



Danny Marshall, Chairman of the Steilacoom Tribe, enjoys the company of his granddaughter.

Steilacoom Tribe Fights for Recognition While Working to Preserve History

By Beth Agnew

Centuries before Lafayette Balch and Nathaniel Orr set foot in Steilacoom, it was home to the Steilacoom Tribe. There are currently more than 800 members of the Steilacoom Tribe, a Steilacoom Tribal Cultural Center and Museum and decades of tribal and government documentation. Carbon dating shows that the Steilacoom Tribe was living in the Chambers Creek area as early as the fifteenth century. According to the federal government's recent ruling, however, the Tribe doesn't officially exist.

In addition to the Steilacoom Tribe, there are currently three other federally non-recognized tribes in Washington: the Chinook, the Dumamish and the Snohomish, who just filed a lawsuit. Regarding the attempt to gain federal recognition, which has spanned half a century, Danny Marshall, Chairman of the Steilacoom Tribe, explains, "Where everything fell apart was that they asked us to trace genealogy to 1854. They asked the non-recognized tribes to submit documentation that the recognized tribes couldn't provide. Historically, the Tribe's story is that we've been here since before the time of the Great Flood," Danny relates.

"The heroes of the story tied their canoes to the highest peak," Danny continues. "It's what became a big sand mine." He adds that at one time the mine, which was alongside Chamber's Creek, was the largest producing sand mine in the world. The peak has since diminished, and "has changed dramatically in the last ten to 15 years," Danny observes.

The Steilacoom Tribal Cultural Center and Museum preserves the tribe's rich history and culture. Exhibits of jewelry, clothing and baskets showcase the work of the Steilacoom Tribe, as well as those of other tribes in the Puget Sound area. There is also a collection of historic photographs. The Center's gift shop offers many Native American items, including dreamcatchers, jewelry and baskets that were handmade by Danny's aunt.

"One of my mom's cousins actually used to travel all over the western states teaching people how to do baskets," Danny says. "When I was pretty young, he taught me." Traditionally, some grasses were used as the material for the baskets. "The big thing we use now is Scotch Broom," he laughs. Outside the center, "a traditional plant garden is springing up around the sign up front," Danny enthuses.

The new garden will include plants used for baskets and medicine, as well as a flower that was prevalent in Steilacoom and helped give the town its name. "The easiest way to understand any of the tribal names is that they just mean people," he explains. "They have something to do with geographic features."

The Steilacoom Tribe's efforts to safeguard its culture extend beyond the walls of the center. "We did a drum-making class," Danny comments. "We did a youth canoe project, where we did some paddle carving. My youth project this summer will be a story-telling project. I love telling stories." He's eager for younger people to take up the art of story-telling.

There has been a renewed enthusiasm for canoeing in the

last decade, Danny observes. "It has grown so greatly that it has almost been looked on as something that never went away. They started carving them again, and traveling together as tribes." He adds, "We had a canoe landing that brought in tribes from all over at Sunnyside Beach.

One of the most important things we've done besides crafts is to bring back the language," Danny continues. "Even my grandmother, who attended a public school in the Puget Sound area, was beaten with a stick for speaking her native language. My mother grew up in the generation that didn't hear the language spoken," Danny recalls. "It was a group process to get the language back."

Meanwhile, the Tribe is planning improvements for the center, which occupies the original Oberlin Church building that was erected in 1903. Those changes come with a rather large price tag. "Right now, our biggest project is trying to get the front door open," Danny states. Bracing was installed to stabilize the gable on the front porch of the center, where the front entrance is located. "The last time we checked on the front porch," Danny remarks, "we had estimates from \$20,000 to \$40,000."

Another challenge is that the building's siding won't hold paint. Regarding the cost of re-siding, Danny says, "I have no idea." As for funding these projects, the Tribe is checking into a matching funds grant. "Pierce County just started using the hotel tax for historic preservation," Danny

Steilacoom Tribal Cultural Center and Museum 1515 Lafayette Street, Steilacoom 253-584-6308

Open Saturdays 10 to 4; Group Tours available on other days with advance reservations and can also include a Tribal Story Performance. (Use side entrance.)

Ways to Show Support for the Steilacoom Tribal Center and Museum:

Visit the center, attend the tribe's fundraisers, when a gift is needed, don't forget the beautiful items in the center's gift shop, buy some delicious fry bread at their booth in front of the center on the Fourth of July, make a tax-deductible donation and/or volunteer at the Center.



According to Danny Marshall, Chairman of the Steilacoom Tribe, the quest to establish federal recognition began in the 1950s, when the tribe sent a letter to the President. The letter was returned, as the government stated that it was creating the Federal Acknowledgment Process to review requests for federal recognition.

The Tribe has continued to follow the government's process through the subsequent years. Now that the Department of the Interior has decided against recognizing the tribe, their efforts have come full circle, as the next step is to once again write to the President and Congress.

Regarding the decades spent trying to establish federal recognition, Danny comments, "Growing up in high school and college looking into the future, I would never have thought it wouldn't be settled. I never thought it would be a multi-generational process."

He adds, "I've been involved in it since 1976. We were patient." Most people would probably agree that it must be difficult to be patient now that so many years have transpired, and Danny's mother has died before seeing her tribe recognized by the government.

comments. "They've just opened the process for a new grant. That includes a match, so we'll have to get the match money to put it to use."

In order to raise the matching funds, "We're talking about another concert in August or September," Danny says. There will also be a story-telling fundraiser. The hope is that the story of the Steilacoom Tribal Cultural Center and Museum will have a happy ending.



The gift shop features baskets handmade by Danny Marshall's aunt.