



PHOTOGRAPHS BY EDWARD S. CURTIS

TOTEM OF THE SEVEN CEDARS

BY LESLIE MILLER

My friend Paul and I attended the dedication of Maya Lin's (designer of the Vietnam Memorial in Washington, D.C.) work on behalf of the Confluence Project at Cape Disappointment, on Friday, November 18. One of the objectives of the project is to interpret the impact of the arrival of Lewis and Clark's Corps of Discovery upon the natural world and the indigenous people. We had heard a lot from, and about, the Corps through their journals, and historians such as the illustrious Rex Ziak — without his research, much of the Corps' experience on the North Shore of the Columbia River may have gone largely unnoticed during the Lewis & Clark Bicentennial.

Our hope was that the ceremony would explain to us more about the Native American experience and Ms. Lin's interpretation of it. And we wished to know the impact of the coming of Lewis and Clark upon local culture. Alas, that was not to be.

It might have been more auspicious and interesting to have a Chinook tribal elder or Ms. Lin act as the master of ceremonies. Tribal Chairman Gary Johnson invoked the spirits of the animals of the land, sky, water, and the Great Spirit, to "show us the Way." His words were powerful, poetic and moving. The Chinook people played a sacred drum song. An eagle flew above us. Ms. Lin spoke of her design of the Totems of the Seven Cedars, the fish cutting station, the viewing area, and the trail which links them. She was by far the most interesting speaker, except for the Chinook.

All three of these activities may have taken ten minutes each. The rest of the hour and a half I attended the ceremony was filled with speeches by local (Caucasian) public officials and politicians. The bulk of the program pitifully consisted of very little of Lewis and Clark or the impact upon native culture — instead it was more one of back-slapping and mutual self-aggrandizement. Especially frail was to have the M.C., a commissioner of some sort, dedicate the ceremony to his father, a World War 2 veteran — which seemed inappropriate to say the least: World War 2 veterans already have a national memorial in Washington, D.C.

The M.C. used the word "idiosyncratic" several times to justify calling several Yale graduates to the forefront. It appeared that he and Ms. Lin being alumni at that school was more important to him than the Confluence Project, or perhaps it was the only way he could relate to her. It seems to me he has a mental state peculiar to him.

Halfway through all this speechifying, I nodded off and started to snore lightly. A lady next to me spoke to her neighbor. "He's snoring!" she said. This woke me. Embarrassed I explained I suffer from sleep apnea. "That's all right," she said. I now wish I had gone into full 90-decibel "chainsaw" mode, if only to hurry the program along.

I had to work early that afternoon, and my friend and I had no idea how much more pontificating was to come. So we left. The work at the park will be completed in April 2006, and we intend to make an awe-filled pilgrimage to the cape at that time. I hope someday to observe or participate in a traditional fish cutting. I am sorry I missed it.

The white man (and woman) still has a lot to learn about living in balance with the planet and the other creatures we share it with, in accordance with the Great Mysterious. As usual, white Americans are too busy congratulating themselves to listen to the people who were here before us.

Leslie Miller lives in Sunset Beach, on the shore of Neacoxie Lake ("the place where the water spirit dwells").

CHINOOK NATION

BY GREG ROBINSON

1805. The year seems to peer back a great distance in history, but ten years later, my Great-Great-Great-Grandmother was born in a village at Willapa Bay. Ch'isht is the woman portrayed by photographer Edward Curtis digging clams on the beach, an open weave basket in one hand, gazing towards the ocean.

Curtis was famous for posing natives, often in ludicrous fashion, portraying to the public a glorified image of Native America. It is a trend that continues to this day. Posing Indians in the early 1900s might seem a harmless act, perpetrated at a time when the general public had little understanding of Indians. Perhaps it would have remained harmless if the exploitation of Native Americans had ended there.

Modern America is, in many respects, a society without a specific culture; a thin historical layer thrown over the top of cultures that are tens of thousands of years deep. Many of these ancient cultures were unacceptable to the fledgling America's newfound sense of sophisticated decency. After all, one cannot have naked or half-naked heathens running amok in America, it just would not do. Enter, stage right, the Christian Soldiers to rectify the situation by dressing Indian children like Raggedy Anne and teaching them the ways of non-culture. Enter, stage left, the chroniclers of native life, to record and glorify a more acceptable image for public digestion. The stage was set.

