed in the sun. Mother Wolf said, "I will watch them."

Le-lu was a bit afraid, but something inside of her made her trust Mother Wolf. So she wove a pack basket of wild iris, kliskwis. And put the babies in the pack basket and strapped them to the back of Mother Wolf and just to make sure the babies would be safe and would not fall out, Le-lu also wove a wide strap and strapped those babies around their head in that basket, to make sure they were safe and she went away to look around in the world. She was gone a long time, but when she came back the babies were safe. Le-lu, Mother Wolf, had taken good care of them. As Le-lu lifted those babies out of that basket she saw that something was different. As she unstrapped them from that basket, took the straps from their head, she noticed that their forehead was flattened. She said, "This is good. From

now on our people will flatten the foreheads of the babies in honor of Mother Wolf, who took such very good care of the babies." Indeed, that's how life came to this earth.

Traditional oral history narrative of the Fearn family, descendant of *Camafeema*

THE KALAPUYA

From the Falls near Oregon City southward to present-day Winchester was once the traditional territory of the Kalapuya Nation. Twelve bands of Kalapuya occupied this area and the southernmost group is known as the *Komemma*.

Three distinct dialects were spoken within the Kalapuya homelands. *Tualatin-Yamhill* was spoken to the north and a central valley language was known, among other names, as *Santiam*, consisting of 6-10 minor groups of dialects.

The group occupying the Yoncalla area developed the southernmost dialect, commonly referred to as 'Yonkalla.' It is believed that isolation from the Willamette Valley was a major factor in the distinct dialect, although all three dialects could be reasonably understood among all the people.

The last known speaker of any of the Kalapuya dialects passed over in 1972, leaving only bits and pieces of the language remembered within families. The Komemma consider the traditional language as "sleeping," rather than "dead" as some linguists refer to languages that have all but disappeared. Early ethnographers such as Frachtenberg, Jacobs and Gatschet collected stories and narratives in the Kalapuya language in the early 1900s. However, today these 'Kalapuya Texts' remain only words on paper until interest can be given to the resurrection of the Kalapuya language.

