

COMMERCE

TRADE

A thorough-going occupation with commerce dominated Chinook life. Within the territory three great streams of travel fused. Coastwise travel from both the north and the south centered here. Traders from the interior using the great Columbia waterway necessarily looked upon the mouth of the river as the point where the riches of the coast might be obtained. The fourth route, less important than the other three, led from the interior of Washington through the Cascade passes. Other routes, of still lesser importance individually, were numerous; cumulatively they added significantly to the commercial importance of the mouth of the Columbia. Full advantage of these conditions was taken by the Chinook who became the middlemen in all transactions. But even more significant was the fact that there came to be concentrated here a store of goods from divers sources which was available to the occasional trader at any time. Furthermore, a slow infiltration of goods, passed from one people to another without great travel, constituted a great share of the stock possessed by the Chinook, and such variety and quantity was not to be found at any other locality within a large area. A still further factor was the richness of the Chinook habitat itself which allowed a greater production of economic goods than was necessary for local consumption.¹

The selection of this point as the center of early fur trading activities was merely a reflection of the commercial importance of the site in native life.² A further key to the extent of pre-Columbian trading activities is the Chinook jargon which apparently had its center of development here. This "unique and beautifully satisfactory means of communication between the speakers of a hundred or more mutually unintelligible Pacific Northwest languages"³ seems to have been an aboriginal development largely in response to the needs of commerce.⁴

The Chinook gradually came to feel, it appears, that trade was an end in itself. At least it is certain that they took great satisfaction in driving a bargain. Lewis declares that "they are great hagglers in trade and if they conceive you anxious to purchase will be a whole day bargaining for a handful of roots. . . . I find that they invariably refuse the price first offered them and afterwards very frequently accept a smaller quantity of the same article."⁵

In evaluating commerce as an aspect of Chinook culture one must not overlook its prestige value. It permitted them to exert a widespread influence of a sort which did not often lead to conflict. It resulted in both the group and many of its members becoming known and discussed over a wide area,⁶ whereas intervening peoples might be unknown and of no interest. It led to a high contempt for groups that

¹See physical environment.

²The first American commercial settlement on the Pacific was that established here by the Astor enterprise.

³Jacobs, *Chinook Jargon*, p. 27.

⁴See the Lower Chinook and their neighbors.

⁵Thwaites, vol. 3, p. 311.

⁶Cf. p. 58.

were "just poor people" (that is, had little to trade) and a consequent bolstering of their own self-confidence.

The dentalium shell (*Dentalium pretiosum* Nuttall) was the standard medium of evaluation and exchange. It was itself an imported article, not being found south of the Strait of Juan de Fuca.⁷ The degree to which monetary formalization had been carried is indicated by Ross:

The circulating medium in use among these people is a small white shell called higua . . . , and may be found of all lengths, between three inches down to one-fourth of an inch, and increases or decreases in value according to the number required to make a fathom, by which measure they are invariably sold. Thirty to a fathom are held equal in value to three fathoms of forty, or four to fifty, and so on. So high are the higua prized, that I have seen six of 2½ inches long refused for a new gun. But of late, since the whites came among them, the beaver skin called enna, has been added to the currency; so that, by these two articles, which form the medium of trade, all property is valued, and all exchange fixed and determined. An Indian, in buying an article, invariably asks . . . how many higua? or, how many beaver skins is it?⁸

The sizes of the units in which goods were sold was also highly standardized and baskets serving as containers were conveyed in any transaction along with their contents. Such units are described in the section on basketry.⁹

From the Strait of Juan de Fuca came no item of greater importance than dentalia. The quantities of these shells imported by the Chinook must have been tremendous, for not only did they use a great quantity in the daily routine of trade, but they also furnished the bulk of the supply used in the southern Plateau and western Oregon. Though the shells of exceptional length maintained an exceptionally high market value, indicating their rarity, the price dropped rapidly for those of shorter length, reflecting a corresponding increase in quantity.

