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a section of the outer bark and draw long strands of the soft cambium layer for the weaving of baskets or capes or shirts or mats. The cedar was the precious wood used in the carving of the totems, these magical poles that graced the beaches and villages, dotting the landscape from Sitka to Chinook for millennia.

This was and is a cedar civilization.

Traders

Tony Johnson is a descendant of the Chinook. He is a fine carver and natural leader. On a Friday late in June, the Chinook came together to celebrate the return of the Chinook salmon, their namesake. They gathered at Fort Columbia and, in a ceremonial walk, descended to the sandy cove that housed the Tsinuk and their watercraft for eons. From this deep cove, the natives would launch their canoes. Stories are shared as to how they might sneak behind warring canoes from the Haida or Kwakiutl (Kwak-wala'wakw), canoes moving upriver to raid on the many villages that bound this ancient civilization together. Once the enemy had passed the hiding place of the Chinook, these warriors would race up behind the enemy, creating a pincer movement from west to east, as their brothers confronted the invaders from up-river.

But the Chinook were mostly traders, and preferred amicable relationships with the tribes of the West Coast. Their civilization spread from Willapa Bay upriver to Bonneville, and south down the Oregon Coast for twenty or thirty miles. At the zenith, they may have numbered nearly 40,000, a civilization rivaling any of the indigenous peoples all the way south to Mexico City.

The carving of the canoe began with splitting the log horizontally and nearly in

two, but preserving high points at both ends. The belly was carefully burned, then rudimentary hand adzes and chisels began to strip away the bark and soft wooden fiber. Months went into the preparation of the watercraft. A Haida canoe 63 feet long was purchased by the famous anthropologist Francis Boas before the turn of the century and sent around the Horn to New York and the museum of Natural History. One can only marvel at this specimen.

The 'best canoe navigators I ever saw'

Cecil Paul, a chief of the Haisla nation described how each canoe had a calling card. Some were designed for war, some for peace. Some were fishing vessels, and many were used for transporting trade goods or for weddings and other ceremonies. By design, the natives could tell which tribe carved the vessel. Often, they could decipher the mission of the visitor.

Johnson welcomed in a hand-carved canoe, and, in fluent Tsinuk, praised the occasion and issued a welcoming salutation. He had a large part in the carving of the canoe, and like all his artwork, this piece is elegant. It is also extremely seaworthy.

In 1806, clinging to the shoreline, William Clark praised the seamanship of the Tsinuk, writing in his diary: "Certain it is they are the best canoe navigators I ever saw." High praise from a rugged soldier who crossed a good part of North America in a dugout canoe.

Above, by the theater at Fort Columbia, salmon were being prepared. They were splayed and pinioned between split cedar withes and then crisscrossed with strong slats. A bed of coals sent a sheen of heat, slowly braising the fish. Younger members of the tribe fed salmonberries into the mouths of the salmon, a ritual offering prayers to the fish



SUBMITTED PHOTO

for its annual return. There is nothing casual, nothing taken for granted, when it comes to the removal of the salmon from the Columbia waters. For eons, the Tsinuk

depended upon the delicious fish. The salmon is served with the same respect and ritual as the breaking of bread in an Anglican church. As tradition mandates, the

elders are served first, guests second. No one begins to eat the bounty until everyone has been served. The feast was magical and heartfelt.

A proud people


The Chinook nation has not been recognized as an "official" tribe by our government, a fact that never gets past these proud people.

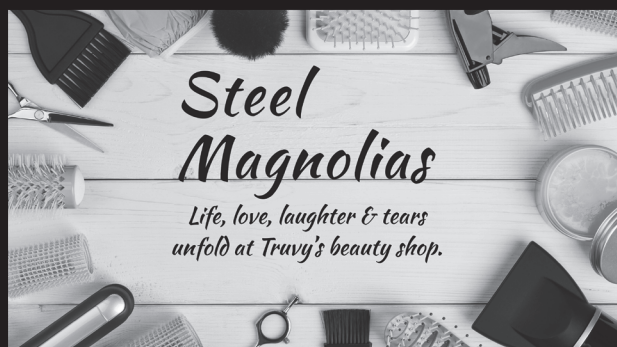
It remains impossible to reconcile: the Tsinuk were the largest historic traders of the Pacific coast. They were ravaged by disease, racism and indifference. The land where they dwelt and its bounty were coveted by the first pioneers. All across North America, native lands were stolen, acre by acre, piece by piece. This tribe offered friendship to the first whites and pioneers. Custom dictated that all visitors be served with dignity and respect. All food was shared.

In 1792, Robert Gray entered the big river aboard the Columbia Rediviva. Gray was apparently the first foreigner (from a Caucasian perspective) to cross the Columbia River Bar and enter the big river. He anchored off Chinook Point below Fort Columbia and began

to trade European goods for otter pelts. According to Chinook legend, Gray issued a declaration: The Chinook were not to trade after dark. They were not to approach the good ship flying the stars and stripes of the United States. The natives did not understand the language or the implied threat.

When canoes came alongside the ship at dusk, Gray turned two cannons loose on the unfortunate natives, blowing them out of the water. The tribe and its intentions were clearly misunderstood. Obviously, the tribe was angry. The younger warriors wished revenge. The chiefs said "no." There would be no reprisal. We are a trading people, they proclaimed. Murder these sailors and we are out of business. The next day, the Chinook returned and traded. Gray set forth to Canton, and made a small fortune off those pelts.

The tribe waits, the sun moving their dreams wraith-like from the four compass points and into sunrise. Proud and patient, they count the days. We are Tsinuk, they say. We are proud. 

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