Chinook Indian Nation

Native peoples called these shores home for generations. Their descendants continue to keep that heritage alive today.

Story by MATT WINTERS • Photos by DAMIAN MULINIX

Members of the Chinook Indian Nation are proud of their maritime traditions.

Each December's breath-robbing riot of storms at the mouth of the Columbia River always catches in my throat like a salmon bone, making me think of what it must have been like a thousand years ago, when no white man even imagined this coast where people had already been living for hundreds of generations. It is inspiring, scary, and profoundly humbling.

A visit to the seaside and river towns around the Columbia also is a journey to the villages of...
one of North America's most successful civilizations. Access to water and other attributes that appeal to modern homeowners also inspired native people to select the same sites. If Native Americans had built from marble instead of cedar, tourists would get a truer sense of the scope and grandeur of history on this shore of spirits.

In the Pacific Northwest where “lost” civilizations didn’t have much metal, objects were mostly made of wood. The powerful Clatsop and Chinook tribes — plus others whose names are barely remembered, such as the Kilookaniuck — made household and ceremonial objects from perishable cedar and other woods. Judging by rare surviving examples collected by early white explorers, these tribes more than made up for in artistry what they lacked in precious metals. Entire houses were sculptures of a kind, now melted away by time.

Visiting the lower Columbia in the winter of 1846-47, artist Paul Kane provided some of what little we know of the twilight of the mighty Chinook empire. He described village houses constructed in pits dug three feet into dry ground, about 20 feet square. “Round the sides, square cedar boards are sunk and fastened together with cords and twisted roots, rising about four feet above the outer level.”

He made a painting on paper of the interior of a riverside ceremonial lodge. “It was here,” according to modern authors Diane Eaton and Sheila Urbanek, “that the winter ‘spirit singing’ took place and supernatural powers were sought: power for curing, for hunting, for canoe making. Those who were successful in the quest emerged from behind the dance screen into the firelight to the reverberation of drumming and the rattling of deer hooves. In the flickering firelight, in songs and in dances, they gave proof of the spiritual powers invested in them.”

Surviving to this day is a simple mat woven from cattails, a specialty of the Clatsop, used to weather-proof the roofs and walls of plank houses. Obviously highly perishable in our harsh weather, this mat is nevertheless executed with outstanding verve, interweaving vertical strips of maidenhair fern to create an undulating pattern. Visit the fantastic Columbia Pacific
Heritage Museum in Ilwaco to see the time-torn prow of a Chinook canoe. Pause for a moment to study this pragmatic sculpture, allowing your mind to wander back to a time when it was dashed with salt spray while helping speed ancient people toward a home where virtually every board and bowl were works of art.

All this speaks of a cultural sophistication beyond our imagination. Think of the stories, songs, and artworks that must have been spun in those snug, smoky houses over the endless months and centuries of incessant rain; the baby-making and gossip and back-scratching. An uncountable lost fortune of human experience echoes across these broad waters.

(http://www.discoverourcoast.com/wp-content/uploads/2016/02/Chinook-quote.jpg)"Once there was a people so wealthy, plump, and sleek that they drank sea lion oil straight and didn’t have to look for food all winter long,” author Rick Rubin wrote. “They danced and sang and recited stories instead. These people’s upriver neighbors bent under 90-pound packs. These people just carried their big boat down to their river, piled in several tons of trade goods — cranberry preserves, smoked salmon, dried clams, six or seven kinds of vegetables, fur robes, and arrow-proof battle armor — and paddled a hundred miles or so up the river to trade."

They were the mightiest tribe in the Columbia River Basin. Kane and other visitors in the early 19th century wrote, for instance, of the Chinook Chief Casanov, who could lead 1,000 men into battle in 1829 and ruled by terror through the agency of an assassin known as his scoocoom, a kind of evil genie.