From Willapa Bay to the mouth of the river steadily flowed large quantities of dried shell-fish. These were arranged on sticks of salmonberry wood, each about two feet long. From the Kwalhiokwa the Willapa Bay people received furs of the larger animals and dried meat packed in tule bags. A portion of these goods was kept for home consumption but much of it found its way, along with the shell-fish, to the Columbia river. The bay people furnished the Kwalhiokwa with shell-fish likewise; and again, with goods first received from the Columbia. Home products of the Columbia, which were distributed in all directions, included dried salmon, pulverized salmon, dried sturgeon, dried smelt, dried seal meat, blubber, and canoes. Dried berries were also a local product but the river people probably received more of them from the bay and upriver than they supplied. All of the other products here named flowed in greater quantity away from the river than toward it. Some, especially blubber and canoes, were almost exclusively exports. The upriver groups brought, above all, wapato and camas to the coastal people. These foods were highly prized on the coast and were imported in great quantities. Other important westward-moving products included dressed elk and deer skins and dried meat. Inte-

⁷The Chinook explained that the people who gathered dentalia were very small and had tiny mouths. They gathered the dentalia for food, which they sucked out of the shells. Then the slaves strung the shells as a pastime.

⁸Ross, pp. 95 f. Cf. Franchere, pp. 244 f.

⁹See basketry and matting.

rior traders returned with dentalia, blubber, dried seal meat and shell-fish, and an occasional sea otter skin. Slaves moved in all directions, but less upriver than up and down the coast.¹⁰

Information concerning the market value of various products differs considerably, as might be expected since several periods are involved and because the supply of many products became rapidly depleted after the coming of the whites. Dunn states that forty dentalia to a fathom constituted a fixed standard of reference, and that shells measuring fifty to a fathom were worth little over half as much,¹¹ while Ross (see above) places the ratio at four to three and uses thirty to a fathom as point of reference. Mrs. Luscier furnished a different method of reckoning, with a standard of fifty beads to a string, the value being judged in terms of the number of beads in excess of a fathom. Henry writes that one dentalium was held equal in value to forty or more grains of large China beads, and that one fathom (what size shells?) was equated to three Hudson's Bay blankets of the two and one-half point quality.¹² One fathom of the longest shells, according to Franchere, was worth ten beaver skins.¹³ Mrs. Luscier stated that fifty shells measuring ten over a fathom was equal to a mountain goat wool blanket; or if twenty over a fathom, two such blankets. In turn, one goat wool blanket might be traded for one unit of pulverized dried salmon. One basket of ordinary dried salmon equalled several baskets of dried clams. Lewis and Clark bought two sea otter skins for a belt of blue beads¹⁴ in 1806 but a few years later Henry states that two such skins were equal to forty-eight beavers.¹⁵

The quantity of goods on hand at any one time is indicated by the huge supply of furs taken away by Gray's vessel in 1792¹⁶ and by the whole of the fur trade literature. Henry, for example, speaks of Concomly bringing a hundred large salmon on one day; followed by another hundred, together with ducks and geese, brought by Concomly's son a few days later.¹⁷ White contact of course stimulated trade but there is no doubt but that it was extensively developed in wholly aboriginal times.

TRANSPORTATION

Without adequate transportation Chinook commerce could not have existed on so great a scale. But transportation played a large part in the daily lives of these people as well. With an expanse of several miles of water separating the north and south banks of the Columbia, and a long bay bisecting the territory in the other direction, water travel loomed all important. Travel from any Chinook village to any other one was possible by water alone. To reach the Willapa Bay villages from the Columbia river, however, would have necessitated crossing the extremely dangerous Columbia bar and traveling far to the north before entering the bay (see map, page 37). But this route was almost never taken though the canoes were perfectly

¹⁰Cf. Thwaites, vol. 3, pp. 208, 265, 293 f., 296 f., 338; vol. 4, pp. 6 f., 10 f., 200, 215.

¹¹Dunn, p. 134.

¹²Coues, p. 753.

¹³Franchere, p. 245.

¹⁴Thwaites, vol. 3, p. 238.

¹⁵Coues, p. 753.