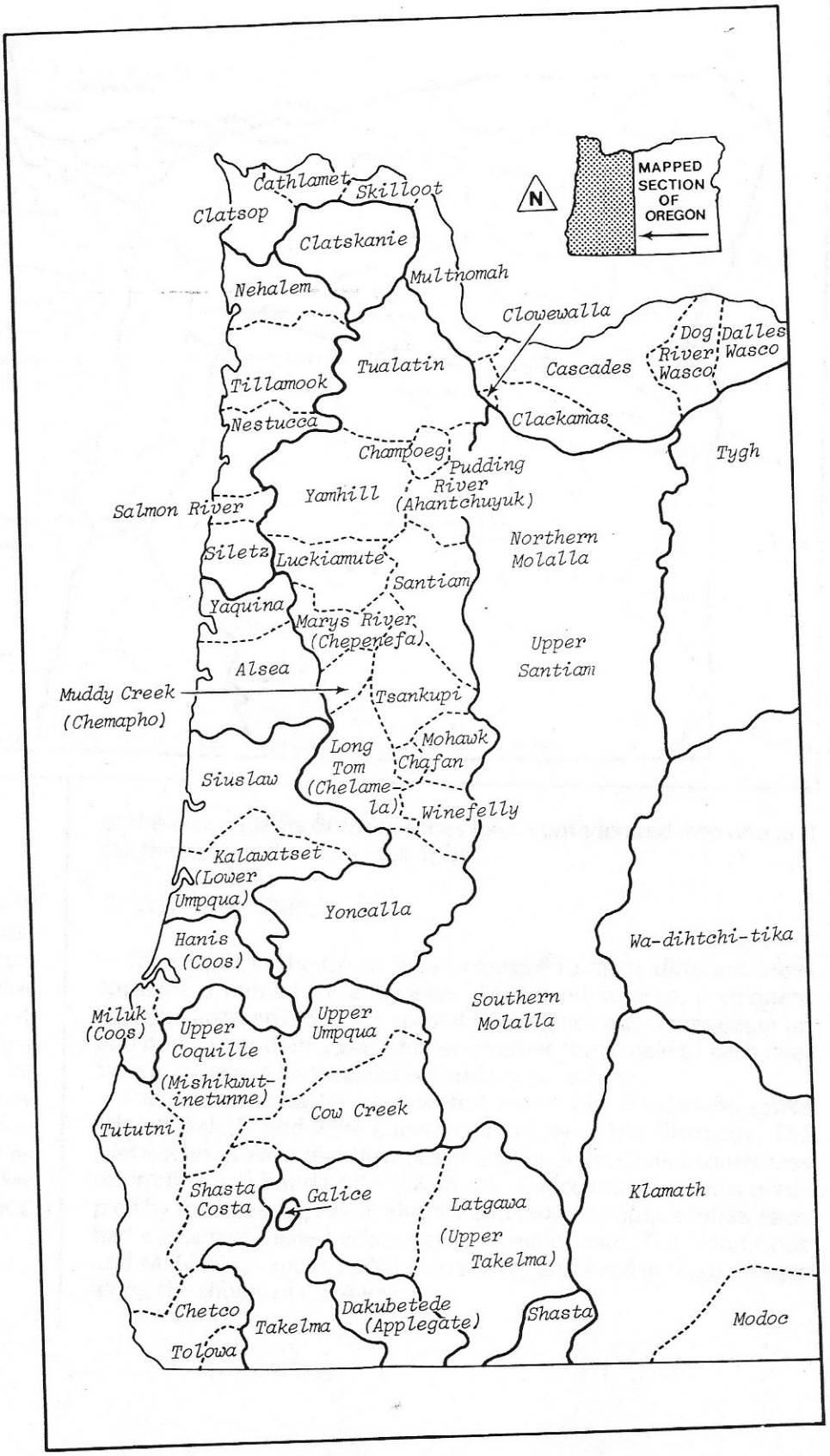
In addition, the Native people of Oregon and the Pacific Northwest spoke a 'trade jargon,' Chinuk Wawa. This was necessary due to the many languages and dialects of the area. Because of the widespread trading activities along the Columbia River, tribes came from all over the Pacific Northwest and as far east as the Plains, each bringing a unique language that could not be well understood were it not for Chinuk Wawa. Most trading and socialization with other tribes took place in Chinuk Wawa.

Early explorers and pioneers learned this trade language easily so that communication was possible with a vast number of dialectically different tribes in the Pacific Northwest.

Kalapuya were once comprised the largest Western Oregon Indian tribe, numbering upwards of 15,000 people before European contact. However, the first sailing ships of the 1700s brought diseases that had never before been experienced in this part of the world…… smallpox, mumps, measles, and a variety of cold and flu viruses. Immediately, the Kalapuya succumbed to the diseases and with no known effective cure, entire villages were decimated. Between 1830 and 1833 malaria swept through the Willamette Valley and the area was known as 'The Valley of Death' because of the devastation from disease. By the time the first overland pioneers reached Oregon, it is estimated that perhaps a mere 5,000 Kalapuya remained with dwindling numbers as the years passed.

The pioneers often wrote in their journals and diaries of the 'pock-marked' Indians of the valley. This was evidence of survivors of smallpox.

In the Yoncalla area, many deaths were attributed to a disease known as 'scroflula,' with symptoms much like tuberculosis. This disease was especially deadly to young children. Those children sent to Chemawa Indian School near Salem were often exposed to scrofula and died soon after.



THE KALAPUYA NATION

THE KOMEMMA

In the area now known as Yoncalla, lived the southernmost of the Kalapuya Nation. It is said that somewhere between eight hundred and a thousand years ago, the Komemma migrated from the lower Willamette Valley. This move was caused by discord among neighboring bands and the Komemma, who wished to avoid conflict, sought the Upper Umpqua valleys for refuge.

Although pioneers referred to the local people as 'Yonkalla Indians', the 'Yongoller' or 'Halo Tribe', the tribal name was *Komemma*, The People (human beings). Tribes to the north referred to the Komemma as *Iyank'let,* or 'people of the high houses'. This name was given because of the sharper pitch of the house roof line as compared to other Kalapuya dwellings.

