

PARTING SHOTS

A weekly snapshot from The Daily Astorian and Chinook Observer photographers



Bald eagles come in for a landing on a pillar along the Warrenton Waterfront Trail Tuesday.

JOSHUA BESSEX — The Daily Astorian

Chinook: Town's Headless Horseman is a 61-year-old woman

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hurls his severed head at the teacher — who runs away and is never seen again.

After gaining fame as an author, Washington Irving traveled the world, schmoozing with the rich and famous. Always in need of money, he became somewhat of a hack. The richest man in America, John Jacob Astor, recruited Irving to write a book that would celebrate his ill-fated fur company in Astoria in 1811. Irving ensconced himself in Astor's mansion and spent two years writing about the tycoon's fur company, along with anecdotes about the Chinook Indians, and the Chinook area. The book, titled "Astoria" is still in print. Descriptions of events were combed from logs, diaries, journals, books, interviews and Irving's own memories of traveling on the frontier — Astor had never seen the place named after him, and neither did Irving.

It turns out the Headless Horseman is a 61-year-old woman. She wants to remain nameless, since few people know her alter ego, but she says she's been doing it for six years, with the sole aim of bringing excitement and fun to her fellow Chinookers. The act takes planning and horsemanship. She obscures her identity by hiding inside a chicken-wire armature that gives her a much broader profile.

A prosperous fishing town

Most Chinookers don't know about the Washington Irving connection, but everybody knows about the glory days of fish traps. These were the days when Chinook called itself the richest town in America. This prosperous hamlet smelled of boiling tar, which kept the fish nets lubricated



A regional tribal canoe journey stops off on the muddy shores of Chinook County Park. The Chinook people, whom the town is named for, hold their annual first salmon ceremony at Fort Columbia each year.

DAMIAN MULINIX — EO Media Group

and less noticeable to migrating salmon.

Those traps were outlawed more than 80 years ago, but still, old men grieve their loss. Fish traps created real fortunes here. Fine homes stand along the highway as reminders of the town's heyday.

In 1950, many years after the collapse of fish traps, Chinook found consolation in a brand new port of its own. The Corps of Engineers altered the shoreline to create the port. The port and its Bell Buoy processing plant are the town's economic mainstays in recent times. While this was a major event for fishermen, there were some who felt wistful for what was lost.

"We had a beautiful sandy beach near the cannery," remembered Beverly Smith who was born in Chinook. "We kids played there for hours. And beyond the beach was a grassy field and trees." As Smith remembered, the town was full of characters in those



DAMIAN MULINIX — EO Media Group

Clay artist Rodney Maxwell-Muir works in his studio at his Chinook home. Over several decades Maxwell-Muir has become one of the most well-known clay artists in the region.

days. There was Marius Hansen, who rarely wore a coat in the rain. He told children he could run between the rain drops — in that way he never got wet.

While the livelihood of most residents centers on fishing and crabbing, many hunt as well. "This is a hunt-

ing community," said Debbie Richmond, treasurer of the Chinook Valley Gun Club, located down the country road that runs behind town.

The range sports a clubhouse and several acres for practice. The site is well maintained, a result of two grants given by the National Rifle

Association for physical improvements. The clubhouse, described on its website as, "warm and cozy," has space to host dinners now that it has a modern kitchen built by volunteers.

"We're starting the Claybusters, a club for kids," said Richmond. This program teaches the young about the safe handling of guns.

The range offers weekly get-togethers for trap practice and trap games. It also provides a rifle and pistol range. But probably the most important function the club brings to the community is a place where like-minded people can meet and relax. The Chinook Gun Club has 110 members and many of them drop in regularly to schmooze and get in a little practice.

School at the heart of the community

The old school was the center of civic and social life. But when the grade school closed in the 1970s, Chinook's children had to go to schools in Ilwaco and Long Beach. For a generation there was no town center in Chinook. The old school sat by the highway orphaned and dejected. Then, in 2002, advocates for the school formed the Friends of Chinook School. Over the last 12 years this group has raised tens of thousands of dollars through state grants and private donations and volunteers to restore the gymnasium and the classrooms. In the two years since its completion, the gymnasium has hosted Shakespeare performances, sports events, parties, receptions and civic meetings. The most public event is the annual Octoberfest, attracting people from all over the peninsula. Members of the Chinook Indian Nation plan to rent space in the school. The town's food bank is now based at the site.

Several months ago, the town's two eateries closed. The venerable Chinook Restaurant and Lounge also changed ownership. The restaurant had a 1950s ambiance with its old-fashioned counter and dark booths. Two partners with extensive business operations on the peninsula bought the restaurant and bar and plan to remodel it. The lounge has some notoriety because it was used as a set on a motion picture a few years ago.

At the same time, the only grocery store went up for sale and changed hands.

"It's a privilege to be here," says Tim Johnson who commutes to Olympia regularly for job at a food warehouse.

Johnson bought the grocery store and then purchased a stately but derelict house next door. At 42, Johnson has the enthusiasm of a new parent when it comes to restoring the old house. After gutting the interior and tossing out years of garbage, Johnson painted the house exterior ruby-red. This building will open as an antique store and tea shop. When a local resident remarked that the color made the house look like a brothel, Johnson says he laughed. The important thing is that folks see his shop and stop to look around.

Long before Lewis and Clark traipsed through, and long before John Jacob Astor made his megamillions, the Chinook people, for whom this town is named, lived in this resource-rich area. At least one historian claims it's the oldest non-native settlement in Washington state because trappers, lost sailors and woodsmen lived on the beach among the Chinook people.

Chinook has thrived through it all — and it still provides a special kind of life for the hearty souls who call this place home.

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From left: Peter Wong, Hillary Borrud, Mateusz Perkowski