

Photos by Willie Mercier



Cape Flattery is not only one of the most beautiful places on earth, it is also the northwestern most point of the continental United States.

branches before a low fire.

Makah Tribal Elder Edie Hottowe acted as overseer for the salmon bake, while onlookers sat attentively and eagerly around the blaze, tantalized by the smokey salmon smell. The pink flesh simmered deliciously, before being lifted reverently and spread out on a table in the longhouse for all to partake. I'd never had baked salmon before, yet I, as well as Bubba SoHappy, Tony Johnson, Bobby Mercier, and salmon expert Kathleen Feehan collectively reached the consensus that this was some of the finest salmon in the history of mankind. The perfect lead-in for an evening of "Bone Game," I thought.

For the uninitiated, this holdover game would seem rather strange and that's because it is. While a handful of Grand Ronders looked on, we merged minds to interpret the pastime. Two teams line up in chairs, facing one another and proceed to chant, beat drums and exchange sticks and carved bones. For all purposes the drum-beating and stick beating seemed moot — the simplest objective was to guess in which hand was the unmarked bone of the selected team member. A correct guess usually meant tossing one or two marked sticks at the feet of the oppos-

ing team, I think. While the other team relinquished the bones, much hooting and taunting would ensue and eventually the longhouse grew so dark that we could not even see the eyes of the opposing team. All I know is that Hottowe led the other team and she would lift her hand and make a sign with her fingers, which would lead to mutters or jeers, but no stick game ever goes unfinished and before I knew it a drum was passed to me and Feehan and I were called on some occasions to palm the bones. Feehan said she understood the game, but I don't believe her.

Either way, we sat the night, palming the bones, exchanging the sticks and even beating upon a loaned drum and hollering occasionally. At some point my team won.

I suppose it would be criminal to write an entire article on the Chinuk Wawa Conference and somehow omit anything about the language. We were here to learn Chinuk, and even one as linguistically disadvantaged, as myself could not escape without learning something.

To begin, one must understand that Chinuk is in fact a jargon — a language that evolved from other languages. Though linguists have worked to make the language presentable with an En-

glish alphabet, one need only look at how many words are spelled and realize that new letters (to us) had to be invented simply to spell out some words. Syllables exist that we westerners seem physically unable to pronounce.

It is these observations that make the accomplishments of Tony Johnson, as well as the linguists and language specialists present, like Maria Parker, Henry Zenk, and Thomas W. Larsen, all that more impressive.

As I learned, the most amazing aspect of Chinuk is that the language has managed to survive at all, given the amount of effort corrupting it, misdirecting it and as we have learned from Elders who attended boarding school, stifling it. Many a linguist, in an attempt to help, or perhaps in self-serving, has added fuel to that fire.

Many of the books written on Chinuk by non-Natives, Johnson and Zenk pointed out, have served the language badly, in all likelihood because writers went to no great lengths to verify details. Yet one wouldn't think so from the way some of them tout themselves. Edward Harper Thomas' *Chinook: A History and Dictionary*, which Johnson showed to me, seems fairly modest compared to George Shaw's *The Chinook Jargon and How to Use It; a complete and exhaustive lexicon of the oldest trade language of the American Continent*.

"Obviously, I don't think these guys went to every village in the Northwest to double-check pronunciations and meanings," said Johnson.

Is then Chinuk lost? Not really, I realized after sitting in on the lectures while Johnson, Zenk, Larsen, Parker and Hottowe carried conversations entirely in Chinuk, much to the frustration, though amused frustration, of onlookers, myself included.

"In Grand Ronde, we have one of the biggest living communities of Wawa speakers," said Johnson (in English), "and right now we have more people learning it than losing it."

What then did I learn? For starters, don't always assume that English will translate into Chinuk. Such was the heart of one of our exercises, when the class divided into groups, one Wawa ex-

pert per, with the intent of translating well-known English phrases, proverbs and short stories.

Given the directness of the language, the more poetic phrases came out butchered or so distinct from their counterparts as to be laughable.

"Curiosity killed the cat" roughly translated into "there was a cat once who wanted to know too much and so he died." The Aesop moral of "beware the wolf in sheep's clothing" became "Have fear of the wolf who wears a coat that looks like a sheep."

There was more, of course, language exercises, but I suspect those were reserved for linguists than layman. This after Maria Parker handed out a flyer titled *Chinook Jargon Words of Nootkan Origin and their Corresponding Makah Pronunciations*. Larsen made his own presentation on his ambitious plans to develop a *Chinuk Wawa Grammar Outline* with Henry Zenk, which years from now I predict people will be thankful for.