This way of life was doomed by the arrival of settlers, traders, and the germs endemic in the European population. In the case of the mighty Casanov, Kane wrote, “His own immediate family, consisting of 10 wives, four children, and 18 slaves, were reduced in one year to one wife, one child, and two slaves.” His only remaining son later died of tuberculosis.
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But the Chinook endure.

Today, the Chinook Indian Nation, with its headquarters in Bay Center on the eastern shore of Willapa Bay, is engaged in a concerted effort to win White House support for restoration of its official status as a federally recognized tribe.

Nineteenth century plagues, a pattern of friendly integration with white culture, and deliberate government policies aimed at denying them their presence around the strategically important mouth of the Columbia all played a role in making the modern Chinook less visible today than many other less consequential tribes.

The Chinook and Clatsop gained new momentum in the years leading up to the 2005-06 bicentennial of the Lewis and Clark Expedition. Lower Columbia River Indians were crucial to the expedition's survival during their difficult winter on this coast, when supplies and spirits were at low ebb.

On Nov. 11, 1805, William Clark wrote five "Indians came down in a canoe, the wind very high from the S.W. with most tremendous waves brakeing with great violence against the Shores, rain falling in torrents ... we purchased of the Indians 13 red charr which we found to be an excellent fish we have ... the Indians left us and Crossed the river which is
about 5 miles wide through the highest Sees I ever Saw a Small vestle ride, their Canoe is Small, maney times they were out of Sight before the were 2 miles off. Certain it is they are the best canoe navigators I ever Saw."

As bicentennial plans moved forward, the Indian role gained greater prominence, with acclaimed designer Maya Lin overseeing installation of a key element of The Confluence Project in Cape Disappointment State Park. The project honors Native American life here on the western edge of North America. At about the same time, an archaeological dig at the site of Lewis and Clark's pivotal Station Camp discovered Indian remains in a collapsed plank house, a finding that eventually led to the site being dedicated as a place of strong significance for both the expedition and the Chinook people. It now is a unit of Lewis and Clark National Historical Park.

"Happy" isn't a term most would have used at the time to describe the discoveries of Chinook ruins, artifacts, and bones. For surviving Chinook descendants, it was another painful reminder of loss and a century of disrespect. But from an archaeological-dig standpoint, it was golden. Scientists including Douglas Wilson of Portland State University and Astoria-based Brian F. Harrison found something that could eventually deserve World
Heritage Site designation as a prime meeting place of cultures, one of the original Pacific Rim free-trade zones.

“The Chinook Middle Village (qíqayaqílxam) site and its other components — Lewis & Clark’s Station Camp and the salmon cannery town of McGowan — are iconic of the change affected by the fur trade and the inevitable march of the Pacific Northwest into modernity,” according to a report on the dig. “The site is on the cusp of history in the Pacific Northwest. It reflects a time when the Chinook at the mouth of the Columbia River were at the zenith of their power ... The site is the earliest known archaeological site at the mouth of the Columbia River containing extensive information on the fur-trade era networks of interaction between Chinooks, other American Indians, and British and American traders.”

Chinook Tribal Chairman Tony Johnson, right, leads drummers greeting the arrival of a canoe at Chinook Point in Fort Columbia State Park in Washington. Part of the tribe’s annual First Salmon Ceremony in late June, the day-long event expresses thanks to the salmon for migrating back to the Columbia River.

The decade since the bicentennial has included many events for the Chinook, with some of the most significant consisting of continuation of cultural touchstones that have now survived countless generations. The tribe is again increasingly reestablishing its maritime heritage. In July 2016, a tribal delegation will once again paddle down the Columbia, out to sea, and north to visit the tribes of the Salish Sea. On June 17, the tribe conducts its First Salmon Ceremony at Fort Columbia State Park — though the ceremony is limited to tribe
members and invited guests, photos of arriving canoes can be taken from the surrounding shoreline.