Although strongly purported as truth by locals, the word "Yoncalla" is NOT an Indian word and does NOT mean…."valley of the eagles." Because the Komemma language was 'difficult' to pronounce, the settlers chose not to keep many original place names and often twisted the sounds of the Komemma language to a more suitable sound.

Four distinct villages occupied sites within the valley, from present-day Cox Road to Rice Hill. In this valley was the largest of the villages, *Splac'ta Alla.* This village was located to the northeast of the current town site.

KOMEMMA HOUSING

The Komemma were not a nomadic people, but rather, lived in permanent villages. Houses made of split cedar and fir clustered around a central meeting area with a prominent and communal 'dance house' structure. Houses were not as large as those north of the Columbia River, but rather modest, ranging in length from 20 to 30 feet as an average. Each house was a semi-subterranean structure, with a floor dropped down four to five feet below the surface. This

enabled the house to stay warm and insulated in winter and provided a cooling feature in summer. One side of the pitched roof dropped to ground level against prevailing wind and weather for extra protection. In most houses, the entryway was a round hole in one end of the structure with steps or a ladder for access to the floor.

Within each house lived an extended family, with sleeping platforms along the edges of the structure and a central fire area. During cold and rainy weather, cooking was done inside the house but most activities took place outside. Archaeological evidence of the outlines of plank houses show fire pits and ‘shelves’ erected for storage.

The ‘runs’ of various fish enabled the Komemma to vary the diet and they set up temporary camps near the best fishing spots. Rounded shelters of brush and limbs were erected as housing and used for the duration of the fishing. These would then be abandoned and over the winter would most likely collapse so that little sign remained of the former inhabitants. These brush shelters were also used on occasion when the women traveled to harvest certain types of herbs, roots or a particularly sought-after variety of camas.

FOOD SOURCES

The Komemma were hunters and gatherers. Within the valleys and surrounding hillsides, the people hunted deer, elk and small animals for food. Fish were also taken from streams and rivers using weirs or with harpoon-like spears. Eel was a common food source also as well as fresh-water clams. Trade with coastal tribes or those along the Columbia River gave the people an opportunity to obtain a larger variety of fish and seafood. Often, the Komemma would travel along the Umpqua to tidewater near Scottsburg for gatherings with relatives who lived nearer to the coast. These gatherings always resulted in feasts and trading of food resources.

Komemma Hunter Illustration by Susan Applegate

The Komemma did not kill wolves or bear. It was forbidden to kill wolves because of the sacredness of the animal that cared for the first babies in the story of Creation. Only certain powerful people could possess the skin of a wolf and this was obtained from animals that had perhaps died from a fight or from aging.

Bear was also taboo. When skinned, the bear resembles the bone and muscular structure of a human being and consequently, the bear was considered an animal relative. In one of the Komemma traditional stories, it is said that, “The Komemma could turn themselves into bear-like and hairless beings who traveled north to the Tualty (Tualatin) to raid the villages if provoked.”

Spear fishing Illustration by Susan Applegate

In the local valleys and uplands, the Komemma hunted deer and elk. This was done with bow and arrow and spear. The Komemma used long-bows made of yew wood that stood "…as tall as a man's shoulder." These powerful weapons could fell an elk.

The lowlands and marshy-type of terrain were sources of ducks and other waterfowl. Duck eggs were also harvested as well as eggs of other birds. These resources, combined with game and fish provided a variety of foods that gave the Komemma a balanced diet.

By far, camas (*camassia quamash*) was one of the most important food resources. The valley was abundant with fields of camas that were selected for their variety and taste. In the parent Kalapuya language, there are at least a dozen words to describe camas, it's taste and color.

Camas was harvested in the spring as soon as the flower began to fade and was harvested until the late summer when very little evidence of the plant remained. Each valley had a variety of camas that was prized for its certain taste and quality. Often, the Komemma traded camas resources with tribes to the north.

