

Princess: ‘She was the single most important influence in my life’

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Remembering Grandma Myrtle
“I lived in South Bend until I was 12,” Judy says. “Our house was about three blocks from Grandma Myrtle and Grandpa Fred Woodcock’s place. I visited Grandma — the last princess of Oysterville — almost every day of my childhood. She was the single most important influence in my life.”

During those well-remembered visits, Myrtle told her young granddaughter about the Chinook tribe. She shared with her the traditional tribal stories, showed her the beautiful baskets made by their forebears, and, on special occasions, modeled the intricately beaded headband that Judy treasures to this day. “I credit Grandma Myrtle with the pride I take in my Chinook ancestry and, with the knowledge and understanding I have of our history,” smiles Judy.

“Grandma Myrtle was referred to as a poetess/historian during her lifetime,” Judy says with justifiable pride. “She and Grandpa Fred were charter members of the Pacific County Historical Society and her poems, which reflected her deep understanding and love of her dual heritage, were often published in the Historical Society’s quarterly magazine, the *Sou’wester*.”

One of Grandma Myrtle’s stories involved her mother (Judy’s great-grandmother) Cecile “Jane” Haguet Johnson. Jane’s father, Louis Haguet, had been born in France and came to Vancouver about 1840 with the Hudson Bay Company. He settled in the area, worked as a carpenter, and in 1841 married Helen Poirier, the daughter of a Chinook Indian chief from The Dalles, Oregon. Cecile Jane, born in 1848, was the oldest of Louis and Helen’s four children, and all of them were the first to attend the Providence Academy in Vancouver, a Catholic boarding school established in 1857.

Jane’s first salary
Jane became one of the early school teachers in Pacific County and, for her first assignment in the Willapa Valley area, she was offered a pig in exchange for a term’s work. That seemed a fair salary. Her Ilwaco family could make use of a pig. At school’s end, the farmer who had raised the pig teth-



Photo courtesy of Espy Family Collection
Cap'n Jimmy Johnson (right) strikes a pose with oyster tongs along side his Oysterville neighbor Abe Wing who samples an oyster fresh from Shoalwater Bay. Circa 1870.



Sydney Stevens
Judy Little proudly models the Chinook headband worn on many special occasions by her Grandmother Myrtle Johnson Woodcock.

ered it behind the schoolhouse for Jane to take home the next day. Unhappily, in the morning she found that a bear had done away with her “salary” during the night. Although she never knew him herself, Grandma Myrtle also spoke highly of her

father “Cap’n Jimmy,” as he was known throughout the Willapa Bay region. For years he carried the mail from Astoria to Willapa Valley and was respected as one of the expert sailors on the bay. He often distinguished himself during the plunger races at the annual regattas sponsored by the Oysterville Yacht Club. A well-known photograph of Cap’n Jimmy and his Oysterville neighbor Abe Wing show the two posing — one with oyster tongs and the other about to eat an oyster fresh from the bay. The photo, perhaps a publicity stunt, gives a hint as to the fun-loving personalities of both men.

Cap’n Jimmy’s father (Judy’s great-great-grandfather) was also a captain and also named James Johnson. He had worked as a river pilot for the Hudson Bay Company and, in 1849, took out a 640-acre Donation

Land Claim in the area called “No’skwalakuthl” by the Chinooks — the place we now know as Ilwaco. James Johnson, Sr. was married to Comtia “Jane” Koholwish of the Lower Chinook Tribe.

More than pride
Hearing the stories of her family from Grandma Myrtle gave young Judy a sense of pride in her heritage. “But more than that,” says Judy, “seeing how hard Grandma Myrtle worked for the tribe made me want to do my part,



Cecile ‘Jane’ Haguet Johnson Howard (1848-1920) lived south of the Oysterville Baptist Church with her husband, ‘Cap’n Jimmy,’ and their nine children. Some years after James drowned on Shoalwater Bay, Jane married William Howard of South Bend.

too. Back in the 1950s and ‘60s, Grandma helped register tribal members, working toward the much hoped for, eventual recognition of the Chinooks by the federal government.”

Judy remembers, too, the 1951 dedication of Fort Columbia State Park on the Columbia River — an area that has been an important part of tribal life for untold centuries. “Grandma Myrtle spoke in the Chinook language as she offered a prayer to the Great Spirit. I was eight years old and witnessed this impressive ceremony. I knew way back then that I, too, would one day be a strong supporter of the tribe.”

And, eventually, that opportunity came. Judy had spent the years since she was 12 living in California and in Alaska. She married, raised two children, and had a 20-year career in social and health services. “Then, in 2000 I was hired as interim manager of Chinook Indian

Bingo and was able to make some significant changes in the way it operated.”

She suggested to local members of the tribe that they make baskets to sell and encouraged them in other Native American artwork projects, as well. “I like to say that I helped put ‘Chinook’ back into Chinook Indian Bingo,” she laughs. During that period, Judy lived at the home of cousins Les and Lucille Wilson of Nahcotta.

These days, Judy is back in California living near her children and grandchildren, but she says: “For as long as I am able, I’ll be making the trip back to the place of my heritage. I’ll be there at least once a year for the First Salmon. It’s where I feel closest to Grandma Myrtle and to all the stories and traditions of my Chinook ancestry. It’s where I feel most at home.”

Sydney Stevens is an author and historian on the Long Beach Peninsula.

2019-2020

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