

# The Cowlitz Indians in Cowlitz Corridor

By Judith W. Irwin

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## DISPOSSESSED

Useful for storage, cooking (with hot stones added) or carrying, the tightly coiled and imbricated Cowlitz hard basket with its subtly curved sides has been a prized trade item for many years.



THE COWLITZ INDIANS were originally considered to be "a large and powerful Salishan tribe." Because they were an interior tribe (that is, their territory did not open onto a large body of water), they were more cohesive than other Salish groups on the coast and Columbia River, said anthropologist Verne Ray, who has intensively studied the tribe. Conscious of social stratification, they valued cooperation and had a desire for smooth relationships with neighbors. They have been called the blue bloods of southwest Washington, yet they were also known as warlike. One of the earliest accounts describes their swoop downriver to attack a Chinookan village at the mouth of the Cowlitz. Another account describes the unsuccessful effort of war chief Wieno and others to take slaves from a village on Vancouver Island.

Today, though the Cowlitz are scattered, many still remain. Relatively few actually live near the Cowlitz River (perhaps 30 or so families). Most of the 1,400 who belong to the tribe live within the radius of a two-hour drive, a recent poll shows. The tribe's business office, presently in Longview, keeps track of the network of Cowlitz individuals and families living, for the most part, in western Washington. Biennial meetings in June and November on Cowlitz Prairie, the tribal heartland, bring them together to renew themselves as Cowlitz as well as to carry on the important business of fighting for their fishing rights, federal recognition and for their own reservation and a Cowlitz tribal center.

Who, then, are the Cowlitz Indians? Why has the Cowlitz tribe not been federally recognized? Who were the

Cowlitz people in the 1800s? How did they live? What resources of the Cowlitz Corridor did they utilize? How have they changed under the impact of explorers, settlers, war, roads, railroads and logging?

Although ethnically unified as a tribal unit by geography, intermarriage and customs, the Cowlitz people are divided into two main groups—the Taidnapam, or Upper Cowlitz, and the Lower Cowlitz. Speaking Salishan like many of their neighbors in the 1800s, the more populous Lower Cowlitz occupied 30 villages dotting the Cowlitz River from present-day Mossyrock southward to within a mile or two of the Columbia River.

Gradually, through intermarriage, the Upper Cowlitz/Taidnapam adopted the Sahaptan language from plateau peoples east of the Cascades. Known for their hunting prowess, the Taidnapam occupied villages east of Mossyrock, camping, as weather permitted, at higher elevations of the Cascade Crest and then a few miles east of the divide on the Tieton River. In addition, the Taidnapam people used trails from the Cascade Crest and Mount Adams to connect with relatives who lived along the Lewis River.

The name Cowlitz means "seeker" in a spiritual sense, according to some Cowlitz living today. *Place Names of Washington* also spells the name as "Tawa-l-litch," which meant "capturing the medicine spirit," referring to the Cowlitz practice of sending their youths to the river's prairies to seek their *tomanawas*, or spirit power.

The earliest historical accounts of the Lower Cowlitz, whose villages began a short distance up the Cowlitz River from the Chinookan villages on the Columbia River, do not begin with Lewis and Clark, but rather with the Astorians of the Pacific Fur Company, who arrived in 1811. One of their first excursions up the Columbia River from Fort Astoria brought them to the 150-foot-high Mount Coffin, the Chinook burial rock studded with canoes outfitted with funeral offerings of clothing and baskets of food. As Alexander

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Henry Cheholtz (far right), son of Chief Cheholtz, with family and friends, c. 1884. Chief Cheholtz was among the Cowlitz people who took advantage of the Indian Homestead Act to claim land in the Cowlitz Corridor.

McKay, Ovid Montigny and three Indian paddlers headed up the Cowlitz River, they were confronted with 20 canoes of Cowlitz Indians intent on war with the village of Chinookan Skilloots at the mouth of the river. The battle was averted by negotiations.

