

Tribe celebrates return of Kalapuyan canoe

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By Ron Karten

Smoke Signals staff writer

The public gifting of the Willamette Heritage Center at Mission Mill's Kalapuya shovel-nose river canoe took place on Friday, Sept. 16.

The organization wasn't giving the canoe back, Heritage Center President Ross Stout told some 30 people assembled in the Grand Ronde Governance Center Atrium, "because it really belongs to the Confederated Tribes of Grand Ronde ancestors, who built it. It has always belonged to the Tribe."

In March, the Heritage Center's Board of Directors voted to repatriate the canoe it had received as a gift in 1980 to the Grand Ronde Tribe. Since then, it appeared in the Grand Ronde Canoe Journey exhibit held at the Heritage Center in April through May of this year.

The canoe is arguably the oldest existing Native canoe in Oregon. Undated but probably pre-contact, it was found when the riverbank washed away in a flood on the Santiam River near Tangent, according to the original donor.

"This is a time when many wrongs are being set right," said Grand Ronde Tribal Chairwoman Cheryle A. Kennedy. With this gift, she added, "Healing continues for both of us. It is an honorable, righteous deed."

"It wasn't just this canoe coming home," said Bobby Mercier, Tribal member and Language and Culture specialist for the Tribe. "This gift gave us carvers a push to carve this style of canoe again."

And the Tribal carvers did just that in the run up to the recent exhibit. "Two canoes have come out of it," Mercier added.

"I feel pretty emotional about this," said Heritage Center board member Gwen Carr. "I didn't think I would, but in this setting."

The setting, in the Atrium lobby of the Governance Building, included the glass case given to the Tribe with the canoe, fitted with sand at the bottom to support the vessel. The case was designed by Heritage Center board member Ed Austin, who is a

professional museum exhibit designer, and funded at a cost of some \$10,000 by William and Judy Meiers of Salem, Heritage Center supporters.

"It was a challenging item to exhibit," said Tribal member and Cultural Collections Coordinator Khani Schultz, who organized the event.

Last year, then-Tribal Council Secretary Kathleen Tom, with Tribal Council blessing, joined the Heritage Center when it combined with Mission Mill to form a new entity. Tom joined the board to express the Tribe's interest in the canoe at a time when the newly combined historical center was ready to part with certain holdings.

"Your generosity was overwhelming," Tom said.

The Tribe "forged a partnership" with the Willamette Heritage Center, Kennedy said previously, "to bring back a culture that many thought was gone."

"It meant a lot to us that the canoe would go back to its original owners," said Peter Booth, Heritage Center Executive Director.

"We've been waiting for an opportunity for this canoe to be shown to the world," said Stout.

Drummers for the event were Tribal members Bobby Mercier, Brian Krehbiel, Travis Mercier and Marcus Gibbons, and Siletz Tribal member Kyle Towner.

Schultz thanked Tribal maintenance men Kyle Rohde (her son) and Soren McCallister, who "did a great job," she said. "Without their helping hands with transport and set up, we could not have done the wonderful display."

In a gift exchange, the Tribe presented Heritage Center leaders with a Tribally-made canoe paddle, and the Heritage Center presented Tribal organizers of the event with original bobbins from Mission Mill.

"We're grateful to have been its custodian," said Stout, "and now we can return it."