¹⁶See hunting.

¹⁷Coues, pp. 750, 768.

capable of making it. Instead, a very short portage was made from the Columbia to the south fork of the Naselle river, which permitted entering Willapa Bay after but a brief trip.

The canoes of the Chinook were of several types (Figures 9, 10), each an admirable solution of a special problem.¹⁸ But unfortunately we have little information as to the details of manufacture, use, and specialization. Lewis and Clark furnish the most extensive descriptions:

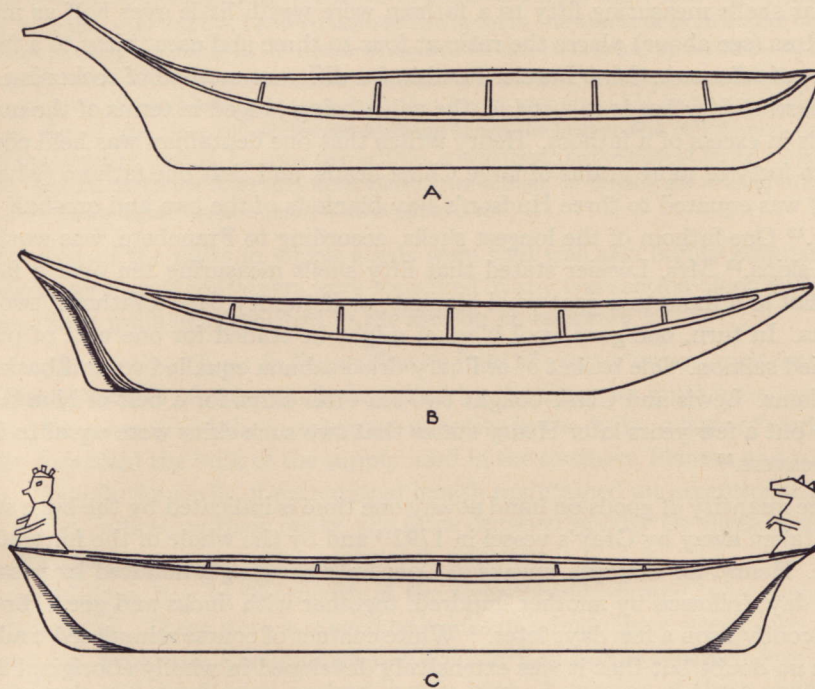


FIG. 9. Canoes. (A) "Chinook" or Nutka type; (B) Cutwater type; (C) Double cutwater type, with raised figures. See text.

The canoes of the natives inhabiting the lower portion of the Columbia River [are made] remarkably neat, light, and well adapted for riding high waves. I have seen the natives near the coast riding waves with safety and apparently without concern where I should have thought it impossible for any vessel of the same size to [have] lived a minute. They are built of white cedar [*Thuja plicata*] . . . but sometimes of the fir [*Pseudotsuga mucronata*]. They are cut out of a solid stick of timber, the gunwales at the upper edge fold over outwards and are about five-eighths of an inch thick and four or five broad, and stand horizontally forming a kind of rim to the canoe to prevent the water beating into it. They are all furnished with more or less crossbars in proportion to the size of the canoe. These bars are round sticks about half the size of a man's arm, which are inserted through holes made in either side of the canoe just below the rim of the gunwale and further secured with strings of waytape; these crossbars serve to lift and manage the canoe on land. When the natives land they invariably take their canoes on shore, unless they are heavily laden, and then even, if they remain all night, they discharge their loads and take their canoes on shore. Some of the large canoes are upwards of fifty feet long and will carry from eight to ten thousand pounds or from twenty to thirty persons and some of them, particularly on the sea coast, are waxed [oiled and pitched], painted and ornamented with curious images at bow and stern; those

¹⁸See Waterman and Coffin, p. 15.

images sometimes rise to the height of five feet; the pedestals on which these images are fixed are sometimes cut out of the solid stick with the canoe, and the imagery is formed of separate small pieces of timber firmly united with tenons and mortices. . . . When the natives are engaged in navigating their canoes one sits in the stern and steers with a paddle. The others sit by pairs and paddle over the gunwale next [to] them; they all kneel in the bottom of the canoe and sit on their feet.¹⁹