The second engagement between the Cowlitz and non-Indians took place after the North West Company, which had bought out the Pacific Fur Company in 1813, sent trappers and hunters, including Iroquois Indians, up the Cowlitz River. Problems began in 1818 after the Iroquois forced themselves on Cowlitz women. In the ensuing conflict one Iroquois died and two others were wounded. Not realizing that his men were the aggressors, James

Keith, the chief trader, sent Peter Skene Ogden to punish the Cowlitz.

Only with some persuasion did Ogden convince his Cowlitz guide, Chief How How, to lead him to the right village. Once there, the Iroquois, acting against orders, massacred 13 men, women and children, scalping three before they could be stopped. The incident temporarily halted the company's hunting and trapping on the Cowlitz River.

**S**IMON PLAMONDON, a young French Canadian whose boyhood friends had been Indians, was working for the North West Company. He traveled up the Cowlitz River and was captured by the influential Chief Schanewa, whose village was on Cowlitz Prairie. Plamondon married the chief's daughter Veronica, who gave birth to four children. It is from this family that many Cowlitz today trace their lineage.

This opening into Cowlitz country provided the Hudson's Bay Company,

once merged with the North West Company, an opportunity to trade with Chief Schanewa, who controlled fur traffic through the Cowlitz Corridor.

Something of the Cowlitz's economic and political organization before the tragic epidemic can be learned from the life of Chief Schanewa, reputed to be one of the most powerful chiefs in the lower Columbia District. Six feet tall and an excellent hunter, the chief had seven wives through whom he made alliances with many other villages and tribes. Evidence indicates that he possessed exemplary portions of determination, persuasiveness, courage and benevolence—characteristics expected in headmen whose influence among peers stemmed from good judgment more than from power.

Pacific Northwest Indians grouped themselves more by family networks and villages than by tribe. Chief Schanewa's strategically placed village at the big bend in the Cowlitz River made it possible for him to become a "man of authority among the Chehalis,



*Simon Plamondon's life spanned 1800 to 1900. He was the local Indian agent for the Cowlitz during the Indian Wars. Some of his many descendants, bearing Cowlitz blood, have served in the 20th century as tribal leaders.*

Chinook, Multnomah, White River, Lummi, Skagit, Tulalip and Quinault, among others," noted Del McBride, a Schanewa descendant and curator emeritus of the State Capital Museum.

The epidemic of 1829-30, called the "gray" or "intermittent" fever and thought to be a virulent Asian flu, was brought in by the American ship *Owyhee* under Captain John Domines. The traditional native treatment for illnesses—the sweat bath followed by a plunge into a cold stream—doomed most Indians. Hudson's Bay Company Governor George Simpson said three-

fourths of those in the Fort Vancouver vicinity died. Dr. John McLoughlin of the HBC thought the number to be more like seven-eighths after several summers of the fever's recurrence. Many of the Cowlitz fled toward the coast, according to Simon Plamondon, "abandoning the dead and dying to the birds and beasts of prey." Villages had become a harrowing sight. Joseph Meek estimated that 500 Indians remained on the Cowlitz River. These were "warlike, but friendly to whites," he said.

In 1832-33 the HBC laid out the Nisqually Farm, where the Cowlitz came to trade. The company gave Simon Plamondon permission to develop a farm on Cowlitz Prairie and in 1838 initiated a company farm nearby, which employed many Cowlitz Indians in production and river transportation. The inauguration of the Catholic Mission was in small part stimulated by the Cowlitz people's interest. Although soon disillusioned, Father Blanchet was at first impressed by these "poor people [who] showed him a great desire to be enlightened."

