

## **Introduction:**

### **Native American Canoes in Washington State**

*by Maria Parker Pascua, Makah*

When something precious is nearly lost, those of us who value it cling intensely to that precious entity and strive to elevate it to its rightful status. Tribal canoe traditions are ebbing away. It is important to assure that those traditions are not lost and that we will continue to see future generations of canoe people living, caring for, and passing on the cultural traditions and teachings.

And a revival of these traditions *is* happening. With the 1989 Paddle to Seattle, a new tradition was born. This Tribal Journey event promotes the knowledge and use of tribal canoes. A new journey designation is chosen annually. Tribal Journeys involve Washington State Tribes and Canadian First Nation Bands. For our Washington State Tribes, this event has led to the apprenticeship of new carvers and canoe crews in the building and use of the Ocean-going Canoe and the Straits/Sound canoe.

Tribal Journeys was inspired in part by Tribal canoe carving projects prepared for the Washington State Centennial program. These projects were spearheaded by Emmet Oliver, Quinault, a well-known Washington state educator. The Tribal canoe carving projects were designed to acknowledge and celebrate the past, present and future contributions of Washington's maritime industry and heritage. The Washington State Centennial Native Canoe Project and the National Forest Service were instrumental in the sponsorship of the projects.

You, too, will be instrumental in helping to pass on the knowledge of our canoe traditions. As a teacher, you have a tremendous impact on the students in your care. In your preparation for teaching this curriculum, take to heart the information provided—and teach it with heart—for you have the opportunity to touch many. Perhaps one of your students will be inspired to become a canoe carver, or to actively participate in canoe traditions.

This curriculum will address an area of life that some of your students have already experienced. Those students who have no prior association with Native canoes may be inspired to learn and apply Native teachings in their own lives. Your students may take new found pride in Native heritage, build their self-esteem and learn respect for knowledge and traditions. They may learn to respect and honor knowledgeable people and Elders, to work with and respect others, develop teamwork skills, or develop people-relationship skills like the parallels between a canoe crew and a family. For some students, the topic of Native canoes will be so relevant that their individual interests will provide a link to further learning.

How happy we are for your inclusion of this unit into your curriculum plan. On behalf of the Indian Education and the Unity Project division of the Office of the Superintendent of Public Instruction for Washington State, The Evergreen Center for Educational Improvement, the Curriculum Consultant teams and the Tribes and organizations they represent—we humbly thank you for the great work you do as educators, and encourage you to continue to be inspirational examples of lifelong learning and respect, especially in relation to the Native American First People of Washington State.

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**Place of Canoes in Native Societies**

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Canoes have an honored place in coastal native societies. Canoes were named like crest names<sup>1</sup> and were spoken to i.e., “Take me safely to \_\_\_\_\_.” A chief’s canoe or canoes were referred to sometimes by the purpose of the canoe voyage. For example, “potlatching to another tribe canoe”, “marriage canoe”, and “war canoe.”

Canoes are respected for the service and care they provide to our people. From the selection of the appropriate tree, through the building process, through the numerous journeys, until the last voyage—canoes command respect.

In times past, canoes were essential to our people. They were the main source of transportation for the coastal tribes, but they were not limited to just these tribes. Plateau tribes also had river canoes and the trade network extended inland. Even the tribes of the Great Plains acquired dentalium shells<sup>2</sup> from our coast via trade originating from canoe transportation.

Socially, canoes provided the avenue to connect with other tribes for various events, games, or ceremonial gatherings, like potlatches. When warfare occurred, the canoes were used to mobilize warriors to defend land, waterways and other hereditary rights. Canoes were also a means to obtain a great variety of food and raw materials, like tule, or cattails. Owning canoes was prestigious: canoe ownership brought access to more places, people and resources. Often, upon the death of a wealthy or highly-ranked person, a canoe was used for the final resting ground.

The longevity of canoes was variable; some lasted for years, others only for a short time, depending on circumstance and the elements. But even after a canoe was no longer able to serve as a vessel for the people, it was often recycled and used to make boards, boxes, or patches for other wooden objects. Smaller canoes could also be used for cooking, rendering oil, etc.

Associations with life and death governed many practices. Women were not allowed in sea mammal hunting canoes. There were strong beliefs about keeping separate the sea mammal who gives its life for the people, and the women, who carry life into this world through childbearing. That was the custom, and it is still observed by some tribes today. Sea mammal hunting canoes were also not used to transport a deceased person.

