

Coastal Life

Story and photos by DWIGHT CASWELL

A great frustration

Chairman Tony Johnson is doing everything he can to gain federal recognition for the Chinook Indian Nation

The house in Bay Center, Washington is weathered and gray; frayed blue tarps protect the leaky roof. Inside, two women are preparing eggs and baskets for the Easter egg hunt that will take place in a few days. The house was once the home of Lewis Hawkes, the late hereditary chief of this Chinook village, and the family made the house available for the tribal office.

“It should be obvious that we are Indians,” says Tony Johnson. “Our existence is self-evident to us, but the federal government says we don’t exist as a tribe. Where do you start with such a situation?”

Johnson starts by doing everything in his power, as Chairman of the Chinook Indian Nation, to have his people recognized, once and for all, by the federal government. Recognition was restored to the tribe in 2001, after a 23-year struggle, but rescinded 18 months later by the Bush administration. Today, Tony Johnson is a man on a mission.

“We live in a crazy gray area,” Johnson says. “Everyone but the federal government recognizes us as Indians, but we’re not able to receive any funding or services. Our great frustration is that we can’t move forward. I want to see our status clarified in my lifetime.”

In his youth, Johnson went out of his way to work with the elders in his community. “What I learned gained me my whole career,” he says. “There weren’t many young people who had the great good fortune to learn what I learned.”

He left home for college and to work at various jobs, eventually spending 14 years with the Confederated Tribes of the Grand

Ronde working to revitalize the language and culture. He is now education director for the Shoalwater Bay Indian Tribe, where he is responsible for the education and heritage departments. He has a dream, though: “to retire from a job with my own federally recognized tribe.”

The Chinook Indian Nation does more than work for federal recognition. “Our efforts are all about the survival of the community,” Johnson says. “We operate the tribal office to take care of the needs of both the individuals and the community.”

As you might expect, Johnson is immersed in Chinook culture. “My grandfather was born a stone’s throw from the tribal office. My grandma was born in 1886, at the time when the salmonberries are in bloom, in a village near Pillar Rock,” he says. “Our lives have been defined by our membership in Chinook. This is our experience.”

Johnson is an expert on Chinuk Wawa, the language that originated as a pidgin trade patois of the Northwest. He and his wife, Mechelle, also Chinook, were married at Johnson Beach, named for his family and now part of Bush Pioneer park in Bay Center, Washington, and their five children (“Five is a sacred Chinook number”) are being brought up in their native culture.

Johnson has also been active in reviving Chinook canoe culture, which had teetered on the edge of disappearing. Canoes are used for the First Salmon ceremony in June and for yearly intertribal canoe gatherings, in which canoe journeys of a week to a month are taken to honor an invita-

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A Chinook Indian Nation sign is located on Bay Center Road.



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tion to a weeklong potlatch from another Northwest tribe. This year’s trip will be to the Nisqually Indian Community, little more than an hour by car but considerably more by canoe.

The unresolved situation of the Chinook Nation is almost unique, and very present to tribal members. “I’ve heard many times, ‘this is old stuff, get over it,’” Johnson says, “but this has happened in my lifetime.”

When the 1974 Boldt decision established native fishing rights, the Chinook were not included because the federal government had never ratified their 1851 treaty. Johnson remembers the resultant

loss of the “blue cards” that allowed them to hunt and fish in their traditional lands.

The Chinook refused to sign an 1854 treaty because it required the tribe to be resettled elsewhere. “We would not leave the bones of our ancestors,” Johnson says, and he and his people are still not ready to relinquish their tribal claims.

“I am simply the last in a long line of men and women who have led the Chinook Indian Nation on its quest for justice,” Johnson says. “We have an unbroken 10,000-year history in our territory. It is too strong an inheritance to ever think you could extinguish it. We’re not going away.”