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“Chinook Tilixam (Chinook People): who are we?”

A public talk presented by **Sam Robinson,**

Vice Chairman, Chinook Nation

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A public program of the Center for Columbia River History, in partnership with the Columbia River Maritime Museum, and with support from Oregon Humanities -- Re-visioning This Place: Lower Columbia River Chinookan Communities.

Left. Sam Robinson discusses the annual canoe journey.

This program was presented as part of a day of family friendly talks, demonstrations, and activities sharing Chinook history, culture, and archaeology with the public. The day included talks about canoes by archaeologist Ken Ames, PSU, the Middle Village/Station Camp site in Washington by Chinook tribal member Charlie Funk, with archaeologist Jim Sayce, carving demonstrations with Chinook Cultural Committee Chair Tony Johnson, artist Adam McIsaac, and local carver Jim Bergeron, and Chinuk Wawa language lessons with Evan Gardner.

Transcription of Digital Recording

Katrine Barber (KB): So, we will go ahead and get started. Our speaker for this afternoon is Sam Robinson, and he is the Vice Chairman of the Chinook Nation and somebody who speaks widely about Chinook culture and history. I have heard him speak several times and know that he does this a lot, so we really appreciate him coming here to do it. And he has also been a very strong advocate, especially as restoration is being pursued, of the Chinook Nation. So we are

really pleased to have him here to talk to us about some of those issues today. With that, I am going to go ahead and turn it over to Sam Robinson. Thank you for coming.

Sam Robinson (SR): *Hayu Masi. Laxayam, naika shikhs. Naika nim Sam Robinson.* Hello my friends. My name is Sam Robinson. I am the Vice Chairman of the Chinook Indian Nation. The Chinook Indian Nation is five tribes: the Cathlamet, the Clatsop, the Wahkiakum, the Willapa, and the Lower Chinook. That comprises the five lower tribes of the Chinook people.

This first picture, here, I just put up there because this [referring to the Chinook Nation flag] is out here in front of the museum and we raised that flag. It is always a proud day to raise our flag. Our flag flies all over the place, and to have it flying out here at the mouth of the Columbia River is fantastic. The Chinook people, even though we are not a federally recognized tribe, we still carry on our culture and we really do not need the federal government to tell us that we are Indians because we know we are. We do need them, though, to help us with the health care and the education of our people and so forth. That is why restoration is so important to us. We were out here today, and the one thing about the Chinook people, as in the past the Chinook people are very proud people, and we are very proud to be out here and share. There is a very big influx of the interest amongst our *own* people to learn more about their ancestors, and more about the weavings and the drummings and the songs and the language, so we are really going to get strengthened. Our hope is to get a reservation where we can get something going to bring our people back, and so we can strengthen our culture.

Ken Ames had some good pictures of Chinook people out on the waters [in his talk, “Chinook Trade and Material Culture”]. This water out here, this is during our first salmon ceremony. This is actually [when] we were taking the bones out and return(ing) them. Some people say, “Wow, that looks like pretty rough waters out there,” and I think, ‘Eh, not really.’ We travel on the journeys, we have been in the canoes, and we have a lot of faith in them. That canoe there is the canoe that is out front, *skwak’-wal*. *Skwak’-wal* means lamprey eel in Chinook. It means that we feel this canoe can climb the falls like a lamprey eel. We have had *skwak’-wal* for about five years now, and *skwak’-wal* has done hundreds of miles, traveled on the tribal journeys up in the [Puget] Sound. We have traveled from Neah Bay down to Seattle, from Lummi [Island] down to Suquamish, and all over. I can even remember being in the – three years

ago crossing the shipping channels, and Tony Johnson is behind me steering. We were going across there and a Norwester came in there and we started getting some chop, and the next thing you know we are taking on water pretty heavily. I think we bailed about four canoe-loads of water in that three-hour period. And I said, “Tony, do you need any help back there bailing, because you know, I am up to here in water.”