Franchere furnishes these remarks:

The bows terminate in a very elongated point, running out four or five feet from the water line. It constitutes a separate piece, very ingeniously attached, and serves to break the surf in landing, or the wave on a rough sea. In landing they put the canoe round, so as to strike the beach stern on. Their oars or paddles are made of ash, and are about five feet long, with a broad blade, in the shape of an inverted crescent, and a cross at the top, like the handle of a crutch. . . . All their canoes are painted red, and are fancifully decorated.²⁰

In an attempt to isolate the fundamentally different canoe types a number of difficulties are encountered. Superficially five forms may be distinguished. The so-called "Chinook" or Nutka canoe of wide distribution on the coast of Washington and British Columbia²¹ is recognizable here, but despite the name the canoe used by the Chinook varies considerably from the type. According to Olson this craft "is pointed at both ends, the prow projects upward and forward and, except on small canoes, is a separate piece. The stern is vertical and raised above the level of the gunwales, the upper portion in all larger canoes being a separate piece. The cross-section is angular, the bottom being almost flat."²² The conformity of the Chinook variant (Figure 9, A) is reasonably close with the exception of the stern characteristics. This was undercut rather than straight and was not, at least ordinarily, surmounted by an extra piece. The Willapa Bay variant may have been more typical in this respect than the canoes of the Columbia.²³

The second type (Figure 9, B) varied from the preceding in that the undercut prow was replaced by a board type cutwater with vertical edge. This was an integral part, being shaped from the main log, but the sides were parallel and the thickness only about an inch. It varied in depth or projection from nine to eleven inches. The stern was sharply undercut.²⁴

Each end of the third form was provided with the vertical, narrow cutwater; otherwise the structural characteristics were similar to the second type. In addition, both prow and stern were usually surmounted with large carved figures (as mentioned by Lewis and Clark in the passage above).²⁵ This is an unusual and exaggerated feature but substantial agreement is found in the descriptions of various early writers. For example, Ross states that the canoes were provided "with a human face or a white-headed eagle, as large as life, carved on the prow, and raised high in

¹⁹Thwaites, vol. 4, pp. 30 f. Cf. Ross, pp. 97 f.

²⁰Franchere, pp. 246 f.

²¹See Olson, *Adze, Canoe and House Types*, pp. 19-22.

²²*Idem*, p. 19.

²³Swan pictures canoes outside a native house (see Plate 4) which correspond closely with the type. But Swan was quite well acquainted with the typical Nutka canoe, having purchased one from a Quinault (Swan, pp. 78 f.). Also, trade canoes may well have been present in the bay. Yet he does speak of separate stem pieces (p. 81) on local canoes.

²⁴Thwaites, vol. 4, pp. 31 f.

²⁵*Ibid.*

front."²⁶ Thompson writes of three-foot projections above the gunwales, but more surprisingly, of over-decking extending ten feet back of the prow.²⁷

The next type may be termed the hunting canoe. It occurred in two fairly distinct variants. The river form (Figure 10, A) was almost vertical at the prow but sharply undercut at the stern. The sealing form (Figure 10, B) was linearly more symmetrical, with both prow and stern undercut, and was wider amidships. This type is related to Swan's "Cowlitz canoe."²⁸ Sometimes the prow was surmounted with a small, carved figure.

