

# Winter Gathering Brings Back Old Friends and Old Ways

By Ron Karten

For the fifth annual Chinook Winter Gathering, the Tribe welcomed Indians from across the west from San Diego to Seattle. Many Chinook Tribal members themselves traveled a couple hours south to get to the traditional plankhouse in the Ridgefield, Washington National Wildlife Refuge, where Tribal members no longer live.

The plankhouse was built in concert with the recent Lewis & Clark commemoration because the site once was home to the Chinook people, and 900 of them are reported to have come out to meet the Lewis & Clark exposition late in 1805.

"Let's just say that I am completely envious of their longhouse," said Grand Ronde Tribal Chair Chris Mercier. "I really hope that Grand Ronde can eventually get something like that."

Disease wiped out the people in this southern Washington home in the 50 years after the Lewis & Clark expedition, but descendants of those who survived settled north in the Washington State fishing communities of Bay Center, Chinook, and Ilwaco on Willapa Bay. From some 16,000 Tribal members in the early 1800s, the Tribe today numbers a little more than 2,000.

In recent times, after two decades of struggle directed at federal recognition, the Chinooks convinced the Clinton administration to recognize the Tribe as one of the administration's last acts, but the Bush administration came in and quickly reversed the decision. Efforts toward federal recognition continue, particularly now, said one Tribal member, that the tone in Congress has changed.

And meanwhile, events like this gathering are part of the process of re-learning the cultural life lost with the land and years of broken promises.

The event included singing and drumming, storytelling and a potluck meal. "Traditionally," said Grand Ronde Tribal member Greg Archuleta, "the Winter Gathering was one of the important seasonal events for the Chinook People."

The Grand Rondes still share



Tribal Council Chair Chris Mercier (l) and Vice Chair Angie Blackwell present Chinook Chair Ray Gardner with a Pendleton blanket at the Chinook Plankhouse in Ridgefield, Washington on Saturday, January 20.

ancestry with the Chinooks.

It was a day for friends and memories and in a plankhouse as close to traditional as they come. Aspects of the old life opened up again on Saturday, January 20 this year.

"I'm trying to think about how a person would put that into words," said Gary Johnson, former Chair-

Ronde Tribe's Cultural Resources Department.

"We meet for the purpose of remembering how strongly our ancestors felt about our culture," Tony Johnson said to the assembly that came and went in a steady stream all afternoon. "We share things from our families and the stories

ways from personal accounts. I loved singing with new people and learning their songs."

Many in attendance were community members and government workers from agencies who worked with the Chinooks on fish and wildlife or cultural issues as this Ridgefield site was developed.

"It's great of you to share with people like myself who were blind to the history," said Susan McAdams, Chair of Friends of the Plankhouse, a fund-raising and support group.

Roger Wendlich, who described himself as "a crazy white guy," said, "I was taught wrong when I was a boy. It was Natives who led the way. I tell school children now that this was home to tens of hundreds of thousands of people. It wasn't a wilderness to those who lived here with the Great Spirit."

Didahalqid, Chair of the Snohomish Tribe, dedicated a drum song to the first people of Seattle, the Duwamish, Chief Seattle's people. The Duwamish are the oldest people of the area that has become Seattle, and like the Chinooks, received federal recognition from the Clinton administration and had that recognition revoked a few days later by the Bush administration.

Mary Lou Slaughter, a direct descendant of Chief Seattle, made regalia in the old way for those from the Tribe who performed their drum song and dance.

"I was really impressed by the sense of community and friendship," said Chris Mercier.

The plankhouse held two fire pits that were kept aflame all afternoon. Room along one side of the plankhouse is elevated and fenced, and young children safely watched all the action. Older kids ran around in regalia and jeans both in and out of the plankhouse. The potluck included salmon, clams and oysters, crabs, wapato, pastas, salads and a selection of chocolate.

All afternoon, firelight glimmered off well-fed, happy, hopeful, determined faces, some in tears for a time, some in laughter. It was a picture of plenty. ■

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~ Leslie Riggs,  
Grand Ronde Tribal Member

man of the Chinooks. "I think it must be a dream come true for a lot of Elders; this opportunity to have their children and grandchildren participate in the culture in this way."

Johnson also is father of Chinook Tribal member Tony Johnson, Education Coordinator for the Grand

are passed down."

"I was honored to be invited to the event," said Grand Ronde Tribal member and Cultural Resources Department Education Specialist Leslie Riggs. "I had a brilliant time hearing new stories and learning about our neighbor Tribes and their



Photos by Ron Karten

Chinook drummer Tony Johnson (second from right) and Grand Ronde drummer Bobby Mercier (center in red jacket) participate with drummers from other Tribes during the fifth Annual Chinook Winter Gathering in Washington.