

# Learning the Ropes in Whale Country

■ Chinuk Wawa Conference at Neah Bay on the Makah Reservation is a chance to learn something old, something new.

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whaling in 1999, was in fact entertaining thoughts of another whale hunt. My editor advised we pursue that story vigorously should we see those canoes put out to sea, since it was sure to be the biggest event in the northwest since the arrival of Ichiro (Rookie outfielder for the Seattle Mariners who hales from Japan).

I could already imagine. We would be awoken one morning by who-knows-what kind of alarm, only to gaze out the window and see the traditional red and black canoe cutting the waves on to a meeting with some complacent aquatic quarry. A crusty old fisherman who mumbled would take us out for a stiff fee, while we simultaneously tried to film and document the whole scenario, keeping the ocean spray off the camera lens and off the notepads and curiously wonder whether our beat up rig was seriously seaworthy.

In many ways I looked forward to it. The perfect christening and the debacle would beat anything we might see aboard one of those ultra-modern Japanese or Norwegian vessels (Japan and Norway being the other whaling nations). And yes, that twinge of conscience in the back of my head would scream.

The whaling never happened and we were treated to an inside view of a Tribe that has lived in select infamy for the last two years. And we learned a little Wawa along the way.

The name of the Makah was bequeathed upon the Tribe by neighboring Tribes and according to the placemat at the Makah Maiden Café — means "generous hosts."

I found that meaning to be completely appropriate under the circumstances, as our Makah hosts showed a strong grasp of the concept of hospitality, giving us, among other things, a guided tour of their museum and of Cape Flattery, an unsurpassable salmon bake and for us greenhorns an introduction to the pastime of the "Bone Game."

The Makah Museum and Cultural Center remains a major attraction for many of the thousands of tourists who make the long, winding drive to Neah Bay. Though opened in 1979, the Museum houses centuries-old artifacts from the legendary Ozette Village.

Ozette, located 15 miles south of Neah Bay, was for centuries a year-round home for many of the Makah people. In 1970, tidal erosion unearthed a group of traditional longhouses, almost entirely preserved and more than four centuries old. Archaeologists from Washington State University led the excavation that went on from 1970 to 1981 and the village has supplied many of the Museum's prized artifacts.

Included in the museum's collection are wood and whalebone carvings, ev-



## Learning the Language —

The Tribe's Language Specialist Tony Johnson (top, right) is joined by Youth Education Specialist Richard "Bubba" Sohappay during a learning session at this year's Chinuk Wawa Conference. The conference was held on the Makah Reservation at Neah Bay, Washington. Makah Tribal Elder Edie Hottowe (below, right) added credibility and her own brand of humor to the language courses and the bone games that were played later in the evening.

eryday tools, fishnets (crafted from stinging nettles, of all things), weapons and two of the Makah's most sacred possessions — a pair of carvings shaped like Orca fins, one adorned with shells and the other sea otter teeth, of which only a few are known to exist and the significance is uncertain.

The Makah have also built a spacious longhouse replica, complete with dried salmon hanging from the ceiling (it smelled real, Lindy Trolan — Grand Ronde Tribal Cultural Resource Specialist — and I agreed) and an unfinished canoe and beach scene. On display in the center of the museum is a pair of huge canoes, handmade with handcrafted tools, and the kind that in days past would be used to hunt, of course, whales.

Naturally, one cannot visit the Makah without invariably engaging in debate over their controversial practice of whaling, which has drawn criticism from all over the globe and even from other Native Americans.

"It is a controversy we did not expect," said Kirk Wachendorf, while leading our tour.

Yet it is one they seem ready to stand by. As explained to us, the Makah have always been ocean people, not river people. And whales, along with seals, have been an important staple in the Makah diet since...well, since forever.

Unfortunately for the Makahs, not many people around the world, Natives

and non-Natives alike, have found that ample reason to restore the practice. Ever since they harpooned that Grey whale back in May of 1999, the Tribe has suffered serious unpopularity from all sides, enough to make them not only defensive about the topic, but also particularly sensitive.

One of the workers in the Cultural Resource Center approached me before the end of the conference and asked if it were the *Smoke Signals* of Grand Ronde I worked for. Naturally, my answer was yes, after which she eyed me dubiously and said, in a bitter tone:

"Well you guys sure published a piece of junk story recently."

My memory went blank. Had we published anything about the Makahs recently?

"That interview with Sherman Alexie," she said.

Bingo.

True enough, Alexie had made some less than sterling remarks about the Makahs in his *Smoke Signals* interview last November. I explained that, but her opinion was that his quotes should have been cut entirely. The piece creates, she told me, the image that Natives are divided on some issues.

"Tell your editor he shouldn't have done that," she added. "There are people more important than him (Alexie) who support us."

Though not a true confrontation, it was one I certainly didn't expect. Maria Parker, Makah Language Specialist, shed some light.

"If you'd have been here when we had all those protestors," she said. "You would definitely understand."

The Makah Reservation, she told me,

had become replete with outsiders two years ago during the whaling fiasco. And none of them were very friendly.

"They were obnoxious," she told me. "Things did not feel safe here."

Some of the more disturbing things she remembered were the signs and bumper stickers reading, "Save a whale, Kill a Makah." And two Indian schools in Washington had bomb threats called in. Needless to say, bring up whaling and you'll be striking a nerve.

Most surprising about the reservation is, given its relative isolation, the amount of tourists who sweep in for the weekend. Though a good deal of them appeared to be on fishing adventures, many of them were not. Many come to see the museum, visit Ozette Lake, and make the fairly easy hike to Cape Flattery.

Now proud Oregonians will be somewhat dismayed, Wachendorf said, by the fact that Cape Flattery is in fact the westernmost point in the lower 48 states. I had heard the Oregon claim, that Cape Disappointment was, yet would lose no sleep were that proven false.

Cape Flattery was stunning even though the weather remained uncooperative. And on this day what impressed more was the work the Makahs have done on the just less than a mile trail at the Cape. The last thousand feet or so of the trail are more or less decks, as the terrain become somewhat swampy and damp. Likewise the vistas are newly adorned with cedar balconies, affording a sumptuous and safer view.

An overlooked fact of its own is that while known for whaling, Makahs have not lost their knack for salmon. So we learned upon our arrival back from the Cape as large fillets sat impaled on

Photos by Willie Mercier

nix" a nōsayka munk skukōm nōsayka chinuk-wawa.  
"Let's work on strengthening our Chinuk-wawa (Jargon)."

### ■ CHINUK-WAWA CLASS OFFERED

Another multi-level three-credit class in chinuk-wawa will be offered in September. It will be conducted by the Tribe's Cultural Education program and sponsored by the University of Oregon. The ten-week course will begin September 24 and will be held on Monday nights from 5:30-8:30 p.m. in the Tribe's Community Center.

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