[http://www.discoverourcoast.com/wp-content/uploads/2016/02/Chinook-words.jpg]Living Chinooks are actively engaged in efforts to strengthen and practice the tribe's language and artistic traditions. Tribal Chairman Tony Johnson is one notable leader of this effort. Chinook jargon, a simplified version of the formal and highly complex Chinook language, survived as a practical trading language on the Northwest coast well into the 20th century. It still provides a comparatively easy point of entry for those wishing to explore Chinook linguistics. (One amusing note for tourists who bring quarreling children here via long car rides: The Chinook jargon word for “Brother” is “Ow”!)

It's tempting to believe that if everyone who lives here woke up one soggy morning speaking Chinook, our whole world would change forever. What we speak imprints itself on the reality we perceive. The Chinook people and their language were born of this place that positively churns and boils with its own character. Back in the long age of the Clatsop and Chinook, every mountain, headland, and creek was wrapped in tragedy and humor, demons and gods. Stories grew like moss on every geographical feature.

Chinook words, philosophy, culture, and artworks may offer the best understanding of this utterly unique kingdom of water and mystery.

There is a vast, immortal timelessness about the waters of the Columbia estuary, a feeling that the next bend may reveal a Chinook trading party racing across storm-tossed waters in cedar canoes. Go down to the river’s edge or to the ocean’s racing tide line. Watch the horizon. Imagine legends of the past racing toward a bright future for the Chinook people here in their lost paradise on the Columbia.
Chinook place names

The Chinook people have lived at the mouth of the Columbia for thousands of years. But we have scant knowledge of the names they gave things — the tribe having been driven to the very brink of extinction almost before anyone was paying attention.

Writing in 1863, linguist George Gibbs was the only person to make a systematic effort to capture these shards of language. Even then, the complexities of Chinook pronunciation were known to only a few.

Here are a few of the original names of places we love, words of power, of creation:

A-wak’atl  Astoria
Su-kum-its’i-ak  Tongue Point
Ka-is’  Cape Disappointment
Ti’chuts  Long Beach Peninsula
No-wétl-kai-ils  Point Ellice
Nos-to-ils  Chinook Point
Nak-i-kláu-a-nak  Youngs River
Wi’mahl  Columbia River
Facts about the Chinook

Chinook Indian Nation - Our Coast


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• The first person to teach English in Japan, in 1847 and 1848, was Chinook tribal member Ranald MacDonald. Grandson of famous Chinook Chief Comcomly and son of Hudson's Bay Company fur trader Archibald McDonald, he is remembered in modern Japan as a notable historical figure.

• Comcomly, a leader of the Chinook when Lewis and Clark visited in the winter of 1805-06, helped maintain friendly relations between the tribe and the region's first wave of white settlers in the first decades of the 19th century. His skull was stolen from his grave in 1835, was displayed in Portsmouth, England for more than a century and stored at the Smithsonian in Washington, D.C. from 1956 to 1972, before finally being restored to the tribe. Traditional Chinooks bound the soft skulls of their infants, resulting in a permanently elongated shape in adulthood.

• The modern Chinook Indian Nation has about 2,700 members. They live worldwide but remain concentrated in the southwest corner of Washington state and in Clatsop County, Oregon.

• In 2016, the tribe's headquarters is in Bay Center, Washington, on the eastern shore of Willapa Bay. Tony Johnson is tribal chairman. Pacific County Sheriff Scott Johnson is another notable living member of the tribe.

• The Chinook Indian Nation includes many descendants of the Clatsop Tribe in Oregon. However, a separate entity, Clatsop-Nehalem Confederated Tribes, is based in Seaside. Both the Chinook Indian Nation and the Clatsop-Nehalem Confederated Tribes are attempting to obtain official federal legal status.

• The correct pronunciation of “Chinook” is chin-ook, like the part of your face; not shin-ook, like the part of your leg. Some tribal members include a “t” sound: Tchinn-ook.

• “Chinook” and “king” are names for the largest and most famous species of Columbia River salmon (Oncorhynchus tshawytscha). They were a mainstay in the diet of Chinookan people in the Columbia River watershed.

• The name “chinook” is also applied to a warm wind from the ocean that melts away inland snow, and to large