**Canoe Carvers**

Canoe carvers were highly regarded for their master craftsmanship. Their highly specialized information was usually handed down by an older male relative. Training for a young apprentice started from the beginning of manhood and continued until he mastered the skill.

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<sup>1</sup> Crest names are names that the canoe owner has rights to use, like if he owned a certain crest or dance. Examples are Thunderbirds, Lightning Serpents, Wolves, Killer Whales.

Medium-sized, white shell used as a type of currency. Dentalia are difficult to harvest, and primarily the Makah and Nootkan gathered them. The shells were strung on a line and measured by the fathom (six feet).

Prayer and spiritual observances have all been part of building a canoe according to traditional teachings. Prayer is an on-going supplication as the canoe maker selects the tree, fells the tree, and works on the canoe until its completion.

Some teachings differ from tribe to tribe. A clean life was important in asking for spiritual help to make canoes. A clean life might mean prayer, bathing, or abstinence from food and physical relations with his spouse.

A canoe maker often worked with an assistant. They would work at dawn, several hours or more every day. Making a canoe could take from two to twelve months, depending on the size of the canoe, and the time needed for the wood to season.

### **Construction of an Ocean-going Canoe**

When the canoe maker knew which tree he would use, he recruited assistance to help him fell the tree. He cut off the top section and removed the bark. V-like cuts were made at specific points on each end, to split out the wood in-between the cuts. The larger section of the tree became the bow end of the canoe. At this point, the canoe could be left in the woods for the winter to allow the wood to season. In the spring, the canoe maker would rough out the canoe, hollowing it with tools or using a controlled burn. He could then bring the canoe to the nearest river or stream and float it down to the village for completion.

Using an adze, the canoe maker would scrape the outside of the canoe. Then he would turn it over and use the adze to shape the inside. Holes and uniform dark wood or fire-blackened pegs were inserted at intervals to keep the canoe thickness consistent. Canoe size and bottom thickness were carved to specific finger-width sizes with awesome accuracy.

When the canoe was carved to proper proportions, a shallow amount of water was poured into the canoe. Nearby, a fire heated rocks. The steaming process would begin by placing hot rocks into the water until the water boiled. The hot water was sloshed onto the sides of the canoe. Pre-measured sticks placed into the canoe would gently spread the sides of the canoe until it expanded to the desired beam width. Later, permanent thwarts (seats) were added.

Bow and stern pieces were attached separately. The higher, projecting bow was distinguished by a small projection on the 'neck.' Makahs refer to these projections as the "uvula," "Adam's apple" or "throat," while the Salish call this feature a 'navel.' The projecting points atop the bow are referred to as 'ears' and the forward-most point of the bow is called the "nose."

The ocean-going canoe had separate bow, stern and gunnel pieces pegged to the body of the canoe. The stern was vertical. The thwarts were tied in with withes (tough, supple twigs) made from tapering cedar boughs. The bottom of the canoe was nearly flat, except for fur sealing canoes which had a slight keel for slicing the water silently. Fur sealing canoes were also narrower for speed. Canoes often had an extra base in the inside bottom of the canoe that was made of wood with a hole designed for using masts and sails.

To finish the canoe, the outside was "charcoaled" and rubbed down with boughs so it was blackened, sleek and splinterless. The inside was painted red with a red ochre and oil mixture.

Some canoes had special, parallel rows of opercula shells or animal teeth inlaid just below the gunnels. Others had four parallel, incised lines carved along the inside of the canoe along the gunnels. Sometimes, animal or bird designs were painted on the bow of the canoe.

A child's canoe was simply made with two sterns, heavy and thick with a wide beam to increase stability.

### **Paddling the Ocean-Going Canoe**

Then and now, the ocean-going canoe was designed to handle ocean waves without taking in water, and could range in size from approximately 8-80 feet. Ocean-going canoes were beached stern first to accommodate the breakers when launching or landing. In rough seas, seal skin floats were tied along both sides of the canoe to protect the hull from cracking. As a wave broke, the paddlers paddled on the windward side, breaking the waves' force and causing the spray to go overhead to the other side of the canoe.

Paddlers knelt on a padded knee rest made of mats and placed in front of each thwart. Nowadays, seats are built into the canoe.

Lattice-like boards served to keep paddlers and items dryer, as did canoe mats that covered provisions and cargo. These canoe bottom boards had a gap space for bailing purposes. Bailers for the ocean going canoe are made of alder and are trapezoidal-shaped, approximately 10" long, 8" wide, and 6" deep.

