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# Origins and Outcomes: Tribal Canoe Journeys

By Philip H. Red Eagle, Salish-Dakota



*The Squaxin Island Tribe canoe SWISSALOO, carved by George Krise, crests on a wave en route to Suquamish during the Paddle to Nisqually in 2016. Photo by Patrick Braese, Squaxin.*

In the following very personal story, I will talk about a Native maritime cultural and education movement that I had the opportunity to be a part of, and one that I had a hand in shaping, during the last 25 years. I will also talk briefly about two men, Tom Heidlebaugh, and Emmett Oliver, of Quinault ancestry, who led it from its beginning. It would truly take a book to talk about either of them and tell you about their lives. I can only offer only few words here, and they are not nearly enough.

Tom told me many things that I now repeat to others when we have time to sit and talk. He filled my head with ideas, as if it were an empty vessel that needed to be filled to the brim. I listened.

We had met in the summer of 1992. My friend, and former student advisor at the University of Washington, Professor Ken Jackson, told me one day that there was a man that I had to meet. I asked him why, and he replied, “Because, you talk the same; you talk about the same things.”

So, I went to meet Tom at the Group Health Hospital the next day. He had just gone through his twelfth cancer surgery. We talked a bit then and he invited me to come and join the The Cedar Tree Institute, and he said that it was dedicated to “re-culturation”. I was curious and joined. We spent the next four years searching for solutions to the problem before us, bringing Native culture back to the people.



*A large crowd gathered, in the top photo, at Golden Gardens Park in Seattle, to welcome the Native canoes and paddlers participating in the original "Paddle to Seattle." The event was a major maritime heritage project of the Washington State Centennial in 1989. Photo: Susan Holland. The photo below shows Mandi Jones, in headdress at left, performing an honoring dance in the bow of the Port Gamble S'Klallam canoe during the landing ceremonies at the park. Photo: Ron Peltier, 1989, courtesy Leslie Lincoln.*

**EMMETT OLIVER**  
**Tribal Leader, Educator**  
**"Paddle to Seattle" Founder**

Emmett Sampson Oliver, one of Washington State's pre-eminent Native leaders, was born on December 2, 1913 in South Bend. He was the son of a Chinook mother and a Cowlitz father. He attended public school in South Bend, and as a boy worked with his father fishing the Willapa River. Later Emmett attended Indian School on the Tulalip Indian Reservation, and the Sherman Institute in California where he excelled in academics, football and track. He then attended Bacone, a two-year Indian college in Oklahoma, later transferring to the University of Redlands in California, where he earned degrees in biology and education. In 1937, Emmett married Georgina Aleita from Isleta Pueblo. Following their marriage, they both were hired as teachers by the Bureau of Indian Affairs and assigned to a school at Acoma Pueblo. In 1942, Emmett was commissioned and served as an ensign in the U.S. Coast Guard. After the war, he received a one-year leave to finish graduate studies at the University of Washington, and later accepted a teaching job at Shelton High School. In 1969, Emmett became interim director of the Indian Student Cultural Center at UCLA, and he later returned to the University of Washington to direct the Indian Student Program. Less than a year later, in 1971, he became Director of Indian Education for the state of Washington. It was in this role that Emmett would begin his involvement in the Native canoe cultural resurgence, to bring the canoe back to his people. His early experience as a paddler in Native racing canoes in the 1920s influenced his idea to develop the "Paddle to Seattle" in 1989, the precursor to the growing canoe movement that followed, Tribal Journeys. Emmett died on March 7, 2016, at the age of 102 years.



life and influence him to create the Paddle to Seattle in 1989, and that that would bring about the canoe movement that followed.

In an interview conducted by Leslie Lincoln in November, 1988, and published in her groundbreaking monograph, "Coastal Salish Canoes," Emmett talked about his role in this development:

*"I've spent a lot of effort and time in trying to arouse awareness of the Native culture being lost. And that probably comes from a personal experience too, and I have traveled so much amongst Indian people who would speak their language very fluently and who knew the English language and yet, I never learned.*

*And so I saw this as one aspect of a culture, perhaps the last one, being lost. Language for the most part is almost extinct except for a few fragments here and there. Canoe-making itself is almost totally lost. We do know and have to recognize that some of the so-called experts of canoe making are Non-Indians who have taken up and in their own right have been very adept at using that. Whereas in the Native culture it's a real threat of being lost. So I think I*

We were constantly on the road to one "rez" [reservation] after another and visited a number of other groups trying to do the same work. I learned on these journeys that Tom was well-traveled. He had worked with the Zapotec people of southern Mexico and spent two years working with some tribes in the barrens of Kenya as a Peace Corps. He knew about tribal culture and structure. He had experienced it.

He and his family moved back to Washington in 1979. In that same year, Tom and his daughter Meroe were in a head-on car collision while Tom took her to summer camp. They both recovered. It was during his recovery that he began working with David Forlines and learned from other elders and teachers including Pansy Hudson, Helen Harrison, Viola Johnson and Lillian Pullen. In the mid-1980s they learned of the request from the State of Washington and Emmett Oliver to be a part of the State Centennial program, receiving a large cedar log to carve into a canoe. Subsequently, in 1989, they traveled to Seattle with three canoes to become part of the Centennial ceremonies in the now famous "Paddle to Seattle."