Certainly, it is unfair to label all recorders of history as window-dressers. But even the best-intentioned recorders filtered everything through a sieve of Euro-understanding. Tribes have been trying to recover an accurate understanding ever since.

The Lewis & Clark Commemoration could have been a step towards accurate understanding, and away from the window-dressed Indians portrayed for over 200 years. I like to believe that was the intent; in the beginning.

But if there is one single component of an evolving culture for America, it is commercialism. Money became available for the Commemoration, and the window-dressing was pulled out of the box. Towns, Cities, States and organizations became focused on tourism dollars. Books and speakers came out of the woodwork. Cultural accuracy took a backseat to the rapidly evolving opportunity to make money, and the public was doomed to view the Commemoration through dollar-tinted glasses.

The Chinooks, like most tribes, were promised the opportunity to set the record straight, with the full support of the Commemoration's representative organizations. Enter, stage left, a newly emerged tribe (the "Clatsop-Nehalem Confederated Tribes," established in 2001) in the heart of Chinook country.* Illegitimate, but nonetheless accepted without question, and fully supported by the local Commemoration group. Exit, stage right, any hope for an accurate portrayal of Chinook history.

The Chinooks did the only thing they could; they withdrew from those groups who endorsed the window-dressing of their history. Other tribes in the region similarly withdrew participation. Rather than give up completely, the Chinook Nation decided instead to portray its culture through its own tribal event in November, which was open free to the public. The other tribes were invited to stand with the Chinooks to tell their story, honestly and accurately.

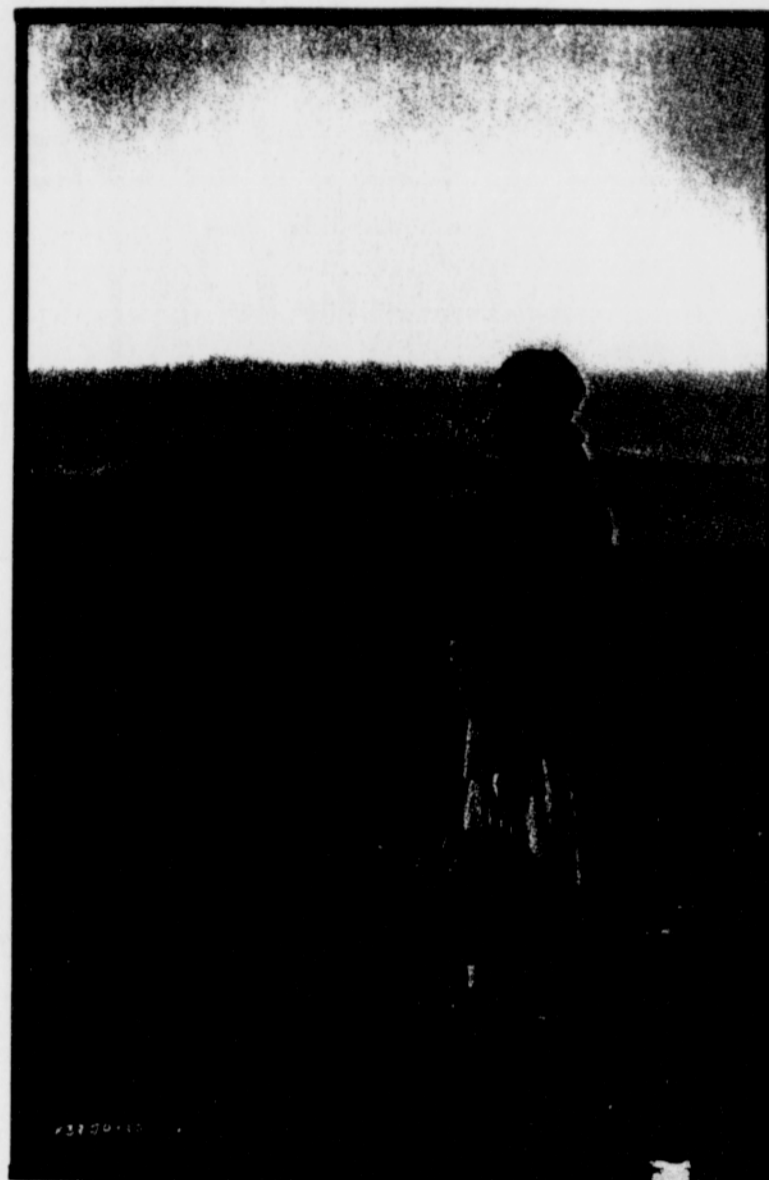
Despite conceptual good intentions, the Lewis & Clark Commemoration has become derailed by the almighty dollar, at the expense of Native America. For the tribes it is the same old, same old. But for Americans, those who stood to finally witness Native America without a filtered haze, it is a travesty.

