

Humor, Sadness & Understanding are all part of Ed Edmo's Gift

■ Shoshone-Bannock storyteller spends time with young people, gives back to the community.

**Celilo
Fishermen**
By Ed Edmo

*you made your nets
& tested the knots
seeing that they held.
little did you know
what was to hold you
after the sound of
water falling
over what
used to be.*

By Chris Mercier

Call him Ed. Call him Edmo. Whatever you do, don't call him "Chief."

Ed Edmo (yes, that is his name) is by and by a real throwback. The famed storyteller, poet and playwright has left many an impression in his life, in many a place, and no doubt intends to leave more.

Recently, students at Nanitch Sahallie, the Tribe's youth treatment center, were given the opportunity to be impressed upon by Edmo when the one-man traveling troupe gave them an hour of oratory experience.

But to first understand Ed's storytelling talent, one must look at the man himself. Ed's height can be generously relegated to the 5-foot category. No doubt he was a strong young man at one point. His features betray his Shoshone/Bannock origins. He bears long black hair, usually braided; though today for his presentation, his mane is swathed in purple leather bands in double ponytails thrown over his shoulders. A Panama hat and walking stick lend a Tolkienesque air to his features, but with a Native twist.

Yet nothing, however, is more emphatic than his speech.

Ed speaks in a low, occasionally inaudible voice. He mumbles, to be sure, yet in a fluid manner as to sound musical. Words pour forth from his mouth like honey from a spout; slow yet deliberate, and one feels rewarded for the patience to wait it out. As is, Ed's physical attributes are the convenient compliment to his profession — storytelling.

Born 1946 in Celilo Falls, Ed began his life with in near squalor. His family, one brother and both parents, were crammed into a two-room shack, where Ed's job was to manage the chickens and rabbits. The Columbia River was an organic pantry for them, in Celilo the salmon, though considerably thinned from overfishing were adequate for local families. The river was the common thread of the community and Ed recalls vividly on March 10, 1957 when the gates of The Dalles Dam clamped shut and the legendary Celilo fishery disappeared underwater.

Many things disappeared that day. Celilo Falls has since then become a melancholy source of inspiration for Ed. He wrote one poem on it and tours the region, stopping at universities, high schools, conferences, and wherever else the demand to deliver his renowned lecture "Celilo Falls: A



Photo by Chris Mercier

Oral Tradition — Transplanted storyteller, Ed Edmo from the Shoshone-Bannock Tribe, now lives in Portland and travels throughout the Northwest seeking an audience with young people. Edmo, who earlier this year visited Nanitch Sahallie youth treatment center in Keizer, is a well-known storyteller and playwright.

Place, A Memory."

Ed has authored one book of poetry *These Few Words of Mine* (Blue Cloud Press), and contributed to others, such as *Talking Leaves* (Dell). One of Ed's short stories *The Bridge of the Gods* was adapted into a stage production by the Tears of Joy Theatre of Vancouver. His plays have taken him across the globe, to such destinations as Syria, India and Jordan.

Edmo is a founding member of the Northwest Native American Writers Association. He is no lightweight.

"He's quite a character isn't he," said Allan Nelson, one of the psychologists at Nanitch. "When you meet a guy like him, you never forget."

As Nelson explained to me, this isn't Edmo's first appearance at Nanitch. He comes periodically, time permitting, and is always introduced to the new young faces that drift through the place. He brings, Nelson pointed out, a sense of levity and lightheartedness to a serious situation. Nobody could ever accuse Edmo of not having a sense of humor.

"Today we're here to talk about stereotypes," he began, slowly surveying the class through thick glasses.

On a six-foot long table at the far end of the TV room, Edmo has arranged an array of odds and ends — dolls, toys, bottles, jewelry — almost all "Indian" in nature.

"You know why they call us Indians don't you," Edmo asked, and receiving no reply, continued. "It's because Columbus you know, he was looking for India."

And so he continued, as the explor-

ers had assumed they had grounded in India, the first dark skinned inhabitants encountered were christened "Indians."

"Good thing they weren't looking for Turkey, eh," he said, amidst mild chuckles.

But his body language suddenly assumed a more somber tone.

"You know, a long time ago, people didn't want to be Indian," he added.

The U.S. census, Edmo said, just recently indicated that the population of Natives in the country has finally exceeded pre-European estimates. Not that Natives are reproducing more, he hinted, but more people are claiming their heritage.

"Lot of people," he continued. "They didn't want to be Indian....if they were Mexican/Indians, they'd say they were Mexican."

"If they were Filipino/Indian," he added. "They'd say they were Filipino."

Growing up, Edmo said, was not easy. Many of his peers, either unaware of the offense or indifferent, adopted the nickname of "Chief" to bestow upon him. Edmo hasn't forgotten.

"When I was younger, in school, it was always 'Chief do this' or 'Chief do that,'" he said, a vestige of resentment in his voice.

"Now, I won't let anybody call me 'Chief,'" he said, in an undoubtedly firm tone.

Once again, Edmo loosened up. Perhaps that is one of his greatest assets; the ability to shift gears so abruptly. He once again assumed a lighter mood.

"Have you ever seen my Teenage Mutant Ninja Chief," he asked, and whipped out the action figure, properly bedecked with feathers, a war band and a tomahawk.

"Or how about this," he said, and held aloft an ax, still sealed in its original packaging.

"A real 'Indian Ax,'" he said, reading the label. "I traded for this one in The Dalles."

Edmo has made a hobby of collecting old-fashioned 'Indian' kitsch, partially for kicks and partially as a reminder of how Natives were perceived during his youth. To demonstrate he breaks out a real gem: a small bottle in a leather sheath.

"I bought this one a llllooonnnnggg time ago in Yellowstone," he said, proudly. "Listen to what it says on the back."

Inscribed on the leather is a crude forgettable attempt at poetry, ending with some phrase about a "drunken Indian."

But the pearl of his collection is his Indian Barbie. True to her namesake, the doll bears all the unnatural features of her Anglo sister, yet sports black hair, feathers, a leather dress and moccasins, still in her packaging. Likewise the back relates her tale of how she enjoys helping her mother gather corn while her father and brothers go hunting, or something to that effect.

"These are very hard to find," he said.

After nearly half an hour of play Ed was ready to begin the storytelling of his presentation. He learned many of his stories from his mother and grandmother, who likewise kept up the oral tradition. Some of them he picked up during his travels.

Edmo likes to invoke the audience during his stories, often calling upon them to mimic his motions, such as in the story of Snake, who was "rolled" into his present form by peers who tired of his complaining.

To tell Edmo's stories would ruin the mystique, but safely assume he told and pantomimed some colorful stories, from his Shoshone/Bannock creation tale, to the many stories of coyote.

All of his stories had a moral — be not cowardly, like coyote, nor ignore the advice of Elders. Yet none so poignantly captured the spirit of the afternoon like the tale of undersized porcupine, "who got himself a buffalo," despite the discouragement of his peers.

Edmo noted that he had as well struggled with alcohol at one point.

"You've got to have faith in yourself," he said. "Do so and you'll realize that nothing is impossible."

The clients of Nanitch lingered around him as he packed up, looking to catch a close-up glimpse of his possessions, as if magical. He ate lunch, and in a matter of moments was homeward bound back to Portland. There is a high demand for his skills, and very few others can do what he does.

Nobody ever seems to forget Ed Edmo. ■