

Shamanistic Rock Art

Tribal Elders from the Columbia River Basin share their knowledge with world scholars.

By Shannon Keaveny
Spilyay Tymoo

On an early September morning near The Dalles area, lower Columbia Plateau elders, who grew up on the river with their families, boarded a small, motorized boat.

The wind blew slightly, the sun shone, and the water was placid with a swift subtle current, the most notable contrast to their childhood, when Celilo Falls still fell and water rushed and swirled dangerously below the cliffs.

In that time, at this stunning geographical place, paintings above the rushing rapids could be seen.

Jean Clottes, world rock art specialist, concludes from his global studies, "Where ever there are natural geological marvels, you can be sure to find stories about them."

What was perhaps, at one time someone's story drawn on the cliffs, became folk tales for the following generations of

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Brigitte Whipple Cultural Resources

people living on or near the Columbia river.

Dams along this stretch of the Columbia River inundated more than half of the known rock art sites. Water monsters over whirlpools, protecting the fisherman, are now sites for only the fish. Other pictographs at higher altitudes still can be seen, and their significance continues to intrigue modern generations.

Among the elders on the boat were Viola Kalama of Warm Springs and James Selam of the Yakama Indian Reservation.

Accompanying them were

their direct descendants and a group of world-renowned rock art specialists.

Some of the rock art specialists included Dr. Jean Clottes, the previous Director of Research for the 32,000 year old Chauvet Cave and co-author of "Shamans of Prehistory;" Dr. David Lewis-Williams Director of the Rock Art Research Institute in Johannesburg, South Africa and also co-author of "Shamans of Prehistory;" Dr. David Whitley, national rock art specialist and author of "The art of the Shaman: Rock Art of California;" and Dr. James Keyser, a Pacific Northwest Archaeologist and lead organizer of their exposition called "The Ethnography of World Rock Art".

The elders were invited to share their knowledge of the past. The group headed toward Miller Island, east of the mouth of the Deschutes River.

There, the specialists listened and learned from what the el-



Pictograph somewhere in the lower Columbia Plateau. Photo image courtesy of The Museum at Warm Springs and Confederated Tribes of Warm Springs. Photo was taken by James Henderson for a project funded by the National Park Service and Meyer Memorial Trust.

ders had to say.

The pictographs viewed included stick figures with arched rays over their heads. Elk, deer, and bighorn sheep were painted with arrows surrounding them. Zig-zags and other geometrical figures were portrayed.

Brigitte Whipple, granddaughter of Viola Kalama and also invited on the excursion, explained the significance of the Columbia River Basin tribes presence, "We were invited for the purpose of giving a historical tribal perspective on Columbia rock art."

Her grandmother, Viola Kalama, who is 80, Whipple noted, was raised on the river in a traditional way. She is fluent in Wasco and Sahaptin and, as a child, she heard stories about the paintings. She is known for her rich sense of heritage and culture.

Kalama used this opportunity to share her version of what the rock art means/meant to the Wasco people with willing Western archaeologists.

To the Natives of the Columbia area, rock depictions were always seen as scenes of cultural and spiritual importance.

Now, views like Whipple's, instilled in her from the teachings of her grandma, have gained international recognition.

Whipple relates, "It is my perspective that rock art is associated with specific places of vision quests, rights of passage, and first kill ceremonies. I think, the pictographs in this area were written/drawn by medicine people, holy people or people performing rites of passage into manhood or womanhood."

"For instance, if I became a woman. I would learn to har-

vest my berries, collect my roots, then, I may go out into the wild by myself and write my story. Those paintings on the walls, could be my story."

But, she reiterates, "nobody really knows."

In fact, among the scholars visiting on that day, all believed the same. Combining the world knowledge of rock art, they now assert rock art was the practice of shamans.

In Portland at the public presentation "Shamans of Prehistory: New Perspective on World Rock Art," Whitley took the time to explain, "Shamans are people who speak with the gods which is commonly associated with hunter-gatherer peoples but has been documented in most religions of the world."

He explained that in a trance-like state, hyperventilation is often symptomatic. When hyperventilating, vomiting and bleeding from the mouth can occur, as many animals in rock art throughout the world are displayed.

The animals, themselves, may be the artist's spirit helper, he said, explaining why many depictions have both human and animalistic qualities.

Whipple loosely defines her impression of spirit helpers.

"A spirit helper may be the animal that person most closely relates to. Maybe a hunter's spirit helper would be the deer."

Petroglyphs and pictographs in the Columbia Plateau commonly contain geometric symbols. World specialists theorize that these designs are common neuropsychological symptoms experienced by all *homo sapiens* in altered states.

Whitley explained seven common visual patterns, including zig-zags, grids, and dots, and provided examples in rock art from around the world.