Women and girls were the primary harvesters of camas, using long digging sticks with horizontal handles to pry the bulb from the ground. Most often the women would roast the bulbs on site using specially selected river rock lining a pit. A fire was then set on top of the rocks and allowed to burn for several hours to heat the rocks. Layers of fern and grasses then lined the pit and the camas was placed on top, covered by another layer of fern and sod. Allowed to roast for an entire day, the camas was cooked and ready to use in stews and pemmican-type cakes. The camas that was harvested in summer was commonly hung in oak trees in loosely-woven wild iris nets. Allowed to dry, the camas was then pounded and used to make flat 'cakes' for meals.

Although the Komemma were not agriculturists, they did ‘tend’ the fields of camas by regularly pulling out shoots of the oak trees. They also saved seeds of wild tobacco to be planted in the rich soil of decaying trees. Seeds of the wild

sunflower or tarweed, *Salawa* in the Komemma language, were harvested after the burning of the valleys and used in a mixture of berries and nuts.

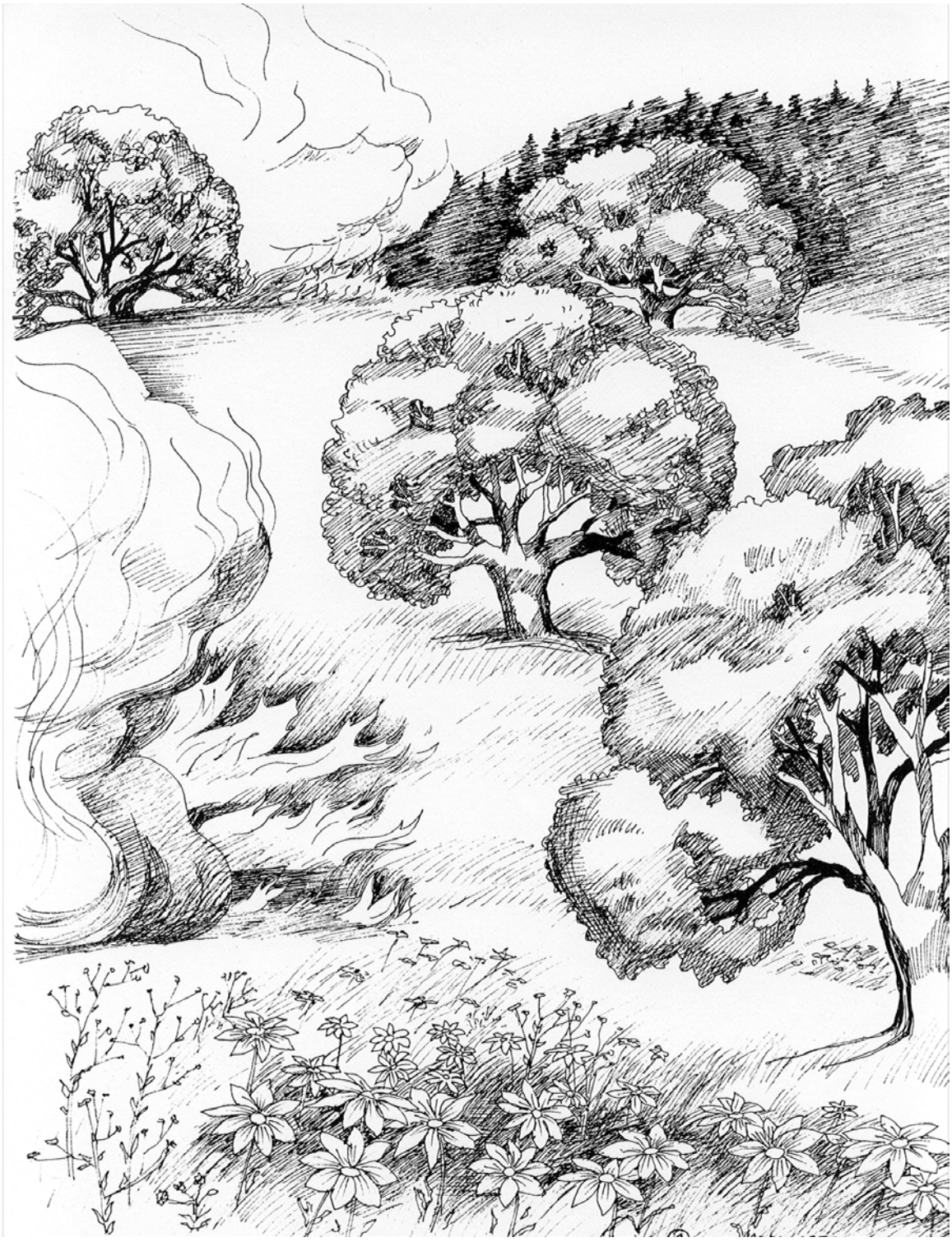
RESOURCE MANAGEMENT

The use of fire to maintain the valleys was often misunderstood by explorers and settlers. Some, such as the botanist David Douglas, commented that the valleys looked as if they were “…a well-kept park in England.” In the late summer, many of the first Europeans to visit the Willamette Valley were aghast that ”… the entire valley is ablaze.” Over all, burning of the valley was seen as a threat to farms and settlements and was soon banned in the mid-1800s.

The Komemma and other Kalapuya people regularly set fire to the valleys to provide nutrients for camas and other plants, to toast the seeds of the *Salawa* and to concentrate game in certain areas. The clearing of the fields by burning insured the lack of underbrush so that deer and elk were more visible to hunters. In addition, the burning roasted the wild grasshoppers which were used as a food source. The Komemma used a unique method to concentrate the grasshoppers during a burn. Long, shallow trenches were dug and as the fire approached, the grasshoppers fled to the safety of the trenches, allowing the fire to ‘toast’ them as it blazed across the valley. They would then be scooped up by the Komemma and eaten as a food supplement.

