

# Essential memories of a Chinook friend will be preserved by seashells

Certain objects are loaded with power. Nobody really understands why. But only a pedantically rational fool would deny that they do.

Certain seashells are among my “objects of power” and thinking of them this morning makes me a little teary.

Important items are married in our minds with the people who gave them to us, or the places or events where we acquired them. Mainly, this force dies when we do — once death robs it of context, a parent’s beloved memento can be transformed into garbage or a trinket sold on eBay for \$5.

Other times, some essential aspect of recollection seems to cling to a humble object, as if a strong emotion has soaked into its molecular structure. There is a flimsy, empty cardboard box that has survived several garage cleanings because I know it symbolized something for my mom. I have little idea what — possibly it once contained a gift from my father. Though intrinsically worthless, it glows with a faint tracery of memory that preserves it from the Dumpster, for now.

Seashells: Worthless husks of calcium carbonate, the exoskeletons of mollusks. One on my office windowsill I picked up during an idle circumnavigation of faraway Gili Trawangan island a lifetime ago. I paid \$15 for a polished abalone shell when my daughter was a baby and we were on a cheap vacation in Mexico. My red-haired Aunt Lucille bought me an exotic South Seas shell on our first visit together to Pacific Science Center in 1969: what I wouldn’t give for one of her laughing hugs, a force shield to keep sadness at bay. (I bet there’s a child in your family who would love one right this moment, though they may pretend otherwise.)

It was June 12, 2011, a little past 1 p.m. when Ray Gardner gave dentalia shells and beads to the handful of us so lucky to be invited to the



Matt Winters

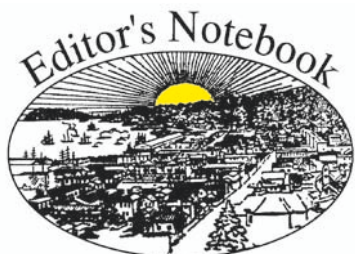


Newly elected Chinook Tribal Chairman Ray Gardner told of how his people used Chinook Cove, located to the west of Fort Columbia on the Long Beach (Wash.) Peninsula, as a place to beach their canoes during rough weather for literally thousands of years. The tribe continues to use the little hideaway for their annual salmon ceremony each June.



Palomar College

This is the daughter of American Horse of the Oglala Sioux. Her dress is covered with dentalia shells as a sign of wealth. She is also wearing a necklace of larger longitudinally perforated cylindrical beads, most likely made of conch shell or bone. Dentalia like these are still objects of power in traditional Native American culture.



bleasing of Middle Village. It was a patented early-spring afternoon on the North Shore, sun eventually transitioning into almost icy sleet not long after we finished — a splendid Columbia River day, strong and varied.

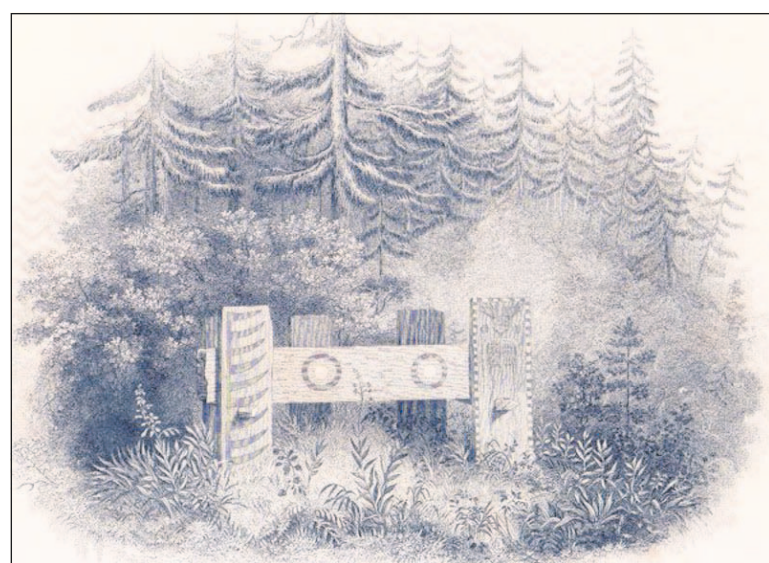
The Chinook Indian Nation chairman, along with honored elder Charles Funk, built a cedar fire within the ancient village site, the sacred smoke carried to the four corners of the wind and earth, healing a peace so long disturbed by sour discord, construction and disturbance in a place still inhabited by the dreams and bones of ancestors. Words were spoken, eloquent words, but they are woven into that moment in time and I won’t dilute their strength by repeating them here.

This was, an archaeologist believes, one of the homes of Chief Comcomly, the only 19th century Chinook most modern-day locals can name. That knowledge evokes a vision of a morning 200 years past, traders from many nations offering gold and guns for sea otter and beaver pelts, vying for the chief’s attention

over the noisy play of children outside his home of massive cedar planks. But even this echo from long ago rests on far-earlier foundations — life after life after life, all celebrated and suffered on this same glorious river bank.

