

Grand Ronde Tribal Elder harvests timber for cedar longhouse

By Scott Swanson

Of The Sweet Home News Era

A s a powerful helicopter crested a forested ridge on Nov. 9 with a long log dangling from a hydraulic grapple on the end of a long cable, Don Day smiled and raised his digital camera to record the moment.

Then he jotted some numbers and a brief description of the chopper's load on a tablet laying on the front seat of his pickup, tabulating how many trips the Boeing 234 Chinook had made and how many logs it had carried.

Day, an elder of the Confederated Tribes of Grand Ronde, was clearly thrilled.

"This is very exciting," he repeated again and again. "This is Celebration Day. I've worked a whole year to get to this hour."

The monster western red cedar trees from the Forest Service's Sweet Home District were beginning their journey towards becoming the first Native American longhouse built in the Willamette Valley, using entirely traditional methods, in more than 250 years, he said.

The chopper carried about 50 8- to 20-foot lengths of old-growth cedar logs, some of them more than 5 feet in diameter, out of a hole behind a tributary of the Soda Fork River, and deposited them on a landing off Soda Fork Road that afternoon.

Sweet Home logger Gary Olsen, who was on the scene to plan his attack, will truck the wood to the Grand Ronde Reservation.

"I've worked with Don before but not like this," Olsen said as he eyed



U.S. Forest Service archaeologist Tony Farque, left, and Grand Ronde Elder Don Day enjoy the moment after more than a year of work to get the wood harvested.

the large logs, figuring how he was going to get them onto his self-loading truck.

District archaeologist Tony Farque said that, because of treaties and federal regulations, Indians are given access to natural resources in what were once their ancestral lands now controlled by the Forest Service.

"It's fully appropriate for the

Tribes to request resources for non-commercial uses," he said. "They have access to ceremonial sites or can request the resources themselves. The Tribes regard us as gatekeepers of those resources."

He said that Day asked for the cedar to build the plank longhouse.

"Don called me and we spent years looking for the right trees," Farque said.

They found them in the hole near a small creek past the end of Soda Fork Road, also known as Forest Road 2041, which runs north from Mountain House on Highway 20, east of Cascadia. The bases of the trees, which Day estimated to be between 500 and 600 years old, had been buried by 20 feet of mud in a landslide 12 years ago, which is believed to have killed them.



Don Day demonstrates how he and volunteers plan to split cedar logs into planks for use on the Confederated Tribes of Grand Ronde longhouse. Day uses a mallet made from a Douglas fir trunk and branch, and wedges, at left, made of yew and old oak to split the huge logs.

The wood will be used to build a Kalapuya-style longhouse 50 feet wide from inside wall to inside wall and more than 80 feet long, with eaves overhanging by 2 to 3 feet. It will have no windows.

The building will be used for traditional and ceremonial activities, such as weddings, funerals and blessings, and will hold between 300 and 400 people, Day said. Currently, Grand Ronde Tribal members travel 55 miles south to the Confederated Tribes of the Siletz for such events, or hold them in gymnasiums.

The cedar planks for the building will be split using traditional techniques used by the Grand Ronde and other Northwestern Indian Tribes.

Day said he and others will use wedges made of yew wood, antler and bone, and wooden mallets to split the logs into planks about 3 inches thick, which will then be shaved down to the desired thickness, closer to 2 inches.

"It's a challenge to split material from an 8- to 20-foot-long log, depending on what part of the house the wood is intended for," said Day, who is using the longhouse construction as the topic for his thesis, "Western Red Cedar Houses of the Northwest," to earn a master's degree in interdisciplinary studies from the University of Oregon.

Day said the techniques he plans to use are a lost art among most Northwest Indians.

"Plank splitting hasn't been done at the Grand Ronde reservation in over 100 years, since the reservation was established in 1856," he said. "When my people were rounded up and put on a postage stamp (reservation), they lost the knowledge of how to do this. This is the revitalization of an art that once everyone knew how to do. If you go to my reservation today, you'll find five people who remember how to do it."

Day said he has tried to learn the old ways by reading historical accounts by explorers, such as Lewis and Clark, and descriptions of Native American life by early ethnographers, and by visiting museums.

He said the American Museum of Natural History in New York City has a collection of Native American tools from the Northwest that include some wedges made of antlers that are about 12 inches long and 3 inches in diameter.

"Those times were huge," he said. "You don't have antlers that big around here anymore."

Work on the longhouse will start "right away," Day said. He said he hopes the project will be completed within a year.

He said the project has gained enthusiasm from Tribal members, who initially were skeptical.

"They couldn't believe I got the wood," he said. "Even when they saw photos they couldn't believe it was this big."

Now, he said, "I have Tribal people calling me at home (in Stayton) and saying, 'Gosh, Don, if you get going on this I'll be glad to help you.'"

He had assistance Nov. 8 at the pickup site from three members of the Grand Ronde wildland firefighting crew who showed up to help set chokers on the logs and get them ready for flight.

"They were kind of excited to be here," he said. "They'd heard stories about this but they didn't know how to do it."

He said he has split cedar logs up to 40 feet long, using as many as 20 wedges.

The trick, he said, is to be patient.

"You want to let the log split travel at its own speed," he said as he demonstrated by splitting an 8-foot log about 5 feet in diameter with two wooden wedges. "Steel (wedge) rushes it."

"Every time I split one of these (logs), the work of my ancestors is that much more amazing to me," Day said. "They could look at a snag and tell you if it could be made into a canoe. I can't do that. It comes with experience."

Getting the chopper to the site required a little patience as well, as its services have been in demand.

Dave Horrax, a forester for Columbia Helicopters Inc. of Aurora, said the chopper had been in Southern California helping to fight the fires there, and then was used to move a 115-foot Christmas tree into Six Flags Magic Mountain, north of Los Angeles, before it flew to Heavenly Valley to help install some new ski lifts.

Then it flew to Hayfork, near Crescent City, to do a logging job there. The Chinook didn't get to the Willamette National Forest until Nov. 9 because of foggy conditions along the coast, he said.

"Those are the kinds of things we do all the time," he said.

The twin-rotored Chinook, powered by two Lycoming AL-5512 turbine engines that produce 4,355 shaft horsepower each, can hoist 28,000 pounds when conditions permit, he said.

Columbia is the only company in the United States to use Chinooks for logging and is the nation's leader in heli-logging. The Chinook doesn't come cheap — it costs \$8,500 an hour.

The chopper made 40 "turns" (round trips) over 3.9 hours to the logs' location, about three miles from the landing where they were delivered. The



Don Day releases a choker for the Chinook helicopter.

chopper carried a total of 422,000 pounds — 211 tons — of cedar Friday, Horrax said. That equates to about 10 turns per hour.

The two pilots expertly swung their cargo over the ridge and laid the logs gently and precisely for easy approach by a skidder Olsen brought to the landing and the self-

loading trucks he planned to use.

Day said he plans to camp on the site to guard the logs, which he estimated contain approximately 50,000 board feet and are worth \$100,000, from thieves.

"I'll be here until they're all gone," he said. "This is a page of history." ■



A Chinook helicopter lowers a cedar log to the landing site off Soda Fork Road. The U.S. Forest Service is providing the wood to the Grand Ronde Tribe for a longhouse that is planned to be built using traditional methods.