Each village and family had responsibility for a certain area to be burned. The burning commonly took place in late summer. After Five days of ceremony, the signal of a powerful ‘medicine woman’ allowed the fires to be set, and then tended by the men. Rarely did a fire get out of control and the burning usually lasted for two to three days.

When burning was halted by governmental provision during the mid-1800s, it was within a few short years that plagues of grasshoppers devastated the settlers' crops.



Trees and the use of fire Illustration by Susan Applegate

THE SACRED

Komemma people lived a life in harmony with Nature. The philosophy or ‘religion’ entails a complex system of honoring and respect. No attempt to publicize the details will appear in this narrative out of respect for the wishes of the Komemma to remain private.

However, a subject of local interest is a location commonly referred to as “Halo Rock.” This is a large boulder with petroglyphs and other inscriptions that date back many hundreds of years. It is a subject of fascination for the local community, with many people wishing to ‘see it.’ In the past, vandalism has taken place on a major level, with defacements by Europeans over the years. It has been scarred, scratched and pecked away at to the point that many of the ancient marks are indistinguishable. This has caused concern among the Komemma descendants who wish to leave the site intact.

This rock is one of the most sacred places to the Komemma. It is the center of much of the beliefs about ancestors and ‘religion.’ The ancient markings are not merely ‘unknown’ as some scholars and educators have surmised. The Komemma of today know and understand what the markings mean and how they pertain to the tribe and local area. The Komemma prefer not to share that information, as it is a private matter among the families.

The rock is not a tourist attraction to be gawked at and studied. Because it is a sacred place, the Komemma hope that sightseers will respect the wishes of the Komemma for the rock to be left alone.

Camafeema, Headman of the Komemma (1800-1878)

Photo courtesy KCPA

A NATION DISPLACED

In 1851, treaty negotiations began with the Indian tribes of the Willamette Valley. Treaties were, of course, agreements between the United States government and aboriginal tribes. Most treaties called for the forfeit of Indian land in exchange for a ‘concentrated’ plot of land for the tribal groups to live together. This led to removal of the tribes to distant reservations, most often by force. Troops of soldiers were sent out in the mid-1800s to round up Native people and force them onto reservations, primarily at Siletz and Grand Ronde.