Objects from these nearly forgotten lives — may 80 or 100 centuries’ worth — are rare as the whispers of fishes. Wood and shell items exposed to our weather melt away like snow. Masterpieces of Columbia estuary civilization may crisscross the ground deep beneath our ignorant feet, surviving only as ghostly shapes formed by root filaments that would blow away before our eyes if brought into the light of day.

Arrogant white traders are said to have unloaded tons of cheap blue beads upon the Chinooks and Clatsops, though nary a one was found in scientific excavations at Middle Village. I will always cherish the ones Ray gave me on that lovely blessing day, but am at the same time amused to think of how the Chinook chief giving beads to white men turns a historical cliché on its head. (People wonder about the fascination with blue beads, but they were a time-honored English charm against respiratory ailments, which in Comcomly’s time were decimating our Chinookan



Submitted Photo

Comcomly’s tomb; engraving after Alfred Thomas Agate.

neighbors. Perhaps wise Comcomly noticed they didn’t work and wouldn’t take them.)

My friend Ray Gardner died this week. In olden times, his relatives would have tied dentalia to his body. They would have placed him in his good canoe, Itsxut, the Black Bear, and raised it up into the trees, painted and with two holes made in its stern.

“The people go down to the beach and wash and comb themselves. They cut their hair — men, women, and children. After they have cut their hair, they take other names. Women, men, and children change their names. Then the dentalia of the deceased are distributed,” according to the old funeral practices recorded in 1890 by Columbia University ethnologist Franz Boas.

All this is an illustration of the torn reality of life after a loved one has died — a transition so fundamental and wrenching that even something so basic as our names must change to encompass the loss.

As with all too many of my friends, it had been far too long since I sat and shared stories and salmon with Ray. In the years still ahead, I will sometimes take his dentalia from the box where I keep small and vivid memories. His smile will appear in my mind’s eye. We will speak of times gone by and generations to come, and of one afternoon bathed in sacred smoke.

—MSW

Matt Winters is editor and publisher of the Chinook Observer and Coast River Business Journal. He lives in Ilwaco, Wash., with his wife and daughter.

## Open forum

### Preserve Merwyn

In *The Daily Astorian’s* editorial of Jan. 27, “At what cost?” the writer first chided preservationists categorically and then asked several questions. An important question was omitted: Is it necessary to raze the Merwyn in order to expand the library? No.

The Merwyn structure offers interesting spaces, a handsome facade, a solid foundation, and “good bones.” A visionary architect would welcome the challenge to incorporate the facade and existing ground floor (and perhaps basement) into a design for the larger library. What would be the wisdom in sacrificing this historic structure in order to incur the expense of starting with a new, deep hole in the ground?

There are also solutions for li-

brary expansion that need not have any involvement with the small piece of land on which the Merwyn sits. There are smart design options that incorporate the Merwyn, and others that leave it alone.

What does preserve the Merwyn mean? To this preservationist, it means to rehab and retain the visible exterior in largely the original configuration, and to save and adapt the interior volumes and materials in a manner that provides for the building’s effective use at a business-worthy cost.

Who would raise the money? The very group of preservationists that the editorial disparages has participated with dedication and persistence in many of the worthy projects cited. Reinvigorating the Merwyn could be a public/private development if the library chose to expand into the main levels, with

productive live/work deployment of the upper floors, or a private development with functions synergistic with both the City Hall and library.

With or without the library’s direct participation, the city’s role in resurrecting the Merwyn is critical. If a mixed-use or related use receives encouragement from the city, this writer is one preservationist who would be excited to invest in such an opportunity. But first the Merwyn must be allowed to remain standing.

How does the drive to preserve the Merwyn rank with the drive to reclaim the Astoria Armory and the Performing Arts Center? The Merwyn must overcome two barriers to success. One, the vision and money must come from a private investor, and two, the city must be convinced not to de-

stroy the existing structure. By contrast, the Armory and PAC are not in physical jeopardy.

And finally, we preservationists are encouraged that the new city council members are listening to constituents and asking questions. It is our hope that the new council may choose to consider options that promote both the library expansion and redesign, and the saving of the historic Merwyn. Together we can do both.

TED K. OSBORN  
Astoria

### Resign now

Today, I am deeply ashamed to be an Oregonian. After Gov. Kitzhaber’s press conference on his fiancée, there are so many questions and too few answers.

And he dares joke at a time like

this? For instance, *The Oregonian* has said, “Documents show that Hayes was more than just an ‘adviser’ to Kitzhaber. She directed other governor’s staff, attended staff meetings, and had the authority to instruct agency officials to do tasks for her initiatives. Kitzhaber and his staff have said repeatedly that they consider her a public official under Oregon’s laws. However, Kitzhaber has never explained his thought process in allowing her to be paid to promote essentially the same agenda that she was pursuing while a member of his office.” (“Cylvia Hayes scandal: Top questions John Kitzhaber hasn’t answered,” Jan. 30)

I have no respect for this governor or his office. He should immediately resign.

RONALD WALL  
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