

# Chuck Williams' life in the trenches

By Ron Karten

*Smoke Signals staff writer*

Chuck Williams, 69, is likely the Tribe's most prolific author and photographer.

The list of his publications and photography shows is long and comprehensive. Subjects include Tribal, natural and political events of the Columbia River Gorge and beyond. He needs six pages to list all of the Oregon and Northwest celebrations he photographs regularly.

"He has visited celebrations and festivals up and down the west coast," says David Lewis, Grand Ronde Museum Curator and Cultural Liaison. "He has perhaps 30 years of photos of these festivals. I think he has the largest collection of images of these cultural events in the world."

Williams' 1980 book, "Bridge of the Gods, Mountains of Fire: A Return to the Columbia Gorge," an illustrated history told from the perspectives of both his Indian and pioneer ancestors, is arguably the best book about the Columbia Gorge and has long been out of print. He has been angling for years to find the means to publish a second edition.

He wrote the book in the late 1970s when he had moved back to the family property near Beacon Rock in the Gorge on the Columbia River to write, and also to be near his father who was having health issues.

"Our family had several parcels of land in the area, some on the river, where our mother was born and our great-grandmother, known as Indian Mary, (Kalliah was her Indian name), lived," says Williams' cousin, Valerie Alexander. "It is right next to the train tracks and was also on the trail by the river. I heard that they used to hear the horses brush against the cabin walls when they came up the trail."

"The road (that goes by the cabin site and an orchard) is called Indian Mary Road and the year-round water source for the refuge is Indian

Mary Creek," Williams says.

The will to the properties was very complicated, Alexander says, and in order to preserve the home site on the river (Indian Mary's Vancouver allotment), the family sold it to the Trust for Public Land.

Williams and other members of the family, including his cousin and Alexander's sister, Marilyn Portwood, worked on the effort that helped preserve the land and ultimately convinced Congress to establish the area as the Franz Lake National Wildlife Refuge.

"Swans and wapato (our potato) have now returned," he says.

Williams' father, Clyde, knew a lot of the family history, Alexander says, and passed that information on to Chuck "who also did a lot of research and wrote his book, recording the family history along with the history of the Gorge."

"I have checked it with many other resources and I think his book is still the most complete and correct in existence. He helped many of the family feel proud of their heritage. Some had been concealing their Indian heritage as they were treated poorly by the white people some of the time there."

In company with countless artists, Williams' talents have not translated into personal riches. On the contrary, today his art is pushing him out of his home. He lives in The Dalles in a house that was once the Columbia Gorge Gallery, showing and selling his photography and his books, together making up his American West Archives project.

"I'm all too aware," he says, "that Edward Curtis, the now-famous photographer who photographed Tumult's oldest daughter in the



Photos courtesy of Chuck Williams

**Bella and Tomas Beal of McMinnville ride a giant rocking horse at the Shrewsbury Renaissance Faire in Kings Valley. David Lewis, Grand Ronde Museum Curator and Cultural Liaison, said Chuck Williams has visited celebrations and festivals up and down the West Coast and he thinks Williams has the largest collection of images of these cultural events in the world.**



Gorge, died penniless in L.A."

The gallery is now closed to the public and the backlog of his photography includes 70,000 color slides that he has yet to review.

Williams began adding digital photography to his collection in 2005 and he continues to photograph with slide film, hard as it is getting to be found and processed. His go-to source for slide film these days is eBay.

His place is four blocks off the Columbia River upriver from where his Grand Ronde ancestors once fished in a wide open and wild river that spawned 100-pound salmon before the dams went up.

"Spiritually," he says, "the Columbia Gorge is our home."

His father's great-grandfather, Chief Tumult, signed the 1855 Grand Ronde Willamette Valley Treaty and was later hung by then-Lt. Phil Sheridan.

Williams remembers a grade school field trip to the Sonoma Mission when his family moved to Petaluma, Calif. In an early display of his refusal to yield on matters of conscience, Williams refused to go into the Phil Sheridan room there. He told the teacher about Chief Tumult and the hanging.

The teacher relayed the history to Williams' mom, Bettye, as fanciful, but the teacher was barking up the

wrong tree.

"My mom," he says, "married my dad when it was barely legal for a non-Indian to marry an Indian, when you were ostracized for it. I tell people, 'No wonder I ended up so screwed up.' My father was a conservative Indian who loved technology and engineering, and my mom was a left-wing WASP who loved nature and art. She was the one who mainly took me fishing when I was a kid."

Williams took off in life as a combination of the two.

After graduating from high school in 1961, Williams couldn't afford a four-year college, so he took engineering classes at a community college for a year and began working full-time as a draftsman/technician.

"My father had me doing mechanical drawing for him since I was a young kid," Williams says, "so I had that skill to fall back on until computers replaced draftsmen."

Williams worked himself into an engineering position with college graduates working for him at two of the nation's premiere technology laboratories — Milwaukee, Wisc.-based Johnson Controls and Richmond, Va.-based Robertshaw Controls. For six years, three at each company, Williams worked on NASA and Boeing projects.

Not for the last time, the politics got to him.

As a way to give back to the country, he moved on to work through the Peace Corps in Dominican Republic in 1968-69 and VISTA in El Paso, Texas, in 1969-70. Afterwards, he spent six years touring the national parks, living out of his van and mastering the photographic arts.

During that time, he visited all of the national parks proper in the contiguous states, plus the majority of other National Parks System units, he says.

He also was named National Parks expert for Friends of the Earth founder David Brower, the subject of John McPhee's book, "Encounters with the Archdruid." He took inspiration from Brower, who later wrote the introduction to Williams' Gorge book.

"He was my idol," Williams says. "He turned the Sierra Club into a major political force, but was thrown out due to controversies over finances and policy." Brower then formed Friends of the Earth, "which became a very effective environmental group because Brower attracted so many young, dedicated idealists," Williams says.

"One of my main goals with Friends of the Earth was to try to get large samples of the country's main ecosystems protected in national parks as a genetic bank for disappearing plants and animals," Williams says.

For the next few years, Williams enjoyed a golden time. He felt he had struck pay dirt in 1976 when Jimmy Carter had just been elected and Carter's Interior Secretary Ce-



**Tribal Elder Chuck Williams sits on the front porch of his gallery-turned-home in The Dalles. The house was once the Columbia Gorge Gallery where he showed and sold his photography and his books.**

See **CHUCK**  
continued on page 11