Canoes could be tied to kelp, or have an anchor included with the canoe gear. Long ago, the anchors were made of stone attached to heavy ropes.

### **Care of Canoes**

Canoes were beached and carried above the high tide mark during normal use. Dragging a canoe causes scrapes, so canoes were carried, even if the distance was short.

Canoes were stored, bottom side up, elevated from the ground by laying them across logs, rollers or, more recently, saw-horses. Canoes needed to be covered with mats, boards, branches and tarps, or kept in the shade to protect them from the elements as they were very susceptible to cracks and checking. Sometimes whaling canoes were given exceptional treatment, stored in the off-season right in the owner's house to prevent any weather damage.

Additional repair was needed for canoe maintenance. Cracks were sewn using new wooden patches tied on the spruce root or cedar withes, then coated with spruce or fir pitch to water proof the patch. Canoes were kept polished and maintained.

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### **Styles of Canoes**

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There are many Native and English terms used to describe the various styles of canoes. Type, size, and use varied from Tribe to Tribe. Since this unit is designed for young learners, we will separate style of canoe by the general overall shape, and also include the more modern racing canoe.

Here are the styles of canoes included in this unit:

1. Ocean-going canoe (or the Chinook canoe, Nootkan canoe, War canoe, West Coast canoe, Traveling canoe, Deer-head canoe and Wolf-head canoe)
2. Sound/Straits canoe (or the Salish canoe, Freight canoe, Hunting/Fishing canoe, and Notched-bow canoe)
3. Shovel-nose canoe (or the River canoe)
4. Racing canoe (mostly known as the Eleven-man canoe, although there are other events based on number of pullers in the canoe).

### **Types of canoes not covered in this curriculum**

Munka and Head canoes were war canoes used in earlier European contact times by Nootka and Salish people. They had larger, thicker shaped bows. The head canoe had an angling stern. The munka was similar to the ocean-going style, except for the strong bow. Munkas ranged from Nootka to the Columbia river. Head canoes are more of a northern style and are related to the more modern spruce canoes in Alaska.

Small, model-sized and spirit canoes are altogether their own category, meant for the specific tribes who honor those traditions and are not within the scope of this curriculum.

### **Types of canoes**

1. Many canoes look like the ocean-going canoe, but the dimensions will vary with the use.
2. War canoe/errand canoe (10-20 people, 48' long). These canoes were not as long or wide as the cargo/freight canoes. They were designed for speed, not for packing.
3. Cargo, transportation or freight canoe (12-20 people, 30-48' long, but built with a wide beam).
4. Whaling canoe (8 people, 30-35' long).
5. Four-man canoe (This may refer only to how many are in the canoe).
6. Three-man canoe (Two in the bow and one in the stern; again, this term refers to how many people are in the canoe).
7. Fur sealing canoe (2-3 people, 24-25' long; bottom is 21'; sharp bow).
8. Hunting/fishing canoe (2-3 people, 18-20' long). These canoes were slimline, used for sea mammal hunting (including whales, sea otter and porpoise). In the off-season, they were used for fishing.
9. Fishing canoe, sometimes called a salmon canoe (2 people, 12-18' long; meant for two people, but could be manned by one).
10. Two-man canoe (21' long).
11. One-man canoe (sit near the middle, 18' long).
12. Woman's canoe.
13. Child's canoe (stern at both ends).

Some canoes may have been used for more than one purpose, so some of these canoes were utilized and referred to by a specific purpose during a specific time, e.g., "marriage canoe" or "war canoe."

When more than one canoe was traveling, the groups traveled together. If one group got behind, the lead canoe waited for the others to catch up.

**The Straits/Sound Canoe**

Used mainly by the Straits Salish and the Puget Sound Salish, these canoes have a split-like bow. Viewed from the side, the tip of the bow is shaped like a partially-opened mouth. The bottoms are rounded and the gunnels flare out. The thwarts are rounded and are pegged in with ironwood or yew pegs.

The freight canoe ranges from approximately 22-40 feet. It has a definite verticalness or squared-off line at the place where the bow turns up. Freight canoes can be used for moving household possessions on calm water. In the past, planks were sometimes laid across two canoes to increase the carrying space when moving family and cargo to seasonal camps. The cross plank feature also stabilized the loaded canoes. Sometimes planks were set on canoes to make a dance platform for special canoe landings and ceremonies.

