

CLOSE TO HOME

## A WINTER GATHERING OF THE CHINOOK

By DAVID CAMPICHE  
FOR COAST WEEKEND

The Creator shaped this series of sloughs and waterways that bleed from the Columbia, the river called Yakaitl-Wimakl by the Tsinuk or Chinook people. A soft landing offered access for the stately cedar canoes. Just feet from the water's edge, 14 long-houses scattered evenly across the waterfront. The village was called Cathlapotle, and from here, 900 indigenous people went about their business: gathering firewood, tending fires, mending, bathing daily, boiling roots for breakfast. Boiling salmon in waterproof reed baskets by adding red-hot stones. Gathering eggs from the nests of wildfowl, geese and swans, and then, as the morning unfurled, beginning the most important task of all, educating the youth.

Tony Johnson, current chief of the Tsinuk nation, calls the time around the campfires that warmed the long, stately lodges, "our university." In other words, "study time." A time to explore religion, to record the stories of the elders, to weave baskets and mats. And carving time.

Here they would plan the days and weeks that lay ahead: the gathering of berries and roots and the harvest of fat spring salmon, the Tye that constituted the bulk of Native sustenance, and a trade good with the disparate tribes that lined the West Coast of the Pacific and scattered inland as far as the Rocky Mountains and across the plains. The Tsinuk traveled mostly by water, in cedar canoes ranging in length from 12 to 70 feet in length, and shaped from single cedar logs with adzes and hot stones, with fire and muscle and with a prestigious skill that was passed from father to son over millennia. The elegant canoes are considered masterpieces by museums around the world.



The Longhouse interior.

**The gathering**

A winter gathering of the Tsinuk people took place late this winter. From beginning to finish, the meeting was inspiring. A hundred or more rendezvoused at the hand-built plank house, built in a traditional manner on a historical spot, overlooking the Columbia and beside an inlet which offers shelter from storms and wily river currents.

Lewis and Clark passed here in 1805, and commented on the disposition of the handsome village and its inhabitants. Plainly, the Corps of Discovery was broke. Remaining trade goods were distributed between two bandanas.

The Chinook were the major traders of the West Coast. They were practiced in the fine art of bartering. A few fish hooks didn't begin to add up to the purchase of an otter pelt, which in the latter years of the 19th century, could be sold in Canton for a small fortune. The Corps was out of luck and plainly miffed by the situation. Descriptions of these proud people were frequently derisive. The Euro-Americans wanted land, timber and access to the millions of Chinook salmon that traversed the big river.



Mildred Robinson.

Native people were in the way. Again, the Tsinuk are standing tall, and with their resurrection comes pride. And pride can withstand the most destructive intimidations.

On a chilly winter afternoon, guests were quartered inside the intimate lodge and exposed to a celebration of dance, music, songs, and stories. Two large pit fires warmed the lodge. Through openings in the planked roof, smoke furlled out into the damp Northwest sky. Here was a world lit only by firelight.

**Devotion to culture**

Johnson speaks the language elegantly. He is a carver of distinction. He is also fierce in his devotion to his culture, one of many that were pushed into near extinction by the new boys on the block, the Boston Tillicums. He is gracious to a fault, as are his brothers and sisters. This too, is custom. This is family. Guests are received with warmth, fed well, and smothered with affection and appropriate gifts. Elders are honored and children respected. Along with the love, discipline abounds.

The lodge was built with precise specifications from the historical plank house or long-house dating back to the 19th century. Johnson, Adam McIssac and friends carved the totems of his people. Adze work dominates the interior, even to the point of scribing the 90-foot cedar log that stretches from the front of the house and its round beckoning entrance to the back wall.

Simply put, my family and I found the space to be exhilarating. The craftsmanship was fine and evocative of another time and place. A good place. These were the traditional homes of the Cathlamet, Clatsop, Lower Chinook, Wahkiakum and Willapa. Homes to the First Peoples of the Northwest Coast.

It is not my privilege to expose the intricacies of every song and prayer, but let it be said, that ancient canoeing songs and welcome greetings in Native tongues, fueled an intimate longing and respect for a culture that revered the Great Spirit, and dignified the land through careful ecology for thousands of years. "I feel the Creator's love," said Tony Johnson, "when



Sam Robinson.

the sun shines on this lodge, and the birds sing." When nature communes its blessings. Blessings, indeed!

The Tsinuk were a proud people, and are a proud people. In a country, thick with immigrants from the Irish to the Vietnamese, from the first Dutchman to the millions of Hispanics, the Tsinuk people were the first. Their explorations expand 12,000 years. Now, they are struggling for federal recognition.

Witness the respect and dignity that these First People negotiate with their brothers and sisters. Perhaps you might remember a Siouхан chant, "Meta cuye oyasin. We are all one people." The Tsinuk have practiced the wisdom of their cousins from the remote time when the great thunderbird released the Tsinuk into the world of ocean and river, the magnificent homeland of the Columbia-Pacific.

*The plank house rests on the refuge at Richfield, Washington, and is open daily. An hour from Astoria, it is worthy of your visit. (<http://bit.ly/2nEipGX>) or, office@ChinookNation.org*