



Cathlapotle

Cultural Resources at Ridgefield National Wildlife Refuge

Life on Yakaitl-Wimakl

The Chinook People have made the Columbia River their home for thousands of years. The Great River, Yakaitl-Wimakl as they called it, provided sustenance through its bounty. From its depths they gathered salmon, sturgeon, and other fish. It was a liquid highway over which their canoes, laden with trade goods, moved from the coast to the interior. Its wetlands and floodplains teemed with wildlife which furnished everything they needed from food, to shelter, to clothing, to the tools they used every day.

Today, on a river greatly altered by dams and development, a remnant of that rich wetland habitat still remains at Ridgefield National Wildlife Refuge. And there, amidst the thousands of geese, ducks, cranes, eagles, and other migratory birds who pass through the Refuge each year, an ancient Chinook town site pays silent tribute to the generations of people who called it home.

What's in a Name?

Cathlapotle is actually a misnomer. The archaeological site on Ridgefield National Wildlife Refuge is not “the town of Cathlapotle,” but more accurately, “a town of the Cathlapotle People.” Lewis and Clark, on their historic voyage down the Columbia River in 1805, identified it as a large village of the “Quathlapotle Nation.” While there is evidence that its inhabitants themselves called it Nahpooitle, over the years the true name has been obscured in an historical haze and the site has come to be called simply “Cathlapotle.”

Lewis and Clark described their first encounter with the Cathlapotle People as they passed the town on November 5, 1805:

“I observed on the Chanel which passes on the Star'd Side of this Island a short distance above its lower point is Situated a large village, the front of which occupies nearly 1/4 mile fronting the Chanel, and closely connected, I counted 14 houses (Quathlapotle nation) in front here the river widens to about 1-1/2 miles. Seven canoes of Indians came out from this large village to view and trade with us, they appeared orderly and well disposed, they accompanied us a few miles and returned back.”

This “large village” was in fact one of largest on the River, with an estimated 900 inhabitants as recorded by Lewis and Clark when they returned to trade and visit on March 29, 1806. Clark went on to describe the particulars of their trading:

“at 3 oClock P.M. we arrived at the Quathlapotle village of 14 Houses on main Shore to the N.E. side of a large island. those people in their habits manners and customs differ but little from those of the Clatsops and others below. here we exchanged our deer skins killed yesterday for dogs and purchased others to the number of 12 for provisions for the party, as the deer flesh is too poore for the men to subsist on and work as hard as is necessary. i also purchased a sea



An ancient hearth that once lay in the center of a cedar plankhouse emerges from the earth.



Illustration by Charles Frank

*otter robe. we purchased
wappatoe and some pashaquar
roots. gave a Medal of the small
size to the principal chief.”*

The Expedition camped that night at a “butifull grassy place” about a mile upstream from Cathlapotle, a site on the Refuge known today as Wapato Portage. Like Cathlapotle, Wapato Portage was occupied for many generations before Euro-Americans arrived in the Pacific Northwest. But for the Chinook People, the arrival of the “Suyapee” or upside-down face as the bearded foreigners were called, signaled the end of a way of life as epidemics swept down the river and decimated the native population. Survivors were displaced by settlers and dispersed to the reservations of other Tribes in the region.

Today, the descendants of the Cathlapotle and other Chinook People are unified in the Chinook Tribe. Despite a long and well-documented presence on the lower Columbia River, the Tribe is still involved in an effort to secure federal acknowledgment. Under the layers of leaves and dirt, Cathlapotle hides a stockpile of information about how their ancestors lived, and ate, and worked. The Tribe has combined what is learned through scientific study of Cathlapotle with the lore and customs passed down through the generations – both from

within the Tribe and from outside observers – to assemble the puzzle pieces of the past.

Studying the Past

The ongoing archaeological study of Cathlapotle is the result of a partnership between the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, the Chinook Tribe, and Portland State University (PSU) which was initiated in 1991. Research has focused on gathering data about sedentary complex hunter-gatherer culture through archaeological evidence of social organization, complex technology, environmental manipulation, and intensive practices of food production. In plain English this means that archaeologists have excavated the site to learn more about how the Chinook People who lived there interacted with their environment and how they found sustenance in the plant and animal resources around them.

During three summers of excavation, visitors to the site watched as PSU field school students uncovered the foundations of cedar plankhouses and the activity areas associated with daily life. The largest of the house depressions at Cathlapotle is some 200 feet by 45 feet while the smallest is 60 feet by 30 feet. At least four are divided into compartments, as Lewis and Clark described in their notes.

Laboratory analysis of the data collected in the field is ongoing. The deep deposits contain a rich record of life on the river before Euro-American contact and illustrate the effects of contact on technology. As glass trade beads appeared, for example, metals became common and bone tools began to disappear. Food remains in the form of bones and plant fossils suggest a broad and intense subsistence economy which utilized both wetland and upland resources.

Sharing What We’ve Learned

Out of this research has evolved an outreach program targeting the populations of the Portland-Vancouver metropolitan area and the rural community of Ridgefield. The *Discover Cathlapotle!* environmental and heritage education kit

was developed for grades three through six. It includes artifact replicas made by a Chinook artist, samples of raw materials, multimedia references, and a teacher’s guide with background information and lesson plans. Each school year approximately 1000 students learn about the past in their community through the kit.

The ultimate goal of the Cathlapotle Project is to work with partners to develop an interpretive center where the artifact collection and the data gathered from excavation will be curated and interpreted as near to the site as possible. A full-scale replica of a Chinook-style plankhouse which will serve as an outdoor classroom is scheduled for completion by Autumn of 2004.

The Past through the Eyes of a Poet

The late Chinook poet Ed Nielsen visited the excavation on a warm summer day in 1995. The poem inspired by his visit, excerpted below, is a celebration of the discoveries archaeologists at Cathlapotle have made about his people’s culture:

*“... In the shadows of trees
students of Archaeology
bring to present light
the past people’s living
These are My People’s
Lives buried in this
Sacred Land, Sacred Soil!
This is the Chinookan History
coming to a very different
Time’s sight
green tree limbed
shadow summered light
in the digs, ridges
of long extinct fires
soil shadows
layers of debris
we stand in this place
of past living
but life is here again
The Chinookan History is once again
given back to Us! ...”*

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February 2003