

## Canoe Crossing

On the 4<sup>th</sup> of July it was pouring rain. Thunder and lightning drummed through the howling wind. Out of the mist far up the lake a fleet of canoes paddled into view with a boat of border guards keeping an eye on them.



It was the 20<sup>th</sup> annual canoe crossing of Lake Osoyoos by Okanogan people whose heritage stretches much further back than the invisible border line. Salmon still swim the Columbia and Okanogan rivers to Lake Osoyoos and beyond. Every spring and again in the fall, these natives and the salmon gather to renew their lives and their bonds. That tradition might have been forgotten except for the persistence of the ancestors and a dream. A native woman in Penticton dreamed that she was laying on the shore of Okanogan Lake. People were rowing by who were known to her, but the dreamer felt left out. (Okanogan ancestors were usually buried beside bodies of water.)

When this dream was presented to tribal elders, they decided to act on it. In 2002 a gathering of 50 canoes paddled to Lake Osoyoos from Penticton on the north and Brewster on the south. At the same time horse riders followed the same route on land. This reenactment of traditional gatherings has been going on for the last 20 years. It pre-dates the renewed canoe gatherings at Kettle Falls by 17 years.

Long dugout canoes were not present in 2002, but they were front and center this last July 4<sup>th</sup>. In the Okanogan Valley, cottonwood trees make the best dugouts, unlike cedar on the coast or Ponderosa Pine near Kettle Falls. There were several cottonwood canoes at this event, testimony to the resurgence of canoe carving, especially among young people in the Upper Columbia Tribes.

The nasty weather highlighted the persistence it takes to keep these traditions alive. I was surprised by how much the border patrol is involved. I asked about the canoe crossing as

I was coming south through the American border and the crossing guards not only knew about it but also knew that the canoes were on their way. Even more impressive in the pouring rain were the guards themselves helping erect canopies to give us all some shelter from the storm. They were invited to share in the feast.

A substantial array of food awaited the paddlers, fried chicken, fruit salad and even tacos. All was prepared by the welcoming party, and everyone was welcome. The first dibs went to the paddlers themselves. But before the celebration could get underway, a prayer was said in thanks for the food and everyone's efforts. Herman Edwards led the prayer. He and Arnold Marchand had helped organize the first crossing in 2002.

Perhaps it was ironic that the canoes landed at Veterans Park on the south end of Lake Osoyoos on American Independence Day. But it could not be more fitting. Declaring the continued unity of the Okanogan Tribe with members on both sides of the border is a very independent assertion. And although it is more about the return of the salmon than rejecting the king of England, it is not out of step with a long history of Native Americans fighting for our whole country.

A highly decorated amphibious personnel assault ship, the U.S.S. Okanogan, kept the county's name at the forefront of WWII, Korea and Vietnam. Crew member, Joe Marchand, was one of the last surviving crewmen and helped organize the U.S.S. Okanogan crewmember association. Okanogan tribal member, Earl "One Lung" McClung was the most outstanding hero of the paratroopers in the 101<sup>st</sup> Airborne Infantry, "Easy Company". The book and eventually the movie, Band of Brothers, was based on the record of these soldiers. So, Veterans Park was indeed a proper site for the canoe crossing.

The 4<sup>th</sup> of July is also the occasion of the annual Chesaw Rodeo. I passed through Chesaw the day before and it was as quiet as ever. But crowds did show up on July 4<sup>th</sup> despite the inclement weather. Actually, I'll bet that there were plenty of Native Americans at that event as well. When America works, we all keep our traditions alive.