

Voice of the Past: Re-visioning this place: Chinookan Cultural Persistence on the lower Columbia

By [Donna Sinclair](#), Printed in the *Vancouver Voice*, Volume 3, Issue 20, August 27, 2009



Chinook leaders on the plaza at the Columbia River Maritime Museum. Courtesy CCRM

Imagine the Lower Columbia region 250 years ago, from the Cascade Rapids (now covered by Bonneville Dam) to the sea. The timbered landscape would have been dominated by Chinookan longhouses, extended family homes that comprised Native towns of several hundred to thousands of people. Carved and decorated canoes would have rested in clearings along the rocky river banks, canoes that plied the river and its tributaries — the region's highways.

Envision this time. A shout or birdcall could be heard across the Columbia. The sounds of the river, the animals, and the people would have been audible, clear, unmuffled by today's ever-present noise of engines.

The Chinook lived in their town homes much of the year. In the spring, women harvested camas root from the river's swampy sloughs, and later from upland marshes. The lifeblood of these river people returned to them annually, as millions of salmon swam upriver, laying eggs in the same gravelly pools they had come from.

During the summer, men fished the rivers and women picked roots, berries, and other plant foods. They mixed huckleberries with dried fish, ground to a nutritious powder for the rainy winter. The Chinook deliberately managed the landscape, burning root plants such as camas and lomatium, replanting unsatisfactory roots, and regularly burning over meadows to stimulate huckleberry production.

This was one of the most populated Native regions in North America and the Chinook people were the shrewd and powerful traders who controlled access to the river's bountiful resources.

By the late 1700s, these people experienced a devastating incursion of microbes, advancing first from the interior and then from the sea. In 1805 Lewis & Clark observed that the Chinook had Euro-American items, including the scars of smallpox. During the next half century, waves of biological invasion fatefully colluded with Euro-American settlement to remove the Chinook from their land.

First came the explorers and then the fur traders. In 1824, the Hudson's Bay Company (HBC) established Fort Vancouver. Company officials found willing business collaborators, rather than dangerous foes in the Chinook. HBC laborers married Chinook women, and lived outside the fort at Kanaka Village. Meanwhile, Chinook communities maintained a trade route from the Columbia Plateau to the ocean.

And then disaster struck. In 1830 a violent disease called "fever and ague," "intermittent fever" or the "cold sick" devastated Chinookan peoples. From Oak Point (between Cathlamet and Longview) to The Dalles as many as 90% of Native people died from what epidemiologists think was malaria. Native people abandoned their homes as they sought assistance. HBC officials collected the bodies of as many as sixty families in two villages near Vancouver and what remained of the population of Cathlanaquiah on Sauvie's Island. They burned them, setting the towns on fire.

Greg Robinson of the Chinook Nation reflects, "*The horror and scope of these plagues can hardly be imagined today. . . . Our children and warriors were struck down with equal disregard; the deaths were often slow and excruciating, others fast and virulent. Villages inhabited for hundreds of years were abandoned to the invisible slayers.*"

One can only imagine the psychological effect of these epidemics. Think of the 1918 influenza pandemic that silently killed millions or the panic caused by a possible Swine Flu epidemic. Envision the cultural disruption.

Dr. John Townsend described the situation in 1834:

"The depopulation here has been truly fearful. A gentleman told me, that only four years ago, as he wandered near what had formerly been a thickly peopled village, he counted no less than sixteen dead, men and women, lying unburied and festering in the sun in front of their habitations. Within the houses all were sick; not one had escaped the contagion; upwards of a hundred individuals, men, women, and children, were writhing in agony on the floors of the houses, with no one to render them any assistance."

Townsend predicted the Chinook would soon be extinct. But he was wrong. The Chinook survived, although the epidemics paved the way for American settlement. By 1850, white citizens could claim up to 640 acres per couple. By 1853 another wave of disease arrived — smallpox — on the heels of treaties made between the U.S. and the Chinook.

Congress never ratified the treaties, attempting instead to place the Chinook east of the Cascades and away from the river. Officials forced many Chinook to the Grande Ronde, Shoalwater, and

Quinalt Reservations. Some Chinookans assimilated into American culture. Others remained in coastal communities, reorganizing tribal government and retaining traditional culture.

The tribe adopted a written constitution in 1925. By the 1970s the Chinook began working to gain federal recognition, pointing to legal cases and censuses that substantiated their ongoing existence as a cultural and political entity. In 2001, under the Clinton Administration, the nearly 2,000 members of the Chinook Nation (five tribes including the Clatsop, Cathlamet, Wahkiakum, Willapa and the Lower Chinook) gained federal recognition. In 2002, the Bush Administration overturned the ruling, declaring the Chinook extinct.

In response, Greg Robinson of the Chinook wrote: *“We are going nowhere, for we have always been here. This is the land of our ancestors; it is the land of the Chinook, and it will always be so. We will never falter in our stand against this storm; we will remain forever vigilant and strong. For we have not fought for survival, we have survived to fight.”*

This spring (2009), Brian Baird introduced a Chinook Restoration bill to Congress. In July, members of the Chinook Nation, the Grande Ronde and the Quinalt testified regarding their ongoing cultural persistence. The bill remains in committee.

To learn more about Chinookan culture and history, attend “Re-visioning This Place: Lower Columbia River Chinookan communities,” presented by the CCRH this fall.

Two day-long, family-friendly public programs will focus on Chinookan material culture. The first focuses on canoes, carving, transportation, and trade, and takes place in Astoria, Oregon on Sept. 19.

The art and history of basketry will be presented at the PSU Native American Student and Community Center on Oct. 17. Both programs begin at 10:30 a.m. and will provide cultural demonstrations, language lessons and opportunities to talk with Native and non-Native historians. For more information, see www.ccrh.org or call 360-258-3289.

Donna Sinclair is the program manager for the Center for Columbia River History (CCRH), a consortium of the Washington State Historical Society, Portland State University and Washington State University Vancouver. The CCRH mission is to promote study of the history of the Columbia River Basin and present the results publicly. CCRH is dedicated to examining the hidden histories of the Basin and to helping people think about the historical record from different perspectives.