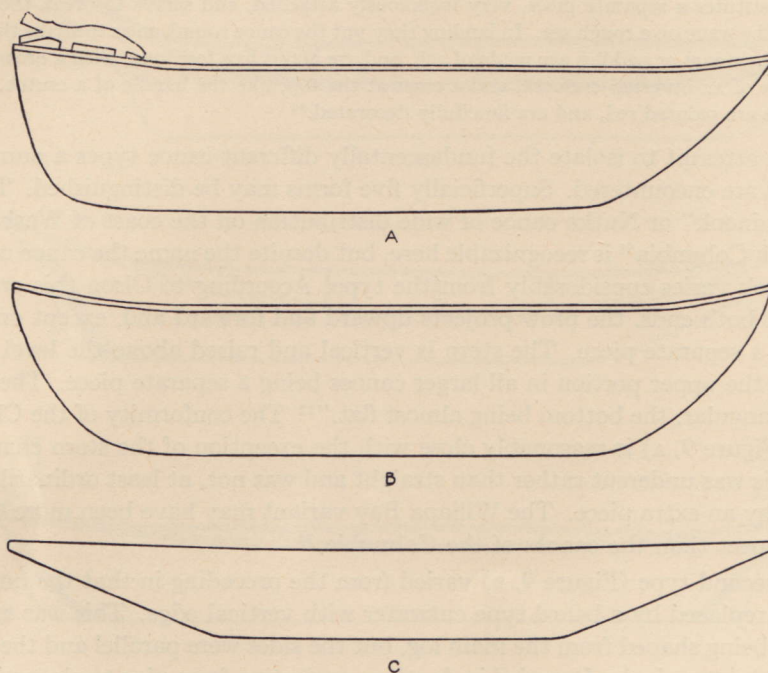


FIG. 10. Canoe profiles. (A) River canoe; (B) Sealing canoe; (C) Shovel nose canoe. (Compare Field Museum specimens 19860, 19861.)

In the shovel-nose (Figure 10, c), the final type, we have a form which is quite unambiguous. The Chinook took great care, however, even in the manufacture of this humble canoe, so that it varied from the comparable craft of adjacent peoples more in excellence of workmanship than in fundamental design.

Swan provides a description of the manufacture of a canoe which he witnessed:

The manufacture of a canoe is a work of great moment with these Indians. It is not every man among them that can make a canoe, but some are, like our white mechanics, more expert than their neighbors. A suitable tree is first selected, which in all cases is the cedar, and then cut down. This job was formerly a formidable one, as the tree was chipped around with stone chisels, after the fashion adopted by beavers, and looks as if gnawed off. At present, however, they understand the use of the axe, and many are expert choppers. When the tree is down, it is first stripped

²⁶Ross, pp. 97 f.

²⁷Tyrrell, p. 507.

²⁸Swan, p. 80.

of its bark, then cut off into the desired length, and the upper part split off with little wedges, till it is reduced to about two thirds the original height of the log. The bows and stern are then chopped into a rough shape, and enough cut out of the inside to lighten it so that it can be easily turned. When all is ready, the log is turned bottom up, and the Indian goes to work to fashion it out. This he does with no instrument of measurement but his eye, and so correct is that, that when he has done his hewing no one could detect the least defect. When the outside is formed and rough-hewn, the log is again turned, and the inside cut out with the axe. This operation was formerly done by fire, but the process was slow and tedious. During the chopping the Indian frequently ascertains the thickness of the sides by placing one hand on the outside and the other on the inside. The canoe is now again turned bottom up, and the whole smoothed off with a peculiar-shaped chisel, used something after the manner of a cooper's adze. This is a very tiresome job, and takes a long time. Then the inside is finished, and the canoe now has to be stretched into shape. It is first nearly filled with water, into which hot stones are thrown, and a fire at the same time of bark is built outside. This in a short time renders the wood so supple that the centre can be spread open at the top from six inches to a foot. This is kept in place by sticks or stretchers, similar to the method of a boat's thwarts. The ends of these stretchers are fastened by means of withes made from the taper ends of cedar limbs, twisted and used instead of cords. When all is finished, the water is emptied out, and then the stem and head-pieces are put on. These are carved from separate sticks, and are fastened on by means of withes and wooden pegs or tree-nails. After the inside is finished to the satisfaction of the maker, the canoe is again turned, and the charred part, occasioned by the bark fire, is rubbed with stones to make the bottom as smooth as possible, when the whole outside is painted over with a black mixture made of burned rushes and whale oil. The inside is also painted red with a mixture of red ochre and oil. The edges all round are studded with little shells, which are the valve joint of the common snail. . . .²⁹

