

## CLOSE TO HOME

Traveling from Yakaitl-Wimak to Willapa Bay by canoe

# Third Interlude: Tracing the portage remnants

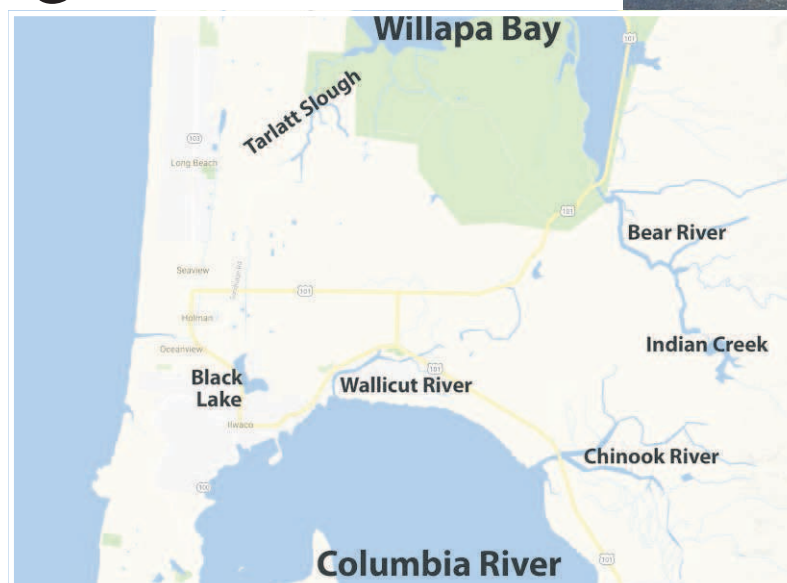
By DAVID CAMPICHE

*Note: This is part three of a three-part series.*

After weeks of harvesting salmon on the Columbia River, the Tsinuk (Chinook) were ready to return to their secure winter lodges on the shore of Willapa Bay. They would travel up one of the three water paths and portage across the Willapa Hills. A portage is a short overland route that a person follows, carrying a boat or supplies between two waterways.

The portage between the headwaters of the Chinook and Bear Rivers was longer and steeper than the Wallcut portage to the west. Jimmy Goulter and I started our exploration at Brown's Slough, a small waterway sluicing just south of his grandmother's house, affectionately called "Granny Goulter's," a local landmark, and close to M'Carty's 19th-century homestead. A decade ago, Goulter was raking a spot in front of his grandmother's house when he found square steel nails and a burn area that indicated the remains of the M'Carty residence, long gone or disguised by age and impenetrable mounds of blackberry bushes.

At the southern end of Brown's Slough, early chronicler James Gilcrest Swan describes being floundered in an Indian canoe containing a few bottles of raw whiskey and his meager supplies. Swan left the canoe and walked ahead to the M'Carty homestead. When the natives caught up, Swan realized that his two Chinook guides had polished off one of the bottles of liquor. Goulter believes his father found that empty bottle buried in the mud. It was dated near the time of Swan's journey in 1855. The relevance of this pioneer history has etched the Goulter family for decades. Jimmy carries the anthropologist's mantle. In fairness, he is



the caretaker of many acres of fertile fields that cover the Chinook valley, a landscape rich in history.

From the north end of that slough, the portage rolls over the Willapa Hills near what is now the water treatment plant for Ilwaco, and then pushes northward before rolling into the southerly edge of Indian Creek below Dick and Ellen Wallace's place, a home with a spectacular vista.

Big thanks to Dick for pulling my two-wheel-drive pickup back from a steep abyss below a rugged road sheaved in ice after a winter freeze. Even today, there are consequences when traveling back roads in severe weather, a fact not lost on the Chinook or early pioneers. Indeed, this was the ultimate reason for the Chinook to portage from the Columbia into the Willapa: The climate and availability of shellfish was far more accommodating on Willapa Bay than residing in the reed shelters they pitched during mild summer days on the Columbia.

Only yards from my near accident, Indian Creek bleeds into Bear River, near where the Wilson homestead

stood, a stopover for wet and weary pioneers as the night skies turned gray and sullen. Bear River then flows into the Willapa, not far from Baby Island, where it is said by some to be the ancient burial place of at least five Chinook chiefs.

A third portage trek from Black Lake in Ilwaco along the small waterway known as Tarlatt Slough appears today to be mostly vanquished by time and the dozens of cranberry bogs that lace the landscape. As kids growing up in Seaview, we would travel that slough and watch the annual migration of native salmon struggling up the small watercourse into Black Lake. Ultimately, the slough was so badly diverted that the salmon succumbed. Unfortunately, this is an all-too-common story.

At the north end of Willapa Bay was a portage that ran into the Chehalis River. There were many of these avenues. Long before white contact, Native Americans had mapped out the easiest travel routes. Mostly, they traveled by water. To quote my friend, Jim Sayce, a fine historian, "Travel was by canoe



PHOTO BY DAVID CAMPICHE

Brown's Slough, which feeds into the Chinook River. The Chinook peoples and first Euro-American pioneers followed the slough as a portage route up from the Columbia River, overland and into Willapa Bay.

and by water, and little else." Other opportunities were generally laborious and circuitous. Swan recounts the travails of the trail: "A mere cart-path, full of stumps and logs, over high hills, and down deep valleys, soft from the rain and nearly knee-deep with mud and water. Over this trail, we climbed, and slipped, and splashed, and jumped, till finally we emerged."

In 1855, Swan counts the "Chenook" living around Chinook Village to be a measly hundred. He thought he was seeing the end of a way of life that included the well-traveled portages of these proud traders. He was defining the demise of an ancient culture that was vanishing from the Columbia-Pacific landscape (and across America) like campfire smoke. I am glad to report that the tribe has been growing in stature and relevance in recent years. The challenges are great, but they are a dignified and persistent people, proud of their heritage and their culture. Facing them squarely, the obstacles were and remain daunting.

In the 1850s, the entire village turned out to gather the salmon. The population was evenly split between the remnants of the Tsinuk, and these

first white settlers. They fished together, the Tsinuk helping themselves to the Tyee with their homemade nets of spruce root and cedar rope. These seine nets could be two football fields in length. Among the Chinook, salmon were dried and smoked and often ground into a pulp that was mixed with eulachon (smelt) grease and then stored in hand-crafted baskets containing 10 or 12 pounds of the fish cakes. The preserved concoction might last for many moons. Back on the Willapa, it remained a security blanket for leaner times.

Much is lost over time. Today, we scratch our heads and ponder our forefathers, their pleasantries and tribulations. But Bear River rolls on, and the paths that crossed the Willapa Hills recede into the harvest of third-growth tree farms. One can't help but wonder, if somehow, we have been diminished.

And doesn't it remain a pleasure to imagine bushwhacking across ancient trails that snaked around and through monstrous evergreen groves, through rich flora and fauna now-adays delegated to a few parks and refuges? All this natural splendor is of another time and place that can only be imagined.