Fishing/hunting canoes are smaller and have narrower hulls with more of a rounded line where the bow turns up. The bow is also angled a little higher than the freight canoe's bow. Fishing canoes are built small, intended usually for only one or two people, including a sternsman paddling and steering in the back, and a spearsman at the bow for shallow water fishing (skates, crabs, flounders, salmon and cod fish eggs are obtainable by this method). The larger version of this type of canoe is known as a sea mammal hunting canoe and is especially used for hunting porpoise.

A one-man version of the Straits/Sound canoe is designed for easy portage. The bow and stern are pegged separately. It is easily capsizable. Also, the paddler sits on the canoe bottom, not on a seat or thwart.

The paddles used for this style of canoe continue to be made of maple or yew, approximately 4 ½' long with a 2 ½' x 5" blade tapered at the tip. (Paddles are actually designed to fit the individual, so paddle size is relative to the paddler.) Women's paddles are shorter and have a broader, rounder blade. Paddles were made with a separate handle. The Sound tribes also used the larger, stronger ocean-going canoe style paddle for steering in rough water.

Several styles of bailers are used for the Straits/Sound canoes. The first type can be made from alder, maple, willow or laurel. These wooden bailers have a handle and the bailer part is diamond shaped, though some had a more oval quality, about 9" long, 5-7" wide and 1-1 ½" deep. Another type of bailer can be made from fresh cedar bark. The bark is folded up on two ends, with the outer bark on the inside of the bailer. The ends are fluted or pleated (like gathering material when sewing) and a separate handle is attached.

Listed below are English translations for the Straits/Sound canoes.

Types of canoes with the Straits/Sound style:

1. Fishing/hunting canoe (22' long).
2. Two-man fishing canoe or trawling canoe (20' or less long).
3. Freight canoe (18-35' long).
4. One-man canoe.

**The Shovel-nose (river) Canoe**

The Shovel-nose canoe is made for rivers and lakes. It was used by Salish groups extending upriver to some of the Plateau tribes. In the upriver areas, some canoes were made from cedar, spruce or cotton wood. The bow and the stern were squared off and lifted up slightly in a scoop. Early Euro-Americans who did not learn the local language called these shovel-nose canoes because they looked like a shovel-nose (a type of fish). The thwarts were flat, pegged in with ironwood or yew wood pegs. The bottom was rounded both in its beam and along its length, allowing the steersman to spin the canoe easily when necessary.

This craft is maneuvered better by poling, or using the specially designed tipless, notched-out paddles that make it easier to push off of limbs or rocky beds. Spears can also be used to pole in these canoes.

The shovel-nose canoe is a smaller canoe than some of the large ocean-going and Straits/Sound canoes which were able to carry 20 or more. The larger shovel-nose canoes held 8-10 people, but a two-man type was more common.

Paddlers are able to stand in either the bow or the stern to pole the canoe in shallow waters.

Upriver fishing can be done with a sternsman steering the canoe while a spearsman in the bow lunges his spear straight down at the targeted fish.

When crossing a river, the person in the bow paddles on the upstream "current" side, while the sternsman paddles on the downstream side. The sternsman can reverse his stroke to turn the canoe downstream, thus controlling the crossing and speed of the canoe. The Salish would pole up river and paddle down river.

Moving upriver required the two canoeesmen to pole along the edge of the river. Each person would take a turn, poling a stroke and holding the progress of the push while the other person moved his pole or paddle forward to make a new stroke.

The shovel-nose canoe was especially suited for swift rivers. Navigation was possible, even if the river was rocky and full of rapids. Shovel-nose canoes were used above the Dalles and even by the Nez Perce in Idaho.

### **Racing Canoe**

One of the innovations in canoeing was the development of the racing canoe. With a bow patterned after the ocean-going canoe and built long and narrow for racing, our creative living culture produced this more modern canoe tradition. Racing canoes are approximately 50' for a regular 11-man crew. Canoe racing entries range from the 11-man, 6-man, double and single canoe races. Participants include both Washington tribes and British Columbia First Nation bands.

Racing itself, though, is not a new concept. Some tribes held sealing canoe races in which the participants raced from one point to another, flipped the canoe over, righted it, climbed back inside, bailed if necessary and then finished the race. This type of race also displayed the crew's ability to handle their craft. Some tribes have river canoe races with an innovative "outboard" canoe. And of course today, there is quite a canoe race circuit for our present day canoe races, many of which are held in conjunction with annual tribal celebrations. All of the racing canoes have names.