Whipple thinks geometric symbols on the Columbia plateau aren't necessarily common

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Tribal fifth graders adjust to off-reservation school

By Shannon Keaveny
Spilyay Tymoo

Fifth graders at Jefferson County Middle School are like most kids on their first day of school.

Students tout the newest fashions, wear new tennis shoes, and arrive at school with a brand new backpack loaded with school supplies.

In the classroom, they eagerly participate, raise their hands, and shout answers to the teacher.

Antsy from their summer vacation, they spin rulers and tip backwards on their chairs.

But, in many ways, this isn't your typical class.

The unique thing about this year's fifth graders is they are all tribal members from Warm Springs.

There are three classes, amounting to approximately ninety students, which commute on the bus or in a car each morning to Madras from the reservation.

Its the first year at Jefferson County Middle School where the students are exclusively Native American.

The 509-J School District decided to keep Warm Springs' fifth grade class in Madras, a circumstance due to lack of facilities at the reservation grade school and a delay on the construction of the new Warm Springs school.

The Madras school system is one third Caucasian, one third Hispanic and one third Native American, containing more racial diversity than in most places in Oregon.

Allowing the kids to ease into multicultural society off the reservation could be seen as a good thing, and less of an emotionally traumatic experience.

Teacher Amanda McDonnial thinks the situation is really a fortunate fluke for the kids.

"Being in their own class for their first year here, gives them a chance to assimilate slowly. Even though they are here because of a lack facilities on the reservation, I think it is a good position for them to be in," she noted.

She explains her method to ensure a "comfort level" is with lots of "positive reinforcement."

Her first assignment is for each student to write one quarter of a page about the things they are excited and nervous for at their new school.

She assures them that if they are nervous it is o.k. They need time to adjust, because it is new and the school has 900 students compared to the 200 students at the reservation grade school, she explains.

The most common concern among students is the size of the school and the amount of students.

Jillisa Suppah, 5th grader from Warm Springs, told *Spilyay*, "I feel nervous because I might get lost."

Even Mrs. McDonnial admits getting confused by the maze of hallways on her first



Shannon Keaveny/Spilyay

TOP: Warm Springs fifth graders giggle during their first class of the new year. **RIGHT:** Valdimire Jefferson and Tessa Picard diligently work on their first writing assignment for the new school year.

days of teaching.

Perry Kalama, also a 5th grader from Warm Springs, was just straight up concerned "he'd get squashed."

Rhyam Smith expressed her concern that "there's a lot more kids and it's scary."

Other legitimate concerns were that "at the new school we only have three recesses" (versus the previous four) said Shawresa Bates.

Security also may be a little tighter. "You have to have a pass to go to the bathroom," said Kristi Olney.

"This school has better food. You can dish up more," said another student.

All the students admitted that despite their trials and tribulations, they were confident they would adjust to the changes and in the long run, after one week,

they liked Jefferson County Middle School quite well.

Facilitating healthy change

Mrs McDonnial has designed writing assignments, team-building activities, and trust-building activities to help facilitate the adjustment period and comfort levels of new students.

"Write two things down," she says in a playful way, "one that is the truth and one that is a lie."

Afterwards students present their two statements to the class and they play a guessing game of which is the lie and which is the truth.

"This," she says "builds trust among the students. They learn that if they speak to the class, they won't be laughed at."

"I want each student to be successful," she explains.

"I also believe in strong parent communication before something negative occurs. If that may happen, I want that relationship to be there on a positive note first and find parents are more eager to work with me then."

McDonnial sends a welcome letter out to the parents of each student encouraging communication.

Teachers in Madras are faced with understanding three different cultures.

The school district has recognized this challenge and makes efforts to educate new teachers.

New teachers bus out to Warm Springs and are given a tour.

Teachers like Mrs. McDonnial attend cultural events like pow wows.



Shannon Keaveny/Spilyay

But, she says, "I learn the most from my students."

Other efforts include two Native American liaisons.

The liaisons offer a tribal presence at the school in a position of authority. A familiar face from home adds to students comfort level.

Butch David, one of the two Warm Springs liaisons, gave the kids an introduction on their first day of school.

"We're here to help you," he assured, "Whatever your teachers can't answer we can."

Catching on quick, one child raises his hand and asks, "Is it o.k. to go see you if we have a problem?"

David explains he has a radio and can always be reached. He will be roaming the hallways. He feels this year's class exclusion is a good thing, one that will allow Warm Springs tribal kids to get used to the middle school system before they integrate with all the students next year.

David also explains he is there to give the kids a sense of accountability.

He conveys comfort, but he also knows their parents.

He may question kids in the hallway during class time.

Sometimes he tracks excessive absences and will make home visits to find out why kids aren't coming to school.

"The kids," he says, "who come from good homes, adjust better."

"The more Indians at this school" David acknowledges, "the more comfy kids are going to feel. They need a familiar face."