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Joe Scovell of Turner is the chairman of the Clatsop-Nehalem Tribe. The tribe recently carved a canoe that will be in a naming ceremony at a potlatch, a ceremonial festival, Friday.

Corps coveted tribal

canoes, stole one

Clatsop-Nehalem members bridge generations by carving a new canoe

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The native tribes were skilled traders.

They had an extensive coastal and river trading network and had bargained with the British for years. The Clatsop, Tillamook and Chinook and other Northwest tribes of 200 years ago knew what their goods were worth.

Especially their canoes.

After years of travel and four months on a soggy coast, members of the Corps of Discovery didn't have much to offer. They needed canoes to go upriver on the return voyage.

"The hats and roots we purchased," Capt. Meriwether Lewis wrote after a visit to a Clatsop village, "but could not obtain the canoe without giving more than our stock of merchandize would license us.

"I offered him my laced uniform coat but he would not exchange," Lewis wrote.

So they stole a canoe.

Lewis reasoned that the theft was in lieu of some stashed elk that Indians had taken earlier.

Two hundred years later, descendants of the Clatsop have carved a new canoe from an 800-year-old cedar tree.

The Clatsop-Nehalem tribe paid for the endeavor with a grant from the National Park Service, so tribal chairman Joe Scovell likes to think of it as restitution from the U.S. government.

"We were replacing something that had been taken by Lewis and Clark," said Scovell of Turner.

The oceangoing vessel is more than a replacement to the Clatsop. It represents a reclamation of cultural heritage nearly lost to smallpox and settlers.

On Friday, the tribe will have a traditional potlatch gathering during which master carver Guy L. Capoeman, the vice president of the Quinault Indian Nation, will lead a ceremony to name the canoe.

On that day the tribe also will welcome visitors for a three-day commemoration of Lewis and Clark's winter stay at Fort Clatsop. Scovell said he hopes that hosting the event will strengthen the small tribe and its pursuit of federal recognition.

"We want to build our tribe," Scovell said, "and be able to perform significant service to our community around us, and also to keep our stories alive."

'Much more kind'

Just after his men had stolen the canoe, Lewis was visited by the Clatsop chief, Coboway. The canoe was hidden.

"He felt badly," said Deborah Wood, the cultural-resource manager at Fort Clatsop National Memorial. "Here he was mistreating his friend, the Clatsop leader who had treated them well all winter long."

Lewis presented Coboway with the small fort and everything left in it, as the chief had "been much more kind an[d] hospitable to us than any other indian in this neighbourhood," he wrote.

Lewis also presented Coboway with a fill-in-the-blank certificate signed by President Thomas Jefferson declaring the bearer to be an honorable person.

Then, he left with the canoe.

Canoes were valuable in the river-rich Northwest. They were carved from ancient trees and took hundreds of hours to create.

"That was their highway system, the rivers and streams and ocean," said Wood, a member of the Osage Nation of Oklahoma. "They didn't walk if they could use their canoes."

As the Corps traveled upstream, members wrote about the magnificent canoes they encountered.

"The natives of this country," wrote Sgt. Patrick Gass, "ought to have the credit of making the finest canoes, perhaps in the world, both as to service and beauty; and are [n]o less expert in working them when made."

Seaworthy vessel

Members of the Clatsop-Nehalem Confederated Tribes wanted to build a canoe in the style of their ancestors, Scovell said.

With a cultural-heritage revitalization grant, the tribe hired Capoeman, a Quinault from Washington. He located a cedar in an old-growth patch on Quinault land.

The log was hauled to Camp Rilea near Seaside, where the Oregon National Guard donated the use of a storage building.

Capoeman and a Clatsop apprentice, Justin Forsberg, spent 33 days over several months chipping, carving and smoothing the ancient log.

"Physically, mentally and spiritually, it takes a lot out of a person," said Capoeman, who has completed eight canoes.

The project was paid for with part of \$35,000 in grants from the Lewis and Clark Bicentennial of Oregon, the National Park Service and the Oregon Heritage Commission.

The money also is being used to research the cultural history of the Clatsop and Nehalem. With help from the National Park Service, the tribe will create a list of tribal artifacts and documents kept by museums, universities and parks, Wood said.

Hosting again

Scovell and fellow Clatsop Dick Basch, a direct descendant of Coboway, will welcome dozens of tribes Friday. Many are recognized by the federal government as sovereign nations.

The Clatsop-Nehalem are not.

The tribe, which has 100 active members, is traveling the difficult path of gaining the same federal recognition granted to nine other Oregon tribes.

Recognition via the Bureau of Indian Affairs can take decades. Scovell pins more hope on getting congressional approval, the path taken by the Confederated Tribes of the Grand Ronde in the 1980s.

The Clatsop-Nehalem tribe gained nonprofit status in 2000. Soon after, Scovell was appointed to the Circle of Tribal Advisors as one of 58 tribes working with the National Council of the Lewis & Clark Bicentennial.

The only other unrecognized tribe taking part in the bicentennial, the Chinook, gained recognition during the Clinton administration but lost it after President Bush took office. New Interior Department officials said the tribe did not meet all the requirements.

The Chinook said last year that they will not participate in Corps of Discovery memorial events if the Clatsop-Nehalem are invited as equal partners.

Instead, they will participate with the Grand Ronde in an exhibit at the Oregon Historical Society Museum.

Scovell said he is pleased that the Clatsop-Nehalem and other tribes have been able to share so much with Americans during the bicentennial.

"One of the things that is stressed quite heavily is that our story must be told," he said. "So all along the line, a special emphasis has been given to collecting the stories that the Indians have and to share them."

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