

Festival receives infusion of Tribal heritage

Grand Ronde Tribe prominent at annual event in St. Helens

By Dean Rhodes

Smoke Signals editor

ST. HELENS — Opening day of the three-day St. Helens Maritime Heritage Festival on Friday, July 13, featured an enormous amount of Native American flair courtesy of the Confederated Tribes of Grand Ronde.

Tribal Chairwoman Cheryle A. Kennedy led a Tribal contingent to St. Helens, which is part of the Tribe's ceded lands, to accept a ceremonial key to the city.

Two Tribal canoes escorted a World War II patrol torpedo boat on the Columbia River as it prepared to dock in St. Helens.

And Tribal drummers and singers performed for festival attendees following the festivities at the City Docks.

"That's a big key. It must open big doors," Kennedy joked as she accepted the key to the city from St. Helens Mayor Randy Peterson. He also presented Kennedy with a framed and signed welcome proclamation.

Kennedy was accompanied in St. Helens by Tribal Council members Steve Bobb Sr., Chris Mercier and June Sherer, as well as Tribal Attorney Rob Greene, Tribal Public Affairs Director Siobhan Taylor and Tribal members Nancy Renfro and Bernadine Shriver, among others.

Peterson, along with City Council members Keith Locke, Pat Martyn and Susan Conn, said St. Helens was extending its hand in friendship to the Tribe and also apologizing for the historically bad treatment of Native Americans in Oregon.

"I applaud the gesture," Kennedy said. "That key is bigger than it looks. It also represents the opening of a friendship."

Kennedy talked about how her daughter was born in St. Helens.

"We have a long heritage here," she said. "The river is the lifeblood and we need to take care of it."

In return, Kennedy gifted a necklace to a St. Helens Council person. A Tribal emblem necklace made by Kennedy's sister, CeCe Kneeland, ended up around Conn's neck.

After the key ceremony, Peterson accompanied Kennedy down a ramp to the City Docks where everyone awaited two Tribal canoes and PT 658, the only functioning World War II-era PT boat in the world.

Tribal Chairwoman Cheryle A. Kennedy welcomes canoes to the homelands of the Confederated Tribes of Grand Ronde during the Maritime Heritage Festival in St. Helens on Friday, July 13.



Photos by Michelle Alaimo

The Grand Ronde Canoe Family escorts PT-658, a World War II patrol torpedo boat, on the Columbia River on its way to dock in St. Helens for the Maritime Heritage Festival on Friday, July 13. Tribal Council member Toby McClary traveled on the PT boat from Portland to St. Helens.



After presenting Tribal Chairwoman Cheryle A. Kennedy, second from left, with a key to the city, St. Helens Mayor Randy Peterson, left, reads a welcome proclamation as Kennedy and Tribal Council members Chris Mercier, middle, Steve Bobb Sr., second from right, and June Sherer, right, listen at the opening of the Maritime Heritage Festival in St. Helens on Friday, July 13.

While waiting, attendees witnessed a rare collision of ships. The already docked Royaliste, a 55-foot-long pirate re-enactors' ship, was sandwiched between the dock and the sternwheeler Portland while the sternwheeler was attempting to moor.

The collision pushed in several of the Royaliste's side planks and the ship began taking on water, forcing the pirate re-enactors to search for a water pump and requiring the eventual arrival of Columbia County Sheriff's Office River Patrol personnel and the U.S. Coast Guard. No injuries were reported and no pollution of the river resulted from the crash, KGW.com reported on July 14.

Meanwhile, there also was humor during the wait.

When the pirate re-enactors fired off a miniature, but very loud, cannon, Tribal Council member Steve

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Bobb Sr., a veteran of the Vietnam War, jumped. "They shouldn't do that when veterans are around," he quipped and then pantomimed hitting the floor to avoid being hit by shrapnel.

At approximately 4:05 p.m., the Grand Ronde Tribe's canoes left Sand Island upriver from St. Helens' City Docks. The two canoes hooked up with PT 658, which was carrying Tribal Council member Toby McClary, and escorted the boat to the City Docks.

Between the sternwheeler and River Patrol boats, the two Tribal canoes squeezed in to be welcomed

by Kennedy to the homelands of the Grand Ronde Tribes.

After disembarking from the PT boat, McClary said he met the boat at Swan Island near Portland and it took two hours for it to sail westward on the Columbia River to St. Helens. "There are a lot of good people on there," he said.

After festivities at the City Docks, the Canoe Family gathered under a gazebo in Columbia View Park to perform three songs. The drummers and singers were fronted by Travis and Bobby Mercier, Brian Krehbiel and Greg Archuleta.

Grand Ronde participation in the Maritime Heritage Festival did not end on Friday. A Tribal information booth was staffed on Saturday and Sunday.

"We were very busy," Taylor said about interest in the Tribe.

On Saturday evening, the Tribe hosted an alderwood salmon dinner on Sand Island for Tribal Council members, Tribal officials, sponsors, vessel owners and other dignitaries.

Attendees were shuttled on a ferry to Sand Island, which sits directly across from the City Docks.

The Maritime Heritage Festival celebrates maritime heritage, Native history and the many stories of regional waterways. Proceeds go to the Maritime Heritage Coalition, which is seeking to build a regional maritime center that aspires to be the "Mystic Seaport of the West."

The Grand Ronde Tribe is a member of the coalition. ■

