

Paddling in canoe, students learn Native American history

By **Diana Kruzman**
The Oregonian/OregonLive

PORTLAND (AP) — The 36-foot tribal canoe listed to the left as it pushed away from the dock, looking dangerously close to spilling into the still green waters of Lake River.

Its crew — eight college students, one professor and four members of the Chinook Indian Nation — paddled to the left, then the right. A soft breeze picked up and light rain began to fall, dulling the reflection of the shoreline in this tributary of the Columbia River about 25 minutes north of Vancouver.

Tribal Chairman Tony Johnson instructed everyone to raise their paddles — the crescent-shaped ends marking them as distinctly Chinookan — and plunge them into the water.

“Kanawi kanamakwst — all together now,” Johnson said, translating to English from the tribe’s language as the canoe straightened out and began to move forward at a brisk clip.

Johnson helped guide the canoe as part of a new summer Native American literature course at Washington State University Vancouver.

The class is a first-time collaboration with the Chinook Nation and one of the few courses in the region that offers the chance to earn class credits outdoors. It aims to help students connect with local tribes and learn about the issues important to them - from environmental problems to their status with the federal government.

But mainly, its goal is to dispel the notion that Native Americans are relics of the past, Johnson said. For nearly 3,000 members of the Chinook Nation spread across two states, canoeing isn’t just a historical legacy, but a modern-day tradition.

“We want people to know that this is present tense,” Johnson said. “This is a living culture.”

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On the recent rainy Tuesday the class set out on its second canoe trip of the summer — with four journalists in tow — Johnson kept the pace steady with calm instructions, occasionally breaking into song.

“Nice and easy together — no wasted energy,” he said from the back while his daughter, Mary Johnson, and Chinook tribal council member Rachel Cushman pulled from the front. “The canoe is happiest when we’re all together.”

While the students paddled, Johnson described the history of the area and pointed

to Chinook sites on the river’s banks. One village, now hidden by forest, had been home to nearly 1,000 Chinookan-speaking people before Europeans arrived, he said. Another site known as Warrior Point, on the Oregon side of the Columbia, was so named by an early British sea captain who encountered dozens of canoes there in 1792.

Johnson believes most people lack an understanding of how this history shaped the land that now makes up Oregon and Washington.

The states only recently began requiring public schools to teach students about contemporary Native American life and tribal sovereignty, with Washington passing legislation in 2015 and Oregon in 2017. As a result, Johnson said, few people realize the extent of the civilization that existed here for centuries or that these cultures have continued to evolve to present day.

“Indian communities, Native communities, in the Pacific Northwest are often just in the shadows,” Johnson said. “You could be born and raised in Washington state and never have true interaction with or understanding of its indigenous people.”

Desiree Hellegers, a WSU Vancouver associate professor

of English who organized the class, calls this gap in education the “myth of the disappearing Indian.”

She began planning the six-week class with another faculty member in the fall, breaking it up into classroom-based sessions focused around readings and trips in the canoe with Johnson. Most of the eight students enrolled in the course are English majors who hadn’t read literature by Native American authors.

Hellegers designed the course to bring in representatives from different tribes, including the Chinook, Nez Perce and Cowlitz.

“We’re on their land,” Hellegers said. “We have an obligation to listen to those voices and their concerns, to think about amplifying those voices, to think about what it means to be an ally.”

The concerns include the preservation of waterways like the Columbia. Hellegers invited Lana Jack, a member of the Celilo Wyam tribe, to speak about how the opening of The Dalles Dam in 1957 affected her community, drowning the sacred Celilo Falls fishing site and displacing a village.

And she had students read “Solar Storms,” a novel by Chickasaw writer Linda Hogan who explored the

impact of hydropower projects on Native lands.

“Literature allows us to enter into the experiences of embattled communities. I think it has the capacity to impact people at a very deep emotional level.”

The canoe used during class sessions — one of two

owned by the Chinook Nation — is painted red and black, the figure of a sea monster snaking along its bow.

Traditional Chinook canoes are made of old-growth cedar through a months-long process still practiced by tribal members like Johnson. But this canoe was donated to the Chinook people in 2011 by the descendants of William Clark to make amends for the theft of a Chinook canoe during the

Lewis and Clark expedition in 1806.

Its name, Kthlmin, means “moon” in the Chinookan language — a plea for favorable tides, Johnson said, on its frequent journeys in the open ocean.

Each summer since the early 1990s, indigenous peoples along the Pacific Northwest coast, including the Chinook, have traveled by canoe to a prearranged meeting spot in an annual event known as the Canoe Journey. Upon reaching their destination, canoe families who travel together share songs, dances and gifts with the tribe hosting them that year.

On July 16, members of the Chinook Nation set out for the Lummi Nation in Washington in several canoes, including Kthlmin.

Students like Deanna McNeely, a senior English major originally from Florida, got a taste of what Chinook canoe families experience.

“It was very challenging at first because I didn’t have the technique,” McNeely said of her first trip out onto the water. “But once you get into the canoe, it’s like a certain rhythm. You hear the paddles going against the water. You almost feel like you can do that longer than what your body can physically handle.”

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