When soldiers came to take away the Indian people of the Yoncalla area, they were stopped by Charles Applegate and his family. The Applegates vowed to ‘take responsibility’ for Camafeema’s family and consequently they were allowed to remain in the area.

Over the years, many of the Komemma moved to different areas of the state to seek employment or to be with extended families. Many children were sent to Chemawa Indian School near Salem or to various ‘trade schools’ to the north. As generations passed, the Komemma were no longer visible as a tribal group and soon the Komemma were thought to have ‘disappeared.’

The United States government initiated a policy of Indian Termination in the early 1950s. This act of termination severed all ties between Indian tribes and the US government. However, this was a disastrous move that undermined the family and tribal ties that existed. Consequently, in the 1970s Indian tribes began petitioning the government for reinstatement and recognition of tribal status. As a result, Oregon now has nine Federally-recognized tribes. Many of the Komemma are now enrolled members of the Grand Ronde and Siletz confederations.

THE FAMILIES OF THE KOMEMMA

When the pioneer Applegate family came into the Yoncalla area shortly before 1850, they encountered *Camafeema,* the Headman of the nearby village of *Splac'ta Alla*. This initial meeting in mutual respect ensued in a lifetime friendship between the Komemma and the Applegates. By this time in history, the Kalapuya Nation and especially the Komemma were a struggling group of people, beset by disease and lack of resources. Perhaps it is because of the pioneer's perception of the destitute tribe, the leader, *Camafeema*, was referred to as "Halo," a word in the Chunk Wawa that means 'without' or 'not having much.' Even today, local landmarks bear his nickname… Halo Trail, Halo Hills, etc.

Camafeema had five wives in his lifetime as Headman. One of his wives, *Dunifo*, was a good friend of Melinda Applegate and often visited the Applegate home. *Camafeema* and *Dunifo* had three children: Lalouise, 'Blind John' and Paul.The fate of *Lalouise* is unknown but in the mid- 1800's, Blind John traveled to the Siletz reservation for treatment of his blindness and subsequently died there of unknown causes. Paul, better known as Be-El, became a prominent figure in the Yoncalla area.

The following is a story that has been told within the Komemma families for generations.

BE-EL AND SALISTA… A TRUE LOVE STORY

Camafeema had three sons with his wife, Dunifo. One of them he named Paul, since most Indian people were encouraged to give their children Christian names. But the sound of 'au' does not exist in the language of the Komemma, so he became known as Be-El, the closest pronunciation the Komemma could give.

Be-El was sixteen years old and he was a fine horseman. He had a little horse named Mowicha, which means 'little deer' in the Chinook trade jargon. Mowicha was a racehorse and living up to her name, she became known as the fastest horse in the valley. Racing arenas abounded in that time. Whenever a fair or festival would take place, horse racing was a major attraction. Pioneers raced

pioneers; Indians raced Indians and pioneers raced Indians, for the most part, all in good sport. All up and down the Willamette Valley, horse racing arenas were a part of trading fairs and gatherings. Be-El and Mowicha were well known and many a side bet was placed in favor of the little horse.

Early one Spring, Be-El's father, Camafeema, said to him, "It's time you found a wife." The son of a Headman should be married at the age of sixteen, as was the custom then.

But Be-El wanted nothing to do with marriage. He was sixteen years old and the finest horseman in the country. He didn't need a wife. But out of respect for his father, Be-El agreed to travel to the Columbia River country to find a wife. The villages of the Multnomahs had beautiful women and the Multnomahs were allies of the Komemma.

So Be-El and Mowicha made the trip to the Columbia River. When they arrived at the encampments of the Multnomahs, it was Spring trading time…….. and horse racing in every village along the Columbia. Be-El entered every race he could and won every one of them. His horse, Mowicha, was the fastest horse people had ever seen. For weeks, Be-El raced and forgot about why he was there. He was supposed to look for a wife.

On one warm day, Be-El was walking through one of the Multnomah villages and he saw a young girl. She was the most beautiful girl he had ever seen. He fell in love with her. She was thirteen years old, a very marriageable age then, and her name was Salista. But there was a problem. Some other man had offered Salista's father thirty horses as the bride price. In those days, a 'bride price' had to be paid; gifts to the father and family of the intended wife. It was an agreement not be broken; a promise of marriage.

