

Carver: "I Want This Canoe to Live"

■ **Tony Johnson is carving a canoe for the Fort Clatsop National Memorial.**

By Chris Mercier

Tribal Language and Cultural Specialist Tony Johnson can list animal figures, bowls, spoons and in some degrees Totem poles to his accomplishments as a woodcarver. Then why on Earth would he approach his latest venture, a 24-foot canoe, with the same insecurity usually reserved for novices?

"There are lots of tricks and nuances," said Johnson, a member of the Chinook Tribe of southwestern Washington. Johnson works for the Grand Ronde Tribe as the Culture department's Language Specialist. "I think it takes a good 20 to 30 years for a guy to get his confidence."

And Johnson, well known among Tribal members for his devotion to Native ways and traditions (he speaks fluent Chinuk), has a mere ten years of carving experience under his belt. He has witnessed the laborious process of canoe-making firsthand and this particular project will be his and his alone — the first solo effort.

Folks from the Fort Clatsop National Memorial near Astoria contacted Johnson years ago about carving a canoe for them. After finding a suitable log last year he agreed, but under the provision that the canoe would be a living one — that they would use it and not just display it.

"No point in making a canoe just for show," said Johnson. "That would be a waste of a tree."

The project has consumed many weekends and evenings the past year, when Johnson had the opportunity to devote some time to it. The canoe, which he hopes will be completed this fall, began its long life as western red cedar, old growth in fact, from the Sweet Home area. Cedar, Johnson claimed, remains the logical wood of choice, for the lightness and the buoyancy. Yet chancing upon the tree was no easy task.

"It (western red cedar) is very hard to come by," said Johnson. "The quality over the last hundred years has diminished."



Photo by Scott Holmstedt

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~ **Tony Johnson, carver**

Under the agreement with Fort Clatsop, a 60-foot log was obtained and that was enough for two canoes — one for them, and one for him. The log was moved by truck to his home in Sheridan and the rest has been, as Johnson would say "patience and repetition."

Johnson's fervor for woodcarving began over ten years ago in Seattle while a student at the University of Washington working on a degree in metalsmithing. His father's cousin was known to be heavily involved in carving and Johnson contacted him in hopes of learning. Since then, woodcarving has become one of his most revered hobbies, to which he has devoted innumerable spare hours.

The canoe could be the ultimate work thus far in his "new" carving career. He has used primarily handmade tools and the project has taken a considerable physical toll.

"Physically," said Johnson. "This will wear you out."

This summer's heat in Sheridan added to the exhaustion factor, enough that Johnson saw fit to relocate the canoe to Astoria to complete it. In former times, he tells, a canoe would usually be carved near the site of the felled tree, or if convenient, in close proximity to water. Laboring under the sweltering mid-valley sun has taught him why.

The end of the carving, of course, will not mark the end of the project. Johnson would never have secured a reputation as a purist had he not been devoted to doing things the "old way" (read: the hard way). Making the canoe shipshape will be another bit of work.

In order to give canoes their trademark curve one requires unique traditional technology. First, Johnson explained, he must fill the inside with "four fingers of water." Second, he must heat up a batch of fist-sized stones in a nearby fire pit. Adding the stones to the water inside and covering the canoe to keep steam in, the sides and bottom will warp outwards, enough to expand it to 150 percent of the original size.

"When it's wider," Johnson explained. "It won't tip as easy."

A torch is applied to the exterior, in order to harden the surface. And to waterproof, oil must be rubbed all over.

A traditional Chinuk canoe, said Johnson, would typically be black outside and red inside. When treated and completed with bow and stern pieces, Johnson estimates the piece to weigh roughly 200 pounds.

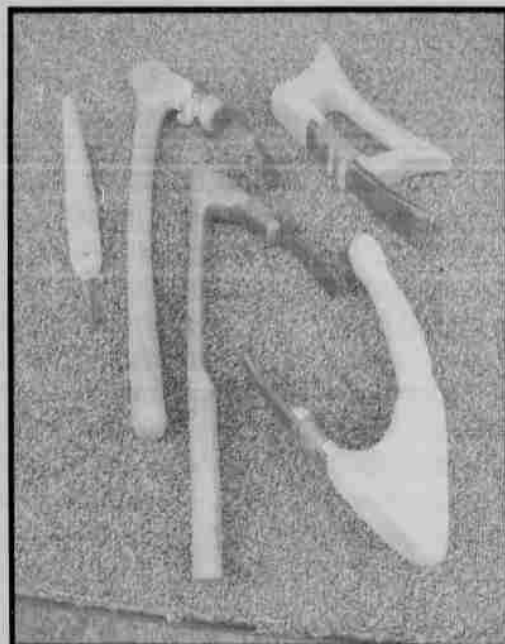
Next, using the remainder of the original log, Johnson will start on his own canoe, with probably a little rest in between.



This is a model of what the canoe will look like.



Weekend Project — Chinook Carver Tony Johnson has been devoting his non-working hours to carving this 24-foot canoe out of an old growth western red cedar log from the Sweet Home area. Johnson is carving the canoe for the Fort Clatsop National Memorial. Johnson said he wants the canoe to get used, not just displayed.



Hand Held — These are the carving tools Johnson is using to create the cedar canoe.

Photos by Willie Mercier