And water is coming across my lap, and he said, “No, just keep pulling. Keep digging.” So we just [dug] deep and get across those shipping channels as we were dodging the freighters and the gravel barges and the ferries. Or trying to get out of their way, anyway.

But, [first] I [will] talk about first salmon ceremony. That ceremony is very important to us. It is an ancient ceremony. The first salmon ceremony is a very important ceremony to us because it is our way of being the docents of this earth, and that is what the Chinook people strongly believe, that the Creator gave us Mother Earth and it is our responsibility to take care of her. And one of the ways was to show respect to the animals. In the first salmon ceremony, we are totally respecting that first salmon. We return those bones out to the ocean and it can tell the other fish about how much we respected it and then they would come up the [Columbia] River, as well. So today, we still carry on that ceremony. We hope that it helps. But there is going to be other ways that the Chinook Tribe are going to be able to help, whether it be in salmon restoration and so forth, but a lot of that will happen after we get restored and we have a little more clout on what happens in this river and all the estuaries.

But canoes – the last speech was just fantastic on canoes. I really liked seeing that. Just to see the canoes out on the water is fantastic. We took *skwak’-wal* up to Celilo Falls, because it was a commemoration of those people up in Celilo. And right there, we are right over the top of Celilo Falls, and it was just so spiritually uplifting to be out on those waters. The first thing I thought about when I was going up to Celilo was – ‘It is windy up there. I see all of those wind surfers, and it is going to be pretty bad waters out there.’ But, no, when we got up there, Mother Earth just provided us with flat (waters) like a lake. Very uncommon to the [Columbia River] Gorge. And it is good to have relationships with the surrounding tribes around us, and we do have great relationships with all of the tribes around us.

We have our winter gatherings. The winter gathering at the [Cathlapotle] plankhouse – if you have not been to the plankhouse, it is in the Ridgefield Wildlife Refuge, and the plankhouse

is a replica of the village at Cathlapotle. Ken Ames was referring to Cathlapotle in that one picture where all of the canoes were gathered up there. And we called it *Quatlapoot*. *Quatlapoot* means the place where people are doing things, and there was a lot going on at Cathlapotle. But we have our winter gatherings in that plankhouse, now. We bring that plankhouse to life, and winter gatherings are very important to us. So many times people ask me, “Do the Chinook people have pow-wows?” No, we were potlatch people. You know, “potlatch” comes from *palach*. *Palach* means to give, so we invite people into our houses and we give to them. We share songs and they share songs and so forth. And with the plankhouse, we are able to bring people in and do drumming and share in stories and so forth. It is a winter gathering, and at the winter gathering, that is the time when you can share stories that you would not share any other time because it might be taboo to share these outside. In the Chinook culture, it could have been something as simple as if you told a story out of season; you might get stung by a bee. So, you know, little things like that, but it was all the way of being Chinook. So the winter gatherings are a great time to get together and share drumming, and then you start seeing more cedar hats coming in the playing, more songs and more traditional people.

And at our winter gatherings, it is really nice because I think in the last couple years we have had anywhere between thirteen and fifteen different nations represented in our winter gatherings - tribes that have come to and shared with us - and it is also an opportunity for us to get fires going into that plankhouse and then really bring the plankhouse to life. We have issues with fires for non-tribal events. They will not allow it because they think there (are) too many smoke particulates in the air, but we know that that house needs to come to life and it needs to have fires. And also it is healthy for the house to have fires into it. You know, it is just important.

This little drummer over here in the little pink coat there, she happens to be sitting over there [in the audience]. She is my granddaughter. And it is very important for us Chinook people to share our culture with our young and let them be the ones that are going to be carrying it on, because as we learn it, we want to share it and continue it. Because the Chinook people did get scattered out, and we are not in a reservation, it makes it a little harder to keep your culture alive. But one thing that we found is a lot of the tribes around us that are federally recognized did not keep their culture quite as strong as we did, not being federally recognized. So they kind of come together and they really like to come share with us because we kept it all together and we are

getting stronger with culture and so forth. So, we do a lot of sharing with the [Confederated Tribes of the] Grand Ronde people because there [are] a lot of Chinook people from that Middle River on the Grand Ronde [Reservation], and our canoe families travel together.