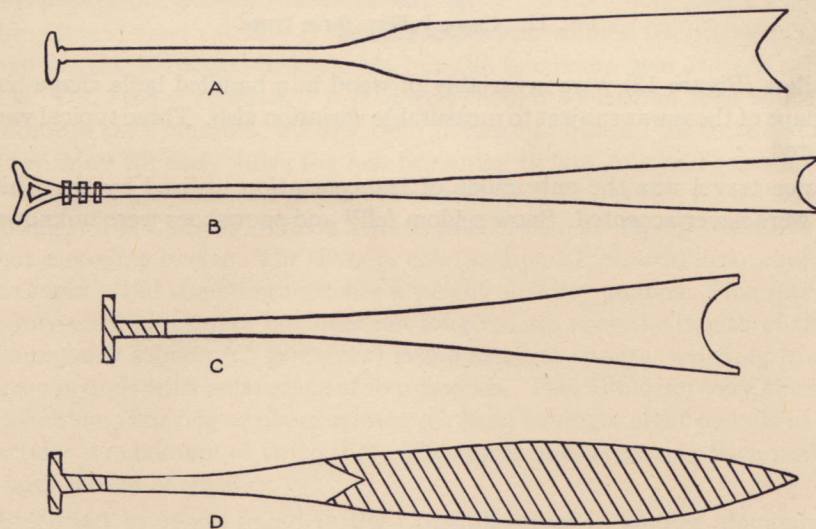


FIG. 11. Paddles. (A) Notched blade type (after Swan); (B) Same (after Lewis and Clark); (C) Same (after Luscier); (D) Type used with shovel nose canoe. Shading represents painting.

The inlaid shells characterized all of the finer canoes.³⁰ Gunwales were not always integral; sometimes separate strips were applied. Harpoon rests and seine net frames were provided. Mats or boards were laid on the bottom of the canoe to protect occupants from water which might seep in. Mat sails were used but not ones of

²⁹*Idem*, pp. 80-82.

³⁰Cf. Thwaites, vol. 4, p. 199; Gibbs, *Tribes of Western Washington*, p. 216.

plank. The sail was supported by a mast set in a block type socket and steadied by halyards. It was erected only when a tail wind was blowing.

Paddles were of two basic types, one with a notched blade (Figure 11, A, B, C) and another with pointed blade (Figure 11, D). The latter was used with the shovel-nose canoe; the notched type served for all others. Both were provided with crutch-type handles; sometimes this was an integral part of the paddle, otherwise it was a separately applied piece. Handles were occasionally wrapped with hide. Paddles were made of yew wood and finished by oiling, charring or painting. The notched blade paddle varied considerably in proportions, as indicated in the illustrations.

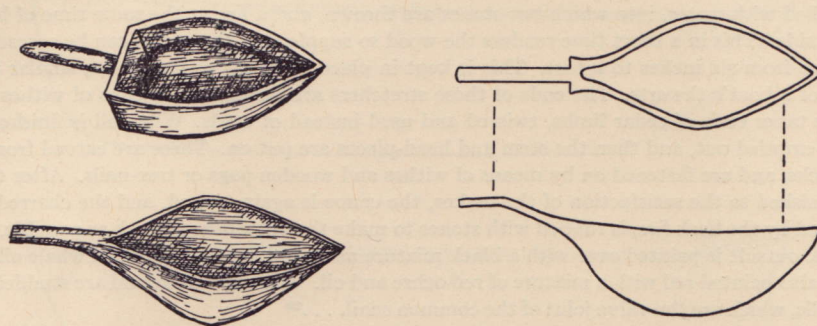


FIG. 12. Canoe bailers, three types.

Bailers (Figure 12) were invariably of wood in a handled ladle shape but the exact shape of these was subject to measurable variation also. Three typical variants are figured.

Canoe travel was the only mode of transportation utilized by the Chinook. Horses were never accepted. Snow seldom fell³¹ and snowshoes were unknown.

³¹See Table 1.