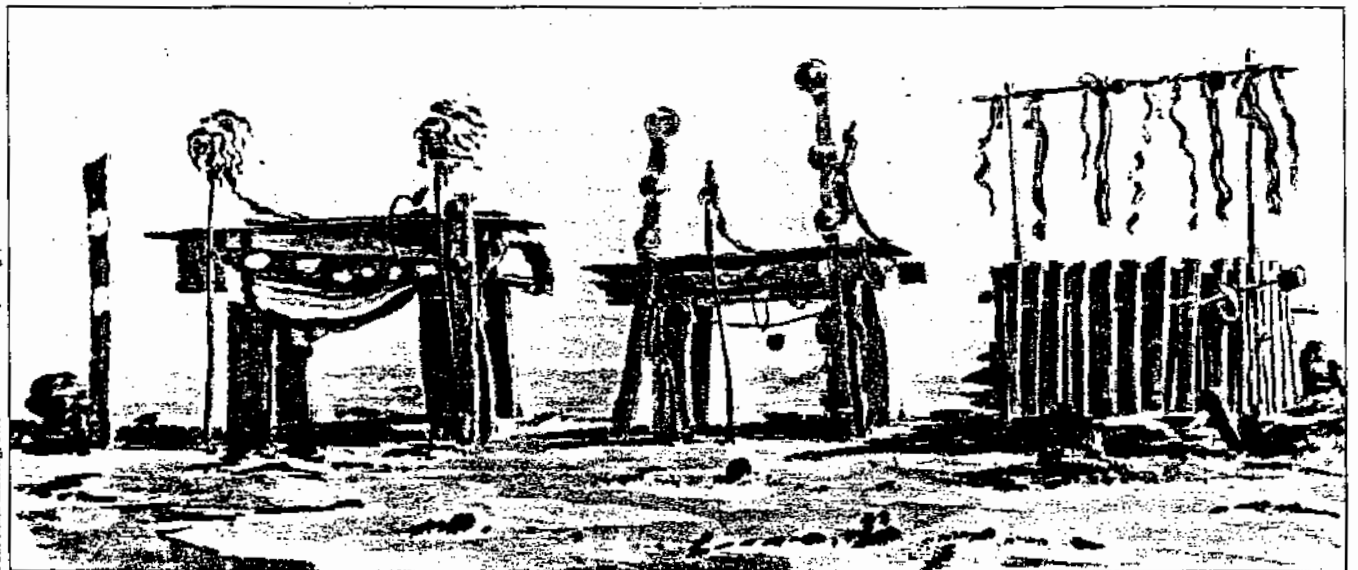
**E**STIMATES OF THE Cowlitz people's character in these years varied with the point of view. Governor Simpson saw them as inoffensive and industrious agricultural workers. The Catholic

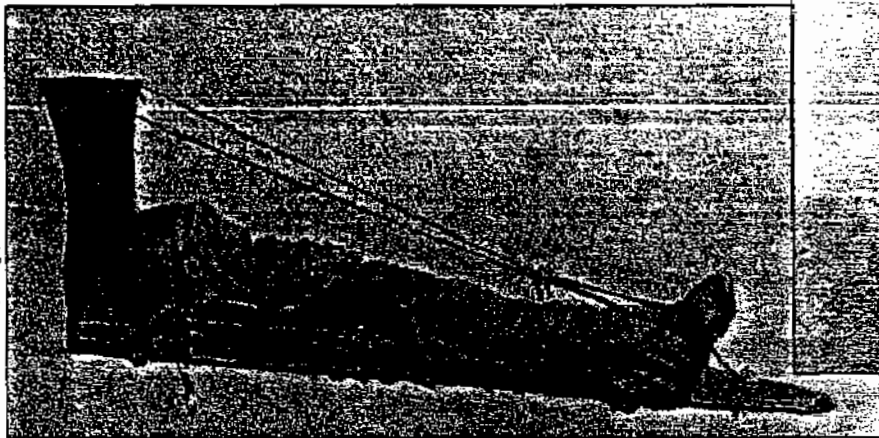
priests condemned them for laziness and unwillingness to plant their own potatoes as well as for their superstitions and reluctance to abandon traditional beliefs. American navy lieutenant Charles Wilkes admired their "free and easy carriage on horseback" and their air of freedom, betokened by

*"[a] few ribbands and cock's feathers that . . . gave them a flaunting kind of air, . . . a species of self-esteem that was not unpleasing, and betokened independence and want of care, in good keeping with their mode of life.*

