Preparing for Cowichan

Canoe Family paddles more than 60 miles on the Willamette River in the heat

By Dean Rhodes
Smoke Signals editor

Grand Ronde's Canoe Family accomplished many things the weekend of June 28-29 while paddling from West Salem to West Linn on the Willamette River.

Members prepared for the annual Native Canoe Journey, this year being held in Cowichan, British Columbia, Canada. It will require Canoe Family participants to paddle more than 200 miles through Puget Sound and the Strait of Juan de Fuca.

But members also learned more about a healthy lifestyle as part of the Tribe's drug- and alcohol-prevention program while also learning about the Tribal tradition of canoeing on what used to be Native highways – the rivers.

"This is traditional waters for us," said Canoe Family President and Grand Ronde Language Specialist Bobby Mercier. "Us being canoe people, it's nice to spend some time out here, travel by historic sites and teach the kids about these things."

The Canoe Family started the two-day Paddle on the Willamette at 9 a.m. Saturday at Wallace Marine Park in West Salem. By Saturday evening, Canoe Family participants had paddled 44 miles under a blazing sun to Champoeg State Park east of Newberg, where more than 200 Tribal members and other Native Americans awaited them for an evening of Tribal drumming, singing and dancing.

Champoeg is where the unratified 1851 treaties were signed with the Kalapuya Tribes, according to Tribal Cultural Protection Coordinator Eirik Thorsgard.

The next morning, the Canoe Family was back in the river, ending the 67-mile journey at Bernert Landing in West Linn.

More than 50 paddlers, ages 10 and older and representing several Tribes, participated. Some paddled the entire distance while others worked in shifts.

"It cleanses you to paddle," said Canoe Family member Santiago Atanacio, 16. "It leaves all of your bad energy behind."

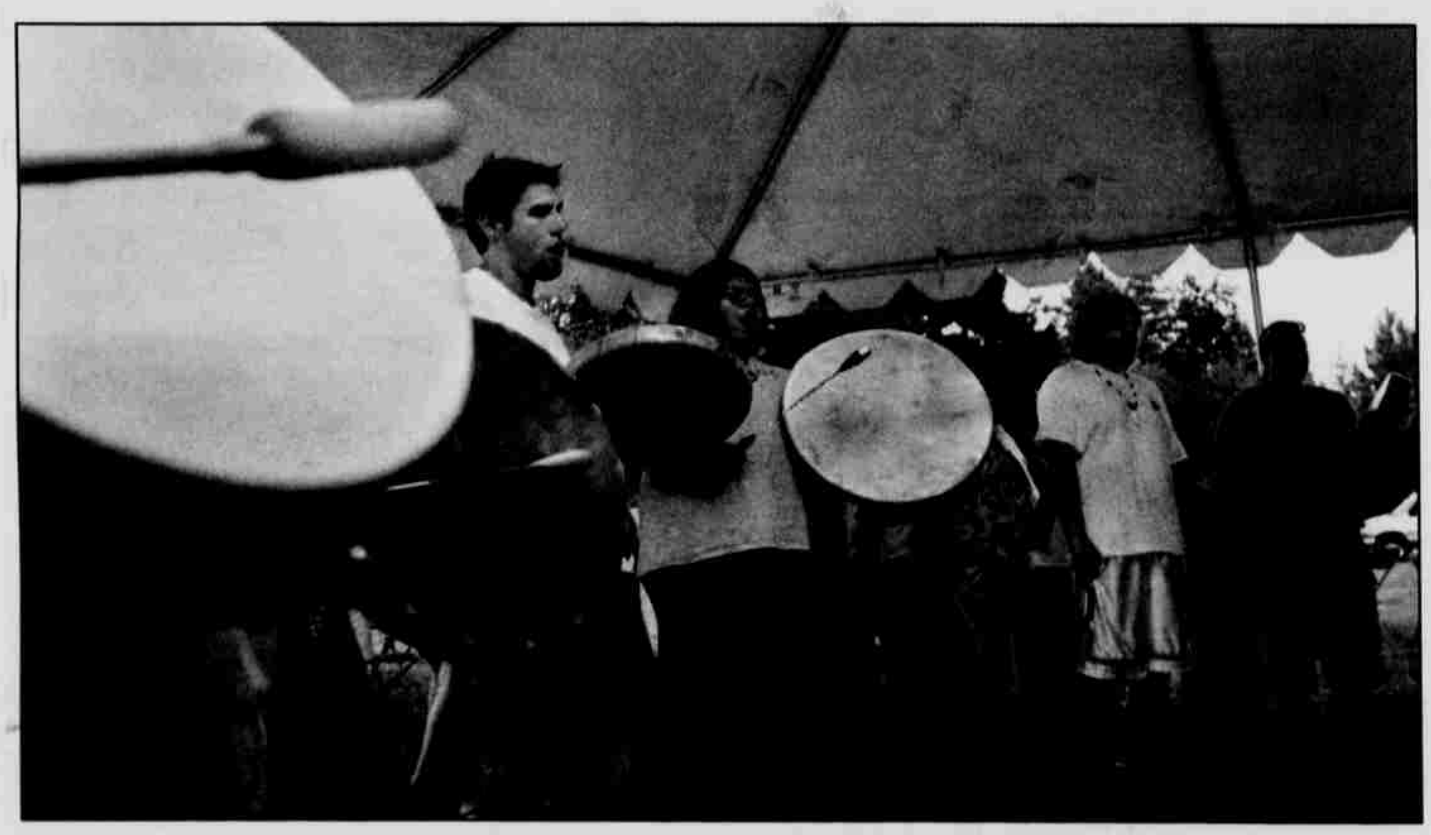
Tribal member Bobby Mercier sings after three canoes arrive at the boat dock at Champoeg State Park on the first day of the Paddle on the Willamette on Saturday, June 28.

The Grand Ronde Canoe Family padded the black-and-red 33-foot canoe Stankiya while other groups paddled the 21-foot Uliimits and the 24-foot Skakwel.

"Uliimits means 'Old Nose," said Tribal member and Youth Education employee Travis Mercier. "Its bow was carved from a 1,180-year-old cedar."

The Paddle on the Willamette took Tribal members through their ceded lands, which stretch from the northern California border, up through the Willamette Valley, out to the Pacific coast on the west and to the Cascade Mountains and slopes of Mount Hood on the east, and along both sides of the Columbia River up to North Bonneville and the Cascade Locks area.

This year's Paddle on the Willamette received extensive media coverage as well, including feature stories in the Salem *Statesman-Journal* and McMinnville *News-Register*. ■



◀ After dinner was served, drummers and singers celebrate the first day of the Paddle on the Willamette canoe journey being completed at Champoeg State Park.

Photos by Michelle Alaimo

Grand Ronde Tribal members paddle down the Willamette River on the way to Champoeg State Park on the first day of the Paddle on the Willamette canoe journey. The journey started at Wallace Marine Park in West Salem Saturday morning and continued Sunday from Champoeg to Bernert Landing in West Linn. The two-day journey covered more than 60 miles.