Dave Robertson of Spokane, a name Chinuk speakers will recognize, brought forth one of the memorable moments of the conference. In his hands were two delicate, crispy and obviously very old newspapers — *The Kamloops Wawa*, a jargon newspaper that reached a circulation of 2000 in British Columbia over 100 years ago. Robertson had gone so far to translate the Kamloops language into Wawa, which of course made it already out of my league, but was impressive.

Frankly, I'm not sure if many beginners took in a whole lot of Chinuk. Maria Parker, who helped organize the conference with Tony Johnson, even confided the same sentiment to me, though she didn't seem too bothered by it. This was the chance for Tribes to meet and discuss their differences, linguistic and cultural. It was a chance to get away and have a little fun. And everybody learned something.

It was, as we say in Chinuk, a classic case of *pus wik-ikta layka lunk, alta wik-ikta layka iskaλ*. ■

By Chris Mercier

Now that many Tribes are reviving spiritual beliefs, languages and are clearly on the up-and-up concerning

economic self-sufficiency, one might ask, what next?

Preserving sacred sites will spring into mind for many who were lucky enough to be watching Oregon Public Broadcasting on August 14.

Point of View's (P.O.V.) *In The Light of Reverence* premiered that Tuesday night at 10 p.m., a documentary chronicling Native Americans' struggles to maintain religious sites that are being encroached upon more and more everyday. Directed by acclaimed documentary maker Christopher "Toby" McLeod and co-produced with Lumbee (North Carolina) Tribal member Malinda Maynor, the film acts as a subtle reminder that Native American religious beliefs still go unnoticed and regrettably, not respected.

Devil's Tower in the Black Hills, though federally protected, draws rock-climbers from all over, many of whom still insist on scaling the monument even during June when Lakotas hold ceremonies there. Park Rangers graciously request climbers plan their ascents around June, but are under no legal obligation to do so. Many, naturally, climb anyway. By comparison to climb nearby Mount Rushmore anytime of the year is a federal offense.

Wintu Tribal members in Northern California experience similar discontent as their traditionally sacred spring at Panther Meadows near Mt. Shasta is experiencing a growing influx of non-Native spiri-



IN THE LIGHT OF REVERENCE

PROTECTING AMERICA'S SACRED LANDS

A DOCUMENTARY FILM NARRATED BY PETER COYOTE AND TANTOO CARDINAL

"THIS FILM IS A WAKE-UP CALL FOR EVERYONE WHO CARES ABOUT THE ENVIRONMENT AND HUMAN RIGHTS." — ROBERT REDFORD



violated by a number of mining companies. Already they have lost a number of shrines as one company, run by a fairly remorseless owner interviewed in the piece, has razed the sites seeking highway gravel and pumice.

Another mining company that the Hopis sold water rights to 30 years ago has sucked their underground lake so bare that already many sacred springs are drying up. At another site ancient petroglyphs have been chipped away by what appeared to be gunfire.

The ultimate question all three Tribes have is what to do about their predicaments, as the Federal Government hasn't exactly jumped to their aid. It is here that *In The Light of Reverence* closes, leaving viewers with an unofficial "to be continued" and urging them, subtly, to do what they can.

McLeod and Maynor spent roughly 10 years making the film, which is narrated by actor Peter Coyote and Tantoo Cardinal. P.O.V. has contributed numerous films to public broadcasting, and is renowned for their famous Talking Back endings, when they give viewers the opportunity to voice their opinion, by telephone, camcorder, or email. Many responses are often aired.

Tribal members interested in purchasing a copy of *In The Light of Reverence* for home-use only should contact Bullfrog Films at 1-800-543-3764 or www.bullfrogfilms.com.

tual admirers who visit the spring to "get back to nature," in the words of one visitor. Add to that the proposal to build a ski resort and it's easy to see why the Wintu are up in arms over the affair.

Steve Vincent, a Wintu member who lives in Falls City, Oregon and acts as the Tribal Firetender of the Sacred Fire, called the documentary "accurate and quite profound." Vincent, who visits the spring every year, said the site has indeed become overrun with visitors, many of them New Age mystics.

"Oh yeah, you get people showing up and pulling out their crystals, and bathing in the springs nude," he said. "We even had some devil worshippers who tried to leave their symbols around."

Vincent noted that *In The Light of Reverence* was the first time Wintu Elder Flora Jones had allowed herself to be filmed or photographed while in her spiritual trance during a ceremony. And though he doesn't feel that the Wintus actually "own" the land, their objections to excessive outsiders is justified because they are, in some forms, caretakers.

"We are definitely stewards of the land," he added.

But neither the Lakotas nor the Wintus seem to have it as bad as the Hopis of Arizona, whose sites are