Ethnographic and anthropological studies on the Cowlitz in the 1800s are in short supply. Beyond the casual accounts of travelers and observers, John Dunn's history, published in 1844, offers some observations of their habits and customs. Usually reliable in his studies of Northwest tribes, pioneer ethnographer George Gibbs limited his 1855 ethnographic report on the

*To transport their dead to the spirit world, the Cowlitz people placed decorated burial canoes or boxes on platforms or in trees. The Cowlitz bored holes in items added for the deceased spirit to make them useless to the living.*





*These 1847 Paul Kane drawings depict a Cowlitz woman and a Cowlitz baby in the process of having its head flattened. The sloping forehead was traditionally a sign of status. The child's necklaces of dentalium and beads also suggest a family of wealth.*

Cowlitz to very misleading second- and third-hand opinions.

In this century Edward Curtis interviewed Ka'ktsama' (Esther Millet), who provided useful detail about Cowlitz villages on the lower Cowlitz River, while Melville Jacobs and Thelma Adamson (1934) separately recorded Cowlitz myths. Jacobs also included detailed information from William Yoke and others on how the Upper Cowlitz utilized their river habitat—fishing, hunting, root digging and berrying.

Trading or visiting, both the Lower and Upper Cowlitz used the rivers and trails to reach other tribes. Trade goods included slaves, horses, dried camas and wapato roots, dried berries and meats, hides and furs, including the highly valued mountain goat hair that was woven into blankets, and wool dog hair used for the same purpose. Also prized were the Cowlitz women's watertight baskets, thought by some specialists to be the most "perfect imbricated baskets with more stitches in the same space and also more beautiful designs" than baskets anywhere else. Among the best known basket-makers, Mary Kiona, daughter of William Yoke, reportedly lived to be well over 100 years old, from about 1855 to 1970. A niece of Chief Schanewa, she "was like an empress. She knew who she was" and knew the importance of her work, said author Martha Hardy.

In addition to trading, the Cowlitz avidly exchanged goods through games such as bone gambling, horse racing and "fairs or expositions," as Thomas Nelson Strong described their great

competitive gatherings. The Cowlitz would race horses anywhere, said old-timer Melvin Core. Gambling games were an important and ancient social institution, explained Schanewa descendant Tanna Beebe. Gambling was a trial of superiority as well as an investment opportunity. Fairs and races were held near present-day Longview as well as on Cowlitz Prairie.

**A**N IMPORTANT MEANS of transportation was their blunt-nosed canoe, designed to go over rapids. The Cowlitz were experts in felling the red cedar with fire and stone tools, and in shaping the dugout to about a three-quarter-inch thickness. They then steamed it to widen the sides. These dugouts were used to traverse the dangerous and often tree-blocked Cowlitz River, which in its old bed was much faster and deeper than now. Early settler Ezra Meeker described how easily Cowlitz boatmen skimmed the water "with astonishing rapidity."

Canoes or rectangular boxes set on platforms or into trees were also transport for the dead into the afterworld. In 1847 artist Paul Kane sketched several burial canoes with the deceased's valuables therein: shell money, coins, beads, rings, colorful cloth strips, blankets, baskets, kettles, horn bows and spoons, bows and arrows, paddles, spears and horn picks. Such was the equipment souls would need on their journey to the spirit world.

Before leaving Chief Kiscox's hospitable village on Cowlitz Prairie, Kane

painted Caw-wacham holding her infant in its head-flattening ski'in, or cradle board. He was well aware that her reluctance to sit for him arose from the Cowlitz belief that such a portrait

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stole the soul. When he returned to the village two and a half months later and mentioned her name, no one would speak to him. He soon came to understand that she had died and in pronouncing her name he had been disrespectful and broken a taboo. He also knew that her relatives might seek vengeance, believing him to be the cause of her death. By canoe, he traveled all night toward Fort Vancouver.

In search of *tomanawas*, or spirit power, Cowlitz youths reaching adolescence went on fasting quests seeking visions of a spirit guide, guardian, or helper in such undertakings as hunting, fishing, felling trees, shaping canoes, making baskets or healing the sick. During winter ceremonies dancers pounded their long carved sticks upon the floor and ceiling while singing their *tomanawas* songs. The main purpose of

the *tomanawas* ceremony, said James Swan, was religious. Participants sought to avert evil and assure a supply of food for ongoing life. Through all their senses they also "tuned in" for physical and spiritual survival.

In winter the Cowlitz lived near the fishing streams in well-built cedar plank longhouses with gabled roofs. Five to fifteen families shared a longhouse and the warmth of the small fires that glowed at intervals near bunk-style

runs called them back to set fish traps and weirs in the streams below.

**A**S MORE EURO-AMERICAN families arrived looking for productive land, the settlers asked Congress to authorize a territorial government. During the treaty session with territorial governor Isaac Stevens in 1855, the Cowlitz declined to sign away their rights to their village sites, prairies, fishing places and burial grounds, only to be shunted over to the inhospitable Quinault reservation on the coast. The Cowlitz remained on their land but had no reservation of their own.

When war erupted in 1855 between the Indians and the whites, Chief Atwin Stockam, son of Chief Schanewa, was given to understand that the Cowlitz tribe would be given a reservation if the restive Cowlitz warriors remained peaceful. So, instead of joining the militant Yakimas and Klickitats, 300 Cowlitz people were held in a detention camp on the Cowlitz Prairie under Indian agent Simon Plamondon's care. Their men were conscripted into building blockhouses and roads, transporting supplies and scouting, all of which they did with honor.

Despite the settlers' fears, there was not a single depredation or death in the Cowlitz Corridor due to the war. If these Cowlitz—excellent horsemen and riflemen, "intimately acquainted with all the roads, trails and fastnesses of the country"—had become militant, they could have closed the Cowlitz Corridor. This passage between the Coast Range and the Cascades proved to be the only viable supply and information route connecting military headquarters at Olympia and Fort Steilacoom with troops up the Columbia in eastern Washington.

After the fighting was over the roads, bridges and ferries built during

the war to expedite communication and supply transportation through the corridor began to replace Cowlitz boatmen. Upon returning to their homes the Cowlitz people found that their possessions had been destroyed. Some were reduced to trading with the "worst possible class of whites that can infest any country," commented historians Ruby and Brown. The promise made to Chief Atwin Stockam of a Cowlitz reservation in return for cooperation was apparently forgotten.

Settlers assumed that at the war's end all Indians lost their rights, particularly title to the land. One settler wrote:

*[at] the successful culmination of the Indian Wars . . . the question of land titles was settled in this area and the government was recognized as legally owning the land.*

Actually, the Cowlitz had not lost their rights to the land, nor had they treated their land away or been subdued. After the war they returned to feeding themselves and making a living. Families once again returned to the mountains to hunt, pick berries and socialize with relatives and friends before winter.

In the decades following the war the Cowlitz were pressured by settlers to be monogamous in their marriages; to forego using sweat houses and flattening their newborns' heads; and to quit relying on medicine men, going on spirit quests, holding pow-wows and speaking their own language. Some married and moved to reservations: Quinault, Steilacoom, Skokomish, Snohomish and Warm Springs, among others. Many, however, remained in Cowlitz country. They were described in 1870 by the Secretary of Interior as "the most thrifty and industrious" of the tribes he reported on. Yet, that very success was the reason given by the government to deny them recognition and compensation for lands taken.

In the early 1870s, about the time the railroad was being completed through Cowlitz Corridor, many Cowlitz converted to the Indian Shaker church as a way to retain Indian values.

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beds spread with furs along the walls. Mat or board partitions separated family units. The windowless lodges had roof slots that allowed smoke to escape.

Story-telling and ceremonials occupied their winter evenings. Days were spent carving, making baskets and mats, dressing skins, sewing clothing and weaving blankets.

