



Western tribes strive to keep the light alive

Growing up is hard enough without having to worry about your civilization going extinct.

In the summer 2015 edition of *Gilcrease* magazine, young Cherokee Tribe member Danielle Culp draws a quite brilliant metaphor about surviving within a maelstrom of worry about whether the culture that defines you is fading away.

"One of the scariest things for me to think about is the death of a star. Some stars are close enough that the light reaches us in minutes. Some stars are so far it takes tens of thousands of years for their light to travel to us. Like all things, stars die. If a star dies and it takes hundreds of years for the light to reach Earth we will see the light of that star even after it has passed. By the time that we realize it is gone it will have been gone a long time.

"I am afraid that cultures are like stars, that they can die too. We know they do, even if we do not like to admit it or talk about it. The original inhabitants of the eastern coast were some of the first ones to come in contact with the new explorers. There were some tribes that were wiped off the face of the planet. Either by disease or by the sword. Those cultures are lost in time. There was no one left to pass on their stories, their language, their legacy. I equate them to close stars, for we can see the immediate effect of their demise. I am afraid that other cultures have died and we are still seeing their light in present generations, but when we realize that they are truly gone it will be too late to save their memory. I know that this is not a happy thought, and if I allowed myself, it could be too big a burden to bear. Instead, I allow it to inspire me. It inspires me to fight for my culture to show the world that I am still here, that WE are still here. I refuse to let our light go out, because I want it to continue to shine in generations to come."

My first boss was a full-blooded Cherokee, a profoundly likable Oklahoma man named Henry Gourd, whose name always comes easily to mind because he was distinctly pumpkin shaped. Living all my life in the West, I can't gauge how common it is for white Americans in general to have such Native Americans in their lives. But certainly for me, after my parents decided to build a house just inside a reservation, it was inevitable that I'd have a stronger-than-ordinary interest in their fate. There have always been some whites who cross the line into being tribal groupies. I know far too much about their internal feuds, corruption, school bullying and other ordinary human foibles to so idolize Indian life. But it would be outright sinful to not pay attention when despair haunts too many Indian people, good folks just trying to have decent lives.

There are glimmers of hope dawning on the horizon, much of this light coming from people like Culp who aren't defeated and who feel a renewed sense of direction.

In northeast Oregon, the Confederated Umatilla Journal's August 2015 issue reports on six Umatilla Youth Leadership Council members attending an inspirational gathering convened by the White House to improve the lives of native



Matt Winters



Photo courtesy of the Confederated Umatilla Journal
A group of Native Americans attending a first-ever White House-sponsored event in support of tribal youth poses with the Washington Monument while waiting for the Smithsonian Museum of American History to open during a visit to Washington, D.C. in July.



Photo courtesy of Confederated Umatilla Journal
Umatilla Indian Reservation Youth Leadership Council representatives Cece Hoffman, left, and Alyssa Farrow hurry to put on rain gear during a wet ride around the nation's capital aboard a tour bus during the White House Tribal Youth Gathering July.

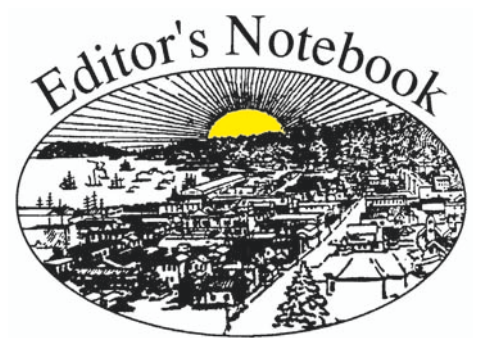
youth around the country. Visiting the capital ought to be a rite of passage we arrange for every young American — this would surely be a far better use of taxes than most of the ridiculous ways in which they are wasted. But for small-town teenagers from Indian Country, making connections at the center of national power and visiting the Smithsonian's National Museum of the American Indian might be the kind of spark needed to ignite a life of activism and political engagement.

Attendee Alyssa Farrow, secretary of the Umatilla youth council, reports being moved by first lady Michelle Obama's speech to the 1,000 participants in this first-ever White House Tribal Youth

Gathering in early July. And youth council Treasurer Cece Hoffman said, "I'm very thankful that we were able to represent our tribe and bring back knowledge and ideas for the future. It was an eye-opening experience I will never forget."

Considering that it takes almost no effort at all to learn that reservation youth are among America's most at-risk citizens, it's head-spinning to think it's taken until now for it to sink in at the top level that it was time to toss them a life ring. But good to see anyway.

It's also emotionally affecting to read in the latest issue of *Archaeology* magazine about Yup'ik Tribe wooden dolls



The Chinook — and the Clatsop on the Oregon side of the river — continue hoping, in the words of the young Cherokee woman, to receive some acknowledgment that 'We are still here.'

dating between 1540 and 1650 washing out of a prehistoric site destabilized by melting Bering Sea ice. Archaeologists mounted an emergency response to investigate the mound from which the dolls were emerging. Sometimes a couple of hundred of these figures, along with ritual masks and other well-preserved wooden objects, were recovered each day.

It is a strange but invigorating irony that destruction of a place so saturated with tribal history is reawakening local young people.

"In part as a result of their experience with the dig, a group of children from Quinhagak petitioned the elders for and received permission to form a traditional dance group," the magazine reports. In 2013 at an exhibition of newfound artifacts, these young dancers performed. "They were welcoming the pieces back," the lead archaeologist said. "That was the first time there had been traditional dancing in Quinhagak in more than a century. It's all part of this revival that is growing along with the finds."

A somewhat similar renewal of tribal identity happened near the mouth of the Columbia River when archaeologists uncovered Chinook tribal remains at the Middle Village unit of Lewis and Clark National Park in the run-up to the 2005 expedition bicentennial. This tangible evidence of their ancestors was sad for local tribal members, and yet at the same time appeared to strengthen their passion for asserting a right to endure and even prosper in the tribe's traditional homeland.

Shamefully, this hasn't ignited a similar interest on the part of national leaders to right wrongs against this essential Pacific Northwest tribe. A letter-writing campaign now in its 54th day has yet to elicit any response whatsoever from the White House.

The Chinook — and the Clatsop on the Oregon side of the river — continue hoping, in the words of the young Cherokee woman, to receive some acknowledgment that "We are still here."

— MSW
Matt Winters is editor of the *Chinook Observer* and *Coast River Business Journal*.

