

Language Specialist develops Chinook Dictionary

By Kathleen Mitchell, Culture Board Assistant

Since coming on board in September of 1997, Tony Johnson has managed to build a Language Program for the Tribe.

Working through the Kwelth Tahlkie Culture and Heritage Society office, Tony has built an archive focusing on all the original languages of the Grand Ronde Reservation, with a special emphasis on Chinook Jargon. This archive of written and audio materials has been growing steadily. This is made up of historic documents as well as recently conducted field-work.

Tony, who was born in South Bend, Washington, went to college to focus on the culture and language of his father's people, the Chinook. Tony's grandfather was an allottee on the Quinalt Reservation in Washington.

"My life's focus has been the culture of my dad's people and family," Tony said.

Tony has a background in American Indian Studies from the University of Washington, but later transferred to Central Washington University. He was looking to pursue a master's degree in linguistics at the University of Oregon when he was recruited as Language Specialist by the Culture Board.

Currently tribal Elder Annabelle "Peachie" Hamm, acts as Culture Board Chair. At its annual planning workshop in August the Culture Board made a language program its top priority.

Tony decided that establishment of the Language Program's archive was the essential first step to fulfilling the Culture Board's wishes.

"We will be looking for dedicated helpers," said Dale Archibald, Culture and Heritage Board Executive Director.

With the help of the archival materials, tribal Elders, and his own experience, Tony, the Tribe's Language Specialist, compiled a dictionary of Chinook that currently has 825 entries for English equivalents. Tony refers to the Chinook Jargon as "Chinook" because the older Chinookan languages had their own names.

Tony sees Jargon as the key to language revitalization here. "Learning Chinook is considerably easier, because of its limited vocabulary and its structure, than the older languages of Grand Ronde."

At first, Tony worked on the dictionary using an existing font (lettering) developed for use with Salish languages, such as Tillamook. The Salish font represented most sounds in Chinook, but was not a perfect fit for a Chinookan language.

Tony, with help from intern Greg Davis, then



Tony Johnson, Curator & Language Specialist

developed an alphabet (orthography) to represent all the sounds in Chinook.

After Tony drafted the dictionary and alphabet he found a "phonetic" font developed by a professor in Toronto, Canada, that could be easily modified to represent all the sounds in Chinook. Tony received permission from the professor and then adapted the font to the needs of the Grand Ronde Chinook alphabet. This new True-Type, called "Chinook Wawa," can now be entered into any word processing program. In the future a typing tutor will be developed to help members master the new keyboard. Also, Tony has made it a policy to recruit graduate students of linguistics, from local universities, to be interns with the Language Program. Greg Davis, a Master's candidate at Portland State University, has become the program's first. Tony believes Greg's thesis will be a valuable document to the future of the Grand Ronde Tribe's language effort.

More recently, Tony has been collaborating with a software developer to perfect a Talking Word Tutor, "TWT." He hopes that this will become a part of the long range Chinook Teaching Program at Grand Ronde. A new version of the "TWT" is currently being developed for use by the younger students and will have pictures rather than English definitions.

Now that basic development of the Chinook Dictionary, Orthography and Font is complete, Tony has drafted Language Program plans for the coming year. The plans are established in a grant application that he and tribal Grant Specialist Bob McElderry recently submitted to the Administration for Native Americans (ANA).

The goal of this ANA Planning Grant is to create a foundation so that "an undeniable ANA implementation grant can be written," Tony said. The

Planning Grant, if received, will allow for the following important elements to be completed during the next year.

The first step is to do a comprehensive survey of the language speakers already in the community.

Another step toward language learning will be that the Culture and Heritage Society will work towards making agreements with tribal and public education regarding a Chinook learning program.

Research and recording of all language materials will continue to have top priority with the Culture and Heritage Society.

Still another step toward the eventual teaching of Chinook is the soon to be established, "Core" language group. This group will be asked to commit over the next year to learning Chinook. For more information, please refer to the article below. Tony is confident in the sense of urgency and commitment he has heard from tribal members in and around Grand Ronde. "A year from now, regardless of our grants, we will find a way to get language learning going at some level," Tony said.

Tony's other focus is traditional Chinook Indian arts. He is trained in carving, print making and jewelry making. Tony received a bachelor's degree in small metals, mostly Silver Smithing, from Central Washington University.

Learn Chinook Jargon

The Culture Board is seeking tribal members who are willing to commit to a "pilot" Chinook (Jargon) project. Project participants will be required to meet weekly, on evenings, throughout the upcoming year. This group will provide support for the teaching of Chinook. A tentative start date for this group has been set for WEDNESDAY, MAY 20. Meeting dates and locations will be discussed there.

An interest in "Chinook" is all that is required to apply. Individuals associated with Tribal or Public Education are especially encouraged.

A letter stating your interest to apply, and your commitment to attend classes, is required for consideration for the project. Letters of application must be received by Friday, May 15.

Please send applications to:

Kwelth Tahlkie
c/o Tony A. Johnson
9615 Grand Ronde Road
Grand Ronde, OR 97347

Culture Board meeting to be held May 9; seeking applicants

Kwelth Tahlkie Culture and Heritage Board will hold its monthly meeting at 10 a.m. on May 9 in the Banquet Room of Spirit Mountain Casino. Tribal members are always welcome to attend.

The agenda includes a presentation by the Tribe's Language Specialist, Tony Johnson, of the Chinook Jargon talking tutor computerized learning program. Other agenda items include: discussion of Mission Statement, hiring of an Education Coordinator, a logo, and reorganization following moratorium.

The Board is also recruiting persons interested in serving on its Board of Trustees. Two positions currently are vacant. The term of office is for three years. These two positions are open to both tribal and non-tribal members.

The Culture Board meets no more than eight times

yearly to give direction to the Society by making policy decisions. A Board Trustee helps oversee the activities of a Culture Center staff and develop support from others, both within and outside the Tribe.

The mission of Kwelth Tahlkie Culture and Heritage Society is to recognize, affirm, and celebrate the historical and contemporary cultural achievements of the Grand Ronde people; to preserve and perpetuate that culture and collaborate with other groups and individuals with similar aims; to collect, preserve and interpret articles of cultural patrimony as well as documents, language and oral history; to use such resources as educational opportunities for students and scholars alike.

Interested applicants are encouraged to write a letter of application the Culture Board office. Any

letter should contain the answers to the following questions:

- Are you a member of any Indian tribe or married into the Grand Ronde Tribe? If you are a tribal member, please include your roll number.
- What do you think you have to offer to the Culture and Heritage Society?
- Why do you want to serve on the Culture Board?

Please send the letter of application to Culture Board, 9615 Grand Ronde Road, Grand Ronde, OR 97347 or call 879-2085 or toll free 1-800-422-0232, ext. 2085.

All applications need to be received by June 1 to be considered. A committee of the Culture Board will interview selected applicants in June and make its recommendation to the Culture Board, which will advise Tribal Council on these appointments.