As each day went by and Salista and Be-El met secretly. They knew they should be man and wife, but Be-El didn't know what to do. At last, he gathered his courage and went to talk to Salista's father. He begged and pleaded for him to give back the bride price of thirty horses.

"We'll run away," Be-El said. He knew that if they did, Salista's father would lose face and be ashamed. Salista's father, perhaps a businessman, agreed. He said, "Bring me fifty horses next Spring and I will take care of the agreement with the other man."
Be-El was overjoyed and returned to Yoncalla and the village of Splac'ta Alla. He gathered horses all winter. Even Charley Applegate gave him two horses to help out. But when Spring came, Be-El had less than twenty horses. A livestock disease had killed many horses that winter. What could he do? It was early Spring and he should start up to the Columbia River to talk with Salista's father.

With less than twenty horses in tow and riding his beloved Mowicha, Be-El traveled to the Multnomah country. He immediately went to Salista's father to argue the agreement. "I have only these horses and my Mowicha. What can we do?" he said.

After Be-El left in the Spring, Salista's father had given back the bride price of thirty horses and made other gifts to the man who wanted to marry Salista. The man was angry and disappointed but had accepted. So, to save his reputation, Salista's father proposed a race.

"We have a fast young horse in the village. I think she's faster than your Mowicha. With one run of the race track, if you win, you can have Salista. If you lose, you leave all your horses and you leave Salista and never return." Be-El agreed. His little Mowicha had never lost a race.

The track was prepared and the race began but little Mowicha lost. She went lame. They didn't know it then but the man who had offered the thirty horses as the bride price was so jealous that he'd driven a stone into Mowicha's hoof. And so not knowing what the man had done, Be-El kept his part of the agreement. He returned to Yoncalla, heartbroken. He swore he would never marry.

That Winter was one of the worst on record. There was four feet of snow in the Kalapuya range. One day while he was out hunting, Be-El heard a noise behind some trees. When he went to look, there was Salista. She had walked 150 miles down the valley to be with the man she loved and she was only 14 years old.

She was half frozen….almost dead. He took her to the village of Splac'ta Alla and used all the medicines he could. Melinda Applegate came with pioneer medicines and tried to cure Salista. It seemed that nothing would work.

Nearly a week after Be-El had found her, there were rumors that her father was coming to look for her, so she was taken to the Applegate house and hidden in a pantry.

After many weeks, Salista began to feel better. She recovered and in a very short time, she and Be-El were married. They lived on a homestead in Scotts Valley, not far from the present-day town of Yoncalla. They had nine children but only three of them lived due to the disease of scrofula.

Most descendants of the Komemma trace their lineage to Camafeema and Dunifo and their children.

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Perhaps Camafeema's prominent wife was Mary, from the Umpqua tribe. It was from this union came Mack, who lived locally near present-day Anlauf and had many good friends among the pioneers. Mack and his son, Sam played on a local baseball team for many years.

Mack's son, Sam, became the subject of a book by Dean Baker in 1981. The title of his book, "The Last Yoncalla," contributed to the myth that upon Sam's death, no more "Yoncalla Indians" remained.

However, descendants of *Camafeema* are alive and well and number perhaps approximately eighty-five, living in various areas. But it wasn't until the 1990s that many Komemma began moving back to the local area, hoping to once again connect with the land their ancestors have called home since the world began.

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Note: Interviews with Jackson, Fearn, Lanegan, Waters family descendants (1999). Many of these interviews were made prior to 1999 but compiled into one resource data base during that year as a part of an oral history interview project compiled by The Komemma Cultural Protection Association (KCPA). Much of the information is common family knowledge and it is difficult to cite each individual source of information. Many family members contributed to the project over the years and this base of Komemma knowledge has become the basis for information among the families.
Also, over the years, KCPA has had dialogues with many tribal cultural offices such as Grand Ronde, Siletz, Coquille and Coos.

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