

Return of the shovelnose

By Barbara Curtin

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Roll back your mental calendar to the time before white settlers arrived in the Willamette Valley. The rich land provided a good living to the ancestors of members of The Confederated Tribes of Grand Ronde. Rivers served as highways to exchange salmon, huckleberries, camas, cedar and even prized dentalium shells from the north. Shovelnose canoes — with blunt noses rather than the prow used in the Columbia River — were the family vehicle.

Three such canoes are the focus of a new exhibit at Willamette Heritage Center at The Mill. The show opened Friday and will continue through May 30. Curated by David Lewis, manager of the Tribes' Cultural Resources Department, the exhibit shares not only history but canoes' role in tribal rebirth. Lewis' native American ancestry is Chinook, Takelma and Kalapuya.

It's the first of what could become annual collaborations between the Tribes and the museum.

"This fits the Willamette Heritage Center mission to a T, allowing elements of the Willamette Valley community access to the museum to tell and re-create a part of their heritage," said Peter Booth, executive director of the Heritage Center.

That approach was outlined in a strategic plan developed last year. It called for the museum to broaden its focus from the traditional emphasis on pioneer-era buildings and the Thomas Kay Woolen Mill.

The first canoe that visitors encounter is a modern one, about 17 feet long, outside the entrance to the mill. The carving was begun on the Grand Ronde reservation. Teams will visit each Tuesday to finish the work on site.

Oregon tribes of our era have carved larger Chinook-style canoes, steamed and stretched to make a prow that can navigate the ocean and Columbia River. But this is the first river



The decayed bow of a shovelnose canoe, believed to be several hundred years old that was found in mud near Tanager.

if you go

What: "The Grand Ronde Canoe Journey," featuring two historic shovelnose canoes and one being completed on site

Where: Willamette Heritage Center at The Mill, 1313 Mill St. SE

When: Through May 30, 10 a.m. to 5 p.m. Mondays-Saturdays

Admission: \$6, \$5 ages 55 and older, \$4 for students, \$3 for ages 6 to 17 and free for ages younger than 6, Grand Ronde tribal members and everyone on Tuesdays

Presented by: The Confederated Tribes of Grand Ronde with support from Bill and Judy Meier, Oregon Humanities and in-kind help from Interpretive Exhibits Inc.

Information: www.missionmill.org or (503) 585-7012

shovelnose canoe known to be carved by the Grand Ronde in modern times, said Lewis last week, as workers rushed to complete the exhibition.

"It's a return to an art form we hadn't done for 150 years," said Lewis, a McKay High grad who went on to earn his anthropology doctorate from University of Oregon. "All we had to see was pictures."

Inside the second-floor exhibit room, visitors will be greeted by two historic canoes. The first, owned by the museum, was found in the late 1960s preserved in mud near Tangent. Lewis guesses that it is several hundred years old. The Heritage Center will give the canoe to the Grand Ronde people when the exhibit closes.

The second canoe is 150 to 200 years old, by Lewis' estimate. Age has been kinder to the cedar, and it shows evidence that past owners adapted it by adding seats and oarlocks.

All three crafts have deep meaning for the Tribes, which ceased to exist when Congress terminated them in 1954. Since gaining restoration in 1983, tribal members have been hungry to reconnect with their traditions, Lewis said. Carving canoes and taking journeys in them is a key part of that.

"I think it's really, truly a connection with that past, who we were," he said. "We've been here 10,000 years. It's an art that deserves to come back, and we're bringing it back in various ways."

The exhibit also includes reproductions of etchings showing canoes in use, plus samples of trade beads and canoe-building tools (behind Plexiglas to preserve them from fingers of curious visitors). There also are panels about how canoes have spurred exchanges among indigenous people worldwide.

Lewis hopes the exhibit will spur people to ask questions about who the Grand Ronde were and what happened to them.

"I think we are going to show them things no one has seen for a long time," he said.

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