

Quick Stop In Korea Continues A Tribal Connection

By Chris Mercier,
Tribal Chair

Quick question: Does a stopover in a foreign nation actually count as having visited that country? Technically, you have set foot on that country's ground. But then again, not always do you end up going through customs, nor do they stamp your passport. In other words, it's kind of a trick question. More importantly, it's the kind of question that will plague a tired and jetlagged mind, which is exactly what mine was on September 20, 2006, as my feet finally touched down in Incheon, South Korea, just about an hour outside of Seoul.

I had the good fortune to visit that up and coming nation as part of an ongoing sister county relationship between Yamhill County and Geumsan province that goes more than a decade back. In fact, in 1996, Mark Mercier then also a member of the Grand Ronde Tribal Council, made the same trip. According to some of my companions who happened to have been part of that same trip, Geumsan has changed quite a bit. I take their word for it. But here's the blow by blow run down of my brief, yet fascinating experience.

I am greeted at the airport on September 20 after having been in transit for nearly 20 hours, including an 11-hour flight from Portland to Tokyo. I left the morning of September 19. The time is roughly 9 p.m. on September 20. The time difference, in case anybody is interested, is 16 hours. Koreans are 16 hours ahead of us. When I return to the United States the following week, my flight from Seoul leaves at 11 a.m. I arrive in Portland at 8 a.m....on the same day.

Bob Youngman, a local businessman who is part of the delegation, and Jane Mauk of the Northwest Korean Culture Society, also a traveling companion, informed me



Chairman Chung Hyu-Soon, the head of Geumsan province, also known by his American peers as "Clinton."

that South Korea has one of the highest standards of living in the far East. Actually, the quality of life and cost of living about parallel that of our country, which to me is kind of surprising, as I have traveled through other countries in the region — Thailand, Laos, Cambodia and Malaysia. Those countries have a ways to go. Korea doesn't, and that is very obvious as our driver takes us down to the central part

of the country, where Yamhill's sister province resides. We speed past a slew of new condos and construction, rarely dipping below 70 m.p.h. Many buildings bear company names and logos,

like Daewoo. Mauk informs me that a lot of the bigger companies provide housing for their employees. They are everywhere, these company neighborhoods, sparkling condos and apartment complexes, jutting out of the ground and lined up beside each other like titanic concrete dominoes.

We arrive in Geumsan and our hotels at just after midnight. I haven't slept in well over 24 hours. Our host, Chairman Chung Hyu-Soon, the head of the province's council, greets us in the lobby, looking a little peaked himself. Mauk and Marian Newell, a local hazelnut farmer (Willamette Filbert Growers) from Newberg, informed me that Chung's nickname is "Clinton",

because he looks startlingly like our former president. Really, he does. We are showed to our rooms, in bed by 1 a.m. Chung informs us that we will be rising at 8:30 that morning, when our guided tour of the province will begin. Chung doesn't speak English, but through body language and a few words we understand, like "sleep" and "wake" and "eight...ter-tee", the plan is made abundantly clear.

Our hotel serves what is called an "American Breakfast", and that means fried eggs, bacon, white toast, sliced kiwis and melons, and plenty of coffee. Chung greets us very chipper. Like a lot of Korean businessmen, I learn, he almost always wears a suit and tie. His entourage of what seems like at least two or three men dress similarly. At times we have a translator, at other times we don't.

We are taken to the World Ginseng Expo to set up a booth representing Yamhill County. Newell sets out tons of packets of hazelnuts, all of which are taken within an hour. I put out Tribal calendars and about three dozen issues of the "Smoke Signals" pow wow issue. Those two are taken quickly. The expo grounds are very impressive. September 21 is not technically the official opening day, but nonetheless there appears to be a "pre-screening" of the opening ceremonies. We are invited.

Chung takes us to the provincial offices, where his secretaries serve us cold tea that reminds me of shredded wheat. Newell and Mauk explain that it is toasted wheat tea. I like the flavor, but still find the idea a little unusual for a beverage.

Not until lunch of our first day do I get to experience a real Korean meal. I have heard of kimchee, the pickled spicy cabbage that accompanies every meal, but this is my first time trying it. We are taken to a local restaurant where we must take off our shoes and sit at a line of small tables no more than 15 inches off the ground. Before us sit a number of small dishes, probably a dozen at least, from which we will all eat. Also present are a hand-



Photos by Chris Mercier

Gyeongbokgung Palace: Sunday visitors enjoy a stroll through the massive old complex, located in the northern part of Seoul. The palace grounds also host the beautiful Korean National Folk Museum.