

CLOSE TO HOME

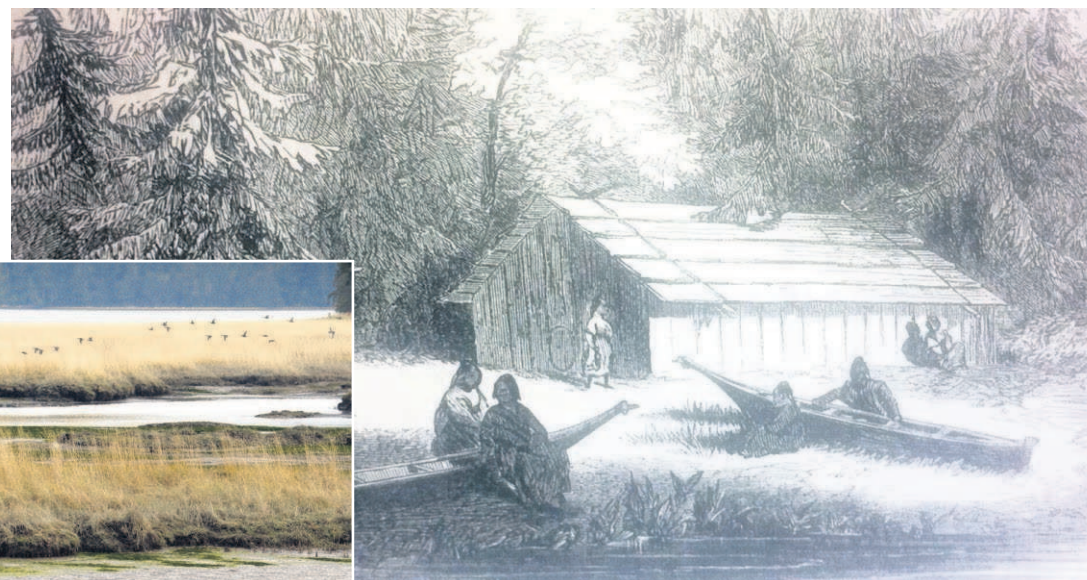
Traveling from Yakaitl-Wimak to Willapa Bay by canoe

By DAVID CAMPICHE
FOR COAST WEEKEND

Winter was harsh on the Columbia River, on the tidal and upriver waters that the Tsinuk or Chinook called Yakaitl-Wimaki. Long before the jetties that stabilize each side of the giant river — long before Point Adams and mountains of sand accretion filled in the Long Beach Peninsula and the Oregon beaches — the Pacific Ocean and huge surging storms buffeted the Native Americans that lined both sides of the infamous waterway.

Calmer by far, Willapa Bay (Shoalwater or Willapah) offered shelter and tranquility to these hearty peoples. These were water people. Canoe people. Barterers on par with the Venetians and other venerated sea traders. One didn't easily venture overland. Sheer cliffs and dense forests encroached on their aqueous landscape, pressed upon the traveler with an almost a trance-like grip.

In those dense woods of the 19th century, a man felt and smelled the weight of so much verdant growth, thick and impenetrable flora and fauna, blowdown, man-sized ferns, bramble and a lacework of streams and creeks that interrupted a day's expected travel and stretched it into an overland hiatus of days or weeks. Old growth cedar, fir, and spruce rose tall and straight, frequently over 200 feet into the often quicksilver and water-laden skies. Rain fell better than a hundred inches a year. Seemed to sometimes devour a human, or at least his spirit. Four-legged predators



Above: James Swan's cabin on Willapa Bay in 1852. This etching was scribed in 1852. The pioneer home was built on Bone River.



DWIGHT CASWELL PHOTO

abounded: lynx, bobcat, cougar, and larger and more dangerous, the thick-haired and powerfully muscled black bear. A traveler had to remain vigilant.

Not that the surly waters of bay and river were to be underrated. Wily currents and angry waves were more common an obstacle than those few blue-bird days that photographers and tourists in the next century might covet as becalmed and peaceful. There were not many Kodak moments in this infamous corner of the Oregon Territory. Death by drowning was never an uncommon event to either the Chinook or those later Boston interlopers who so quickly inundated the land of the Native People, their Tsinuk Illihee (homeland).

The Chinook were world-class seamen. Ask William Clark, cached with his boys

in a cold and wet winter camp alongside the north side at the river mouth (Hungry Harbor), afraid to move because of the sou'westers that punished the Corps of Discovery. Looking out upon the huge river, Clark watched the Chinook quartering the 20-foot combers with dexterity and skill.

"Certain it is they are the best canoe navigators I ever saw," proclaimed the captain in an astonishing moment as storm followed huge seas. Meanwhile they fed their campfires and hunkered down, miserable to their core.

"It would be distressing to a feeling person to see our situation at this time all wet and cold with our bedding &c. all wet, in a cove scarcely large enough to contain us..." strikes out Clark again.

Meanwhile the Chinook were hunkered down in their cedar lodges, warm and toasty beside their seemingly endless campfires. The longhouses were warm and smoky. Stores

of dried berries, salmon and roots lined the rafters of the elegant cedar structures. Even in winter, clams, crabs and oysters lay easily at arm's length in the shoalwater bay.

Most of these First People had already made their annual pilgrimage to the shores of Willapa Bay. If we are to believe the bulk of historical evidence, they were content.

Like the seals and whales that seemed to frolic in the currents and eddies of ocean, bay and river, the Chinook, too, appeared at home on these ferocious waters. This is hardly surprising — the Chinook had eons to adapt to the realities of this ever-fluctuating environment. Call it hostile at times, or sublime at other quieter moments, but, simply put, the Chinook knew the waters of Willapa Bay to be far more peaceful than with the volatile nature of the Big River. Here, winter simply didn't lash them as severely as did those icy east winds that scooped down the

Yakaitl-Wimak from the tall steep cliffs that soar above the Columbia River Gorge. Perhaps angry spirits sent them. High on the cliffs that was the domain of She Who Watches, life styles remained relatively unchanged for centuries.

But a man or his family still had to cross the narrow isthmus that separated the big river from Willapa Bay. That meant a major portage. In the winter of 1805, the Chinook had already made their annual move. The diaries of the Corps of Discovery report the desertion of lodges on the lower Columbia.

Some of that was a result of the Native American rendezvous to their winter homes on the bay and their prized cedar lodges that seemed to nearly kiss the highwater marks of the full-moon tidal surges. Another truth must be told: by now, smallpox had already ravaged the proud First Peoples. For the most part, among the numerous handcrafted lodges and villages that lined the big river, nobody was at home.

And how and where did they cross the 5-mile isthmus? Let that be the story next month.

Let's hike and kayak that stretch of land in the Chinook Illihee that is now forgotten and transformed after a century and a half of modern inundation, a civilization of immigrants with new roads, clearcut forests, villages, farms and homes. In other words, the 20th century had arrived and left its mark in full force.

Travel then, as the Chinook or those first pioneers on four water trails that lace like spider webs through the tail end of the coastal range. We just might discover a worthy patch of rich history that lies mostly forgotten and so Close to Home.