We have also recently strengthened the relationships with Shoalwater by traveling across their waters to their place and vice-versa, traveling from Shoalwater to Bay Center. So we have opened up those traditional highways, which is very important to us because it went on for thousands of years.

Audience Question: [referring to image] The drum that is in the fire pit – is that hide being cured? Is somebody making a drum?

SR: Winter gathering takes place in January and your drums get soft, so you just kind of set them up next to the fire to tighten them up. It probably looks like it is real close to the fire, but in reality it might be about six to eight feet away. You would not want to leave it in there too long. It might stretch it pretty tight. (Chuckles)

[referring to image] These are our friends from the Duwamish. The poor Duwamish are in the same boat we are in the battle for federal recognition. Here you have got a tribe that their hereditary chief is Chief Seattle, and yet they cannot become a federally recognized tribe. They were back in [Washington] D.C. with us when it came time to testify before [the] Natural Resources [Committee] on recognition and restoration. And they battle the same battle, so I always like to share their story. They are very very good friends of ours, and they come to all of our salmon ceremonies and they come to our winter gatherings and share song. And, of course, they always wear these really nice cedar [vests], and they have got some good dancers and so forth. But that is what winter gathering is all about, it is to share what you have, because like I said, the Chinook people on the [Columbia] River had a lot and they had a lot to share and invite people in. It is always a good thing. And you will find that, in all tribes, giving is huge.

I talk about the tribal journeys. You know, we have been probably traveling on the tribal journeys for about the last six years. Tribal journeys have been going on for twenty years. They were started by the Oliver family, and it was a sobriety paddle, because a lot of those tribes on the reservations had people that had not been sober for eight days in a row. So they put them on

these journeys. It also helped bring their youth into the culture. And it has grown over twenty years. This year, we paddled to Suquamish and there [were] over ninety canoes there. There [were] people from New Zealand, there [were] people from Hawaii, people from Alaska, all over the place. And the thing about it is that everybody is very accepting. And even though we are not a federally recognized tribe and you are amongst all of those recognized tribes, they all accept you in because they all know that the Chinook people have not gone away. So to be out there on those waters is just fantastic. And it is a bit of work. You go out there for eight days, ten days. You might travel 200 plus miles in that amount of time, and everyday you go from village to village, and when you come to someone's area, there is certain protocol. You ask for permission to come ashore, and then at the time, then they will feed you and take care of you. And the next day, you would ask for permission to leave, and they allow you to leave and tell you to have safe waters. Then you go to the next place. But meanwhile, you are picking up more people. And then there [are] other people coming from the other directions, so by the time you all meet, there is, like I said, ninety canoes plus out there. And it is just fantastic. I remember when we left Neah Bay one morning, it was pretty dark out there, and there was an elder out there granting us permission to leave. And I remember the horseneck clams were about twenty feet from our canoes spewing water like a little fountain over there, like they were saying goodbye too.

And so, to be out on the waters, you see a lot of things that you just do not see in normal life. You are out there pulling along, you are not only sharing with other tribes but you are sharing with the wildlife. You will see wildlife doing things that you have not seen. It is not uncommon to see four or five bald eagles playing on a beach. This year we had two pods of dolphins that were traveling with us one day. I think Mother Earth and all of the animals, they know we are out there too and know that we will make this place better.

And, of course, the Chinook-style paddles are always a plus. You can always tell us when we are pulling in. And a lot of the other tribes are saying, "Wow, that is a very unique style. Tell me about it." So, we will tell them the whole story and they will want to borrow them and they think they are great. And if you do not know, the notched paddle is totally related to this Columbia River. You spend a lot of time in the small estuaries around the cottonwood trees and so forth, and they give you that maneuverability to push off those roots. The women, they really liked them, because when they were this deep in water [gestures with hand to show depth of

water] harvesting wapato, instead of using their toes, they could stick that paddle down there and loosen those bulbs so that they can float them up and harvest the wapato. So, that is definitely our river paddle and this is what we use today and identify with today. And they pull water just as well as anybody else. I think our longest day this year was thirty miles. We did it in six hours and that was with a half hour lunch break. (Chuckles) I thought we were going slow, but when we got there – I do not wear my watch when I am the journey. You do not want to know how long you have been sitting in that canoe, because some days you might be sitting in that canoe eight, ten hours. Some days, twelve hours.