I like to think my Grandmother, Ch'isht, refused to be posed. She lived through a heart-breaking period of death and collapse for the Chinook people. But through it all, she retained her high-status proudly, and now stares defiantly for all time out to sea; her flattened head held high against the new America as it shovels its shallow culture over us all.

Greg Robinson is a member of the Cultural Committee for Chinook Nation.

**The Chinook Nation is composed of the five westernmost Chinookan speaking tribes. These are the Lower Chinook, the Wakiakum, the Clatsop, the Kathlamet, and the Willapa.*

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POTLATCH

BY WATT CHILDRESS

I was only able to attend one event during the big Lewis & Clark commemorative weekend, and I'll remember it for the rest of my life.

The Clatsop-Nehalem Confederated Tribes asked that I serve as one of four witnesses at a traditional celebration called a "potlatch." It has been about 150 years since a potlatch of this scale has been hosted in the Chinook-Nehalem homeland. The tribal council asked me to play a role that has been part of potlatches since before the advent of the written word. Witnesses are to spread the news of what happens at a potlatch to those who cannot attend. This time the tribe wanted to involve someone from the press.

On my way to Camp Rilea, the location for the event, I listened to a radio interview with the great-great-great-grandson of Captain William Clark. Based on his experience portraying his ancestor, Clark said that the foremost thing this Bicentennial should do is inspire Americans to improve our understanding of indigenous people.

I thought about that as I stood beside other witnesses — three Native American elders who were taking a more traditional role in the event. We stood together and were acknowledged by the emcee in front of 300 folks representing 25 separate tribes.

"As witnesses you are asked to remember what takes place here," said master of ceremonies Guy Capoeman, a member of the Quinalt tribe who has family ties to the Clatsops from the mouth of the Columbia River. "Record what happens, not with written notes or photographs, but with your hearts. Share these memories with your families and friends."

That's a tall order for someone who works with the press and tends to depend on a notepad and pen. We media types often parachute into an event, troll the crowd for a catchy angle, and then leave with a few quotes from key people. Finding the heart of a story can be a challenge given our habits and deadlines.

Perhaps this is part of the reason why local coverage of Lewis & Clark has been overcast with news of inter-tribal conflict. Searching for an Indian angle on the Bicentennial, the local press has fixated on the debate over which tribal group should be recognized as the legitimate representative of all Clatsop descendants. This distracts us from learning about living traditions that predate Captain Clark by thousands of years.

What I witnessed at the potlatch needs no government recognition to prove its legitimacy; but it does stand in stark contrast to what I was taught in school. I was informed that potlatches are a bizarre relic of primitive behavior that have led families to gift themselves into extreme poverty as a display of power. We might just as well teach children that church services lead to snake handling.

I now know that something wonderful happens at a potlatch. People from many different tribes speak with deliberate intent about their gifts of prayers, songs, dances, goods, words, food, and money. Public gifting is done as a way of honoring one another. In this way they solemnify the event and reaffirm the ancient ties that have bound people together for millennia.

The centerpiece of this Clatsop-Nehalem potlatch was the christening of a traditional 32-foot canoe that was made by tribal members under the guidance of Capoeman, a master canoe carver. The sturdy ocean-going vessel is a testimony to the gifts of knowledge and hard work passed from tribe to tribe. It will help convey an appreciation for the deep connections that exist between this region and her people.

It has been said that the displacement of Native Americans by colonial forces was the result of a basic clash between two different cultures — one based on giving and one based on taking. We have learned a lot about the latter culture in the last 200 years. It is time we seek to understand and honor an older tradition.

Watt Childress is proprietor of Jupiter's Rare & Used Books in Cannon Beach as well as a regular columnist for the *Seaside Signal*. He wrote this article as a companion piece to articles that have appeared in the November and December issues of *HipFish*, "This Land Deserves an End to Conquest!" and "Potlatch: 150 Years."