



OPENING THE DOOR TO THE CATHLAPOTLE PLANKHOUSE: *A Lewis and Clark Bicentennial Legacy for the Tribes and Public*

Traditional Chinookan drumming and singing resonated across Ridgefield National Wildlife Refuge, along the Columbia River in southwest Washington, on March 29, 2005, signaling the opening of the door to the Cathlapotle Plankhouse to the public. The event offered a stirring link to the Corps of Discovery, which 199 years earlier on this date visited the Chinookan town of Cathlapotle, located about a mile away from the new plankhouse. Lewis and Clark wrote extensive descriptions of the large wooden houses and their inhabitants in their journals.

Beyond the bicentennial, the replica plankhouse offers a connection between the 21st century and the Chinookan society that prospered for thousands of years on the Lower Columbia River. It allows visitors to visualize the size and grandeur of the original native houses. Its refuge location also allows visitors to see the original Native American landscape, complete with dramatic, commanding buildings overlooking a lake that evokes the original riverbank location of Chinookan towns. Plants and animals once used by inhabitants of Cathlapotle for food, clothing and building materials are still present on Ridgefield.

Today, the original town of Cathapotle is an invaluable archeological site, located on the refuge.



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The original plankhouses long ago decayed into the ground, but 15 years of archaeological work at Cathlapotle by Dr. Ken Ames and his students from Portland State University have revealed substantial information about the houses and daily lives of the inhabitants.

Through cleansing and blessing ceremonies, Chinook tribal members have invited the spirits of their ancestors to bring the new plankhouse to life. The tribe plans to use the plankhouse for ceremonies, gatherings and cultural renewal. The refuge also will have the plankhouse open to the public and school groups as a classroom to learn about the natural and cultural heritages of the refuge.

The Cathlapotle plankhouse was built with \$575,000 in grants and donations from nearly 50 project supporters. It serves as an outstanding example of how federal agencies can partner with Native American tribes, educational institutions, non-profit organizations and the community to achieve a project that would never be possible if the agency relied only on appropriated funds. The U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service partnered with the Chinook Tribe, the Lewis and Clark Bicentennial Committee of Vancouver/Clark County (Wash.), and Portland State University to build the plankhouse.

The unique vision and scope of this project attracted more than 100 volunteers who turned its construction into a labor of love. Every one of the structure's wall planks was hand-split from cedar logs. Every one of the nearly 250 logs had its bark peeled by hand. Now that the plankhouse is open to the public, other volunteers are creating baskets, mats, and other furnishings to resemble what Lewis and Clark might have experienced.

Volunteers are training to act as docent tour guides and interpreters. By November, Ridgefield Refuge hopes to have the plankhouse open on a regular basis and host a wide range of programs.



For more information, visit www.plankhouse.org or contact:

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