These are a couple of ladies that were up at Suquamish a couple years ago, welcoming us in. And that is the type of protocol you get. People waiting, and they are anxious to see you and welcome you to their shore. And it is all-important for us Chinook people to travel on these journeys, like I said, because you are keeping those relationships, because our ancestors had relationships with these people all along as they put out of the mouth of the Columbia River and they would head north.

[Describing image] This is about half the canoes. You cannot see the other half on this side. You just could not take a big enough picture, but they are all lined up waiting your turn to go through protocol so you can get out. That is one of the bad things. At the end, it might take you about four and a half, five hours to get out of the canoe because everyone gets to go through protocol, gets to say who they are, thank them, and, of course, tell them you are hungry. So they will feed you, as well, but they always start from the furthest away. So, early in the journey, we are the furthest away usually, so we get to go first. But as those Alaskans start coming in, and the Canadians start coming from way up north, then we kind of fall low on the pecking order. But we are still better off than some of the local tribes up in the Seattle area. They have to sit for a long time before they can get out of the canoe.

The songs that we share are always, always greatly important. They tell stories. Blessing songs, the sharing of dancing, people just willing to get together on a cold day and share these songs in the winter. But once you get about 300 people in that plankhouse, there is plenty of body heat in there and plenty of sharing of food. And sharing – with tribal events, it is always about sharing. And it is important, like I said, for our people and our young to come forward and

learn because they are actually going to be the ones running the tribe down the road. So you want to make sure that they know how to do it right from the inside.

Like I said, we have got to start young. The reason we do all of this is because of our ancestors. This is Cha'ist, this is my great-great-great-grandmother. A very proud woman. You can tell she was probably a fairly wealthy woman. This is after contact, obviously. She has got her Hudson's Bay (Company) blanket on, but she is wearing quite a bit of dentalium shell, and the dentalium shell was a sign of wealth back then. It was a sign of wealth before copper came on board. Copper was a huge item to the Chinook people on this Columbia River. Copper was like gold to the Chinook people. Only the heads of the households and the chiefs would be owning that copper, so it was a great trade item. And the reason they were able to get it so easily – well, not easily – but it was a good trade item because when the ships came aboard, they would line the bottom of their ships with copper to keep the barnacles off, so they always had copper around.

And this is my grandmother [Dora Clark]. Unfortunately, she had passed away when I was about a year old, but from what I heard, she was a beautiful woman and I know a lot of people that knew her and they said that she was great. I really love all the baskets she has got down around the bottom, and today we have people that are making baskets in the tribe and carrying on that type of tradition. And you will probably see some out there in the gift shop. People are making baskets. Like I said, it is all about carrying on the past.

Oh, now we have got the first salmon ceremony! [At] Chinook Cove, over by Middle Village, we have our first salmon ceremony over there. And right around that rock right there, you can go into this cove, and it is a beautiful little cove where the Chinook people used to wait. And it is kind of blocked off by stone, so there is a narrow passage looking out. And I can remember one time the [ship] *Lady Washington* was sitting out there, and we were inside, and you could look right out the cove at the *Lady* and it was like flashing back to when Captain Gray came up and how the Chinook people must have been sitting in that cove waiting when they saw Captain Gray come up there.

But, once again, the first salmon ceremony – very very important ceremony of ours. The other thing [are] the elders – sharing just how to do things. Making drums. We have paddle-

making classes and so forth. A lot of our elders are getting up there. We have lost a few of them since this restoration fight has started, and we try to do that to honor them.

The Chinook restoration is very important to us, because they fought the battle. I am the third generation to work on recognition, and we are fast losing that second generation. Plus the plankhouse...like I said, if you have not been to the plankhouse, get down there. Ridgefield Wildlife Refuge on the Carty Unit. A beautiful beautiful house.

Sharing the stories, passing the stories along. Amy Singer, she is ninety-four years old. Still remembers quite a bit. She told me, one time, she can remember her grandmother telling her about meeting Lewis and Clark when she was young. But she is just a wealth a knowledge, and she still drives, so you have got to kind of watch her. She is down in Vancouver. Limited area, but I know she still drives.

It is all about keeping alive. I really love the cultural events, love sharing. There is always work to be done, but when you can get together with people and share and just bring back things and do it right, that is what it is all about.

Any questions?

Audience Question: What is the approximate population of the Nation today?

SR: The Chinook Tribe itself, we have right around 2,700 members right now. Small by some scales, of tribes that are trying to go through the restoration process. I know the recognition process with the Lummi Tribe is like 50,000.

Audience Question: Can you generally circumscribe the territory of the Chinooks?

SR: Our area would probably start about Longview down to the mouth of the Columbia River, up into the Willapa and down towards Tillamook. That would be our five tribes in the Lower Chinook. But the Chinook people went all the way to The Dalles.

Audience Comment: I know they seemed to be so widely scattered from what I have read. That is why I asked the question.

SR: Yeah, it was treaties that separated everybody out, because when people sign treaties, families or groups or tribes or bands, they would march them off into different areas. It was my great great great grandfather, Thomas Huckswelt, that signed that 1851 Anson Dart Treaties over here which would have us [at] Willapa Bay as our reservation. They took the treaty back to Washington DC, and they basically told the senators not to worry, that we would be gone – they [the Chinook] were so infected by smallpox and malaria.

Audience Comment: I am from Clatskanie. The Clatskanie Indians were sort of like – you surrounded them. They were more warring and they do not exist anymore. And you were on both sides of them, and they were erased here a long time ago, so I do not know anything about them at all.

SR: Yeah, I am not totally familiar with that area either, as far as them. But disease took its toll, and a lot of those [tribes] would fan out and leave those villages and go in [to reservations]. Some of those Middle River people came down the coast, as well.

Audience Comment: Last hoard of them went to the Grand Ronde Reservation.

SR: Down in Grand Ronde? Yeah. Any other questions?

Audience Question: Where do I find some wapato to try? I would like to taste the wapato, but...

SR: Oh, wapato! You know, we have some at our tribal events now and then. The problem with wapato right now is the gathering of it. You have to really watch where you get it from. I know there are some places where you would like to get it, and you say, “Wow, there is a lot of wapato,” but the drainage has stuff in it that is not good. There is some up in the Washougal Refuge. The Wapato Valley was probably from about Longview to Washougal. That is where all the heavily grown wapato was being grown, in that Middle River. And it was traded down to the

coast or traded on up. They would take the wapato and they would dry it up, turn it into a powder, and then pad it in a case and store it that way. And then they would trade it up and down the (Columbia) River. That Wapato Valley, we have referred to as, is up there...

Audience Comment: We have some in the Clatskanie River.

SR: Yeah, you will find some here and there, but the heavily [grown] areas–

Audience Comment: I wonder what it tastes like.

SR: Oh, you know, it is kind of like a starchy potato. Yeah. Yes?

Audience Question: Does the tribe maintain a library with some of its stories and history, or is it all oral tradition?

SR: A lot of it is still oral. We are getting a little of it recorded here and there. Each family has their own – unfortunately, without having a strong hub to where we can bring all of that information, all of those artifacts into – which we will have some day – it is all out there, it just needs to be compiled. Yes.

KB: Okay. Well, thank you very much Sam. You will be giving the same talk [later], so [to audience] go out and tell people to come in! (Applause)

[End of recording; transcribed by Erica Stevenson, April 2010; audited by Erica Stevenson, April 2010; Initial Edit by Donna Sinclair, August 3 - 4, 2010; reviewed by Sam Robinson February 2011; edits entered by Donna Sinclair April 13, 2011]