In the springtime families moved to the prairies to dig camas bulbs and wapato, taken from lakes and ponds, which provided their "flour" and "potatoes." As the different berries ripened Cowlitz families trekked toward the mountains. While men hunted small and large game, women picked and dried blackberries, blueberries and huckleberries.

Camping was equally a social institution and a food-gathering expedition. Lower Cowlitz and Taidnapam families met in the mountains and camped in a circle with relatives and friends from other tribes until fall fish

*The blunt bow of the Cowlitz river canoe permitted boatmen to maneuver in shallow water or over gravel bars.*



Special Collections, WSFS



*This 1916 photo is believed to be of Cowlitz basket-maker Mary Kiona's brother and sister-in-law, possibly with some of Kiona's basketry, for which she was famous.*

When the Indian Homestead Act passed in 1884 a number of Upper and Lower Cowlitz took out papers for homesteads—Willie Youckton, John Kimpus, Katie Tillikish, Chief Cheloltz and John Ike Kinswa, for example. Many found jobs: the women doing housecleaning and laundry, the men working on farms and log drives, and in the woods and sawmills. Most continued using traditional skills—making baskets, picking berries, hunting, trapping and fishing.

When the hop fields opened near Olequa, whole families worked and played in that country-fair atmosphere on the Cowlitz River. As in the past, they intermarried with members of other tribes and with whites. Around the turn of the century special incentives of land and tribal membership on the Yakima reservation enticed many Cowlitz to join kin and friends there.

Those who remained in Cowlitz country maintained tribal ties under

their aging Chief Atwin Stockam. Before he died in 1912 at more than 100 years of age, he looked across Cowlitz Prairie and boomed out his frustration to a settler friend:

*Long ago all this land belonged to Indians—salmon in the chuck [river], mowich [deer] and moollok [elk] in the hills. Then white men come. Atwin their friend. Now all this land belong to white man.*

**T**HE TRIBE REORGANIZED in 1912 and selected a chairman, instead of a chief, to head an elected tribal council. At that time they began patiently and systematically seeking compensation and recognition.

They collected money and sent Frank Iyall to Washington, D.C. to lobby for them. When their bill finally passed both houses of Congress in 1928, it was vetoed by President Coolidge because they had become successful farmers and formed no distinct class as they lived among the non-Indians, were voting citizens and were "industrious, self-supporting and reasonably intelligent." It was as if the officials thought the Cowlitz were asking for a

handout instead of the right to be justly acknowledged as an enduring tribal entity and compensated for lands taken.

They have persisted in their efforts by helping to organize the Small Tribes of Western Washington. After World War II they presented a land compensation claim. The Indian Claims Commission offered a sum that was a fraction of the land's worth: \$1,550,000 for 1,790,000 acres, or about 90 cents an acre. Tribal members knew the timberland alone was worth about \$30,000 an acre. Despite their anger and frustration the majority agreed to accept the settlement, which earns interest until a plan for distribution and use of the award can be developed.

Today the 1,400 enrolled members of the Cowlitz Indian Tribe continue Indian observances related to child-rearing, religion and food, especially salmon. Many still fish and hunt. Some follow Indian practices in rituals, weddings and burials. They maintain kinship networks and meet semiannually on Cowlitz Prairie to learn more about their own heritage and decide how to promote their case for acknowledgment before the federal government. As a tribe they look forward to owning a place on which to build their own tribal center and become more visible as descendants of the original people of the Cowlitz River.

Once recognized, the Cowlitz tribe, now largely absorbed in trying to meet ever-shifting federal acknowledgment guidelines, can turn its energies to the no-less-arduous business of retrieving their culture and displaying their pride in being what they are—a modern Indian tribe successfully integrated with the white culture but still very Cowlitz Indian in heart and tribal life. When the Cowlitz Indians gain that federal recognition, southwest Washington will regain a part of its heritage.

*Judith W. Irwin, a retired English teacher at Lower Columbia College, is completing a book on the Cowlitz Indians. This essay was originally commissioned by the Cowlitz County Historical Society for part of an exhibit on the Cowlitz Corridor.*