Emmett was a quietly-driven, haunted man. In his early years as a teenager, he "pulled" [paddled] in the Native racing canoes that had been popular in Puget Sound beginning in the 1920s. It was this experience that would visit him later in

*saw this as something that could be restored. You can appreciate the forest and the big trees and this can become alive again in a canoe." (Endnote 1)*

In the mid-1980s, Emmett had convinced the Governor [Gardner] to support the carving of several canoes to be used in ceremonies for the Centennial program. Not all of the eight canoes that were commissioned were completed and made it to the ceremonies of the "Paddle to Seattle". To increase the number of canoes involved, Emmett asked several Canadian First Nations tribes to expand the Native canoe contingent that would arrive at Golden Gardens Park in Seattle. It was this mix of international canoes, and the people involved in getting them to Golden Gardens, that formed the basis for the canoe resurgence that was to come. It was at Golden Gardens that Frank Brown, a Heiltsuk, woke up everyone with his challenge to travel north to Bella Bella in 1993, for a second Native canoe paddle and journey event.

**Origin of the Canoe Resurgence Movement**

Including the "Paddle to Seattle," there were several subsequent canoe journeys during the early years of the canoe resurgence. It was these journeys, carried out by dedicated people, Native and non-native, who would later make up the core of what would become the "canoe movement",

and subsequently Tribal Journeys. These events would also lay down the foundation for the rules and protocols of the journeys to come.

The big canoe journey of the time was the Journey to Bella Bella in British Columbia. Tom and others would talk of seeing elders coming down to the landing beaches with tears in their eyes. The elders said that they thought they would never see the canoes land on their beaches ever again. This journey took months to plan and complete, and left an indelible mark on those who were involved.

After Bella Bella in 1993, several of us from The Cedar Tree Institute cultural renewal project were struggling with where to go next with our effort, also known as the Potlatch Project. It was at a purifying ceremony on the waterfront at Olympia that Tom and I realized that the canoe itself was the answer to our dilemma. We had wanted to grow our program, but were frozen because our project was in one place from year to year. And although those in our group were dedicated and knowledgeable, we were unable to draw others into our work that we called, "Re-Culturation", or the Restoration Project.

Charlene Krise, a Squaxin, had put together a healing of the waters ceremony for south Puget Sound to take place in Budd Inlet near Washington's capital city. She had gathered four bundles of water containing samples from each of the seven inlets below the Narrows. Charlene requested four canoes, also from the South Sound area, to come to the dock at Percival Landing and retrieve these four bundles. Each of the canoes would then go out into the inlet, take positions in the four directions, East, West, North and South, and then pour the gathered waters into the inlet.

As the canoes arrived, and the first canoe received a water bundle, an idea "light bulb" lit up in Tom's and my heads at the same time. We realized in that moment that Ceremony was the answer. The canoe becomes the



Surrounded by his family, tribal leader Emmett Oliver, center in blue blanket, was honored in 2013 at his 100<sup>th</sup> birthday celebration at the Suquamish Longhouse. Photo: Philip H. Red Eagle.



Curt Hebron (left) and Danny Marshall, Steilacoom, carve a canoe named THE GIFT in 2007 at the Tacoma Sea Scout building on the Foss Waterway. Photo: Philip H. Red Eagle.



Phil Red Eagle (top left) crafting copper ring necklaces in camp at the Paddle to Swinomish in 2011. Photo: Renee Notrica. Chinook tribal leader Tony Johnson's copper ring necklace (top right) in 2014 features two beads on the left, a red bead honors Emmett Oliver, and the copper bead participation in the Cedar Tree Institute. While he was a University of Washington student in the early 1990s, Johnson was part of the Cedar Tree Institute, and now leads the Chinook Canoe Family. Photo: Philip Red Eagle. The butt end of a seasoned beam (bottom left) serves as a working base for making copper ring necklaces, while 50 hanging finished necklaces await presentation to paddlers during a Tribal Journeys ceremony. Bottom left photo: Renee Notrica; bottom right photo: Philip H. Red Eagle.

carrier of the culture. We pour all of our knowledge into these canoes, and when everyone comes together to go on journey, the canoes give that knowledge back. We had our answer: "Journey as ceremony! Canoe as Teacher!"

We began to work on that understanding right after the Healing Ceremony on Budd Inlet. We convinced a few people who had access to canoes to join us and we came up with three canoes.

During the next year Tom and I traveled to several reservations and recruited a few young folks to join us on the first leg of a Youth Paddle called "The Full Circle Canoe Journey." We felt that we should break it into a two-year event, the first year we would travel from the bottom of Hood Canal in the south, and journey to Squamish in west central Puget Sound. The second year we would travel from

Squamish back south to Squaxin Island near Shelton. We completed the circle by closing the gap between Hood Canal and Squaxin Island with a concluding ceremony, in which one of the canoes was taken out of the waters of Puget Sound and "portaged" west to the waters of Hood Canal.

As we traveled, we would conduct a ceremonial landing at each place. At first the distances were short. We felt that it was not about the distance, but about the learning. We would stop at these landing sites and setup camp, prepare meals and sit around campfires and tell traditional stories and sing traditional songs. Joining us at our first camp was Bruce Miller, of Skokomish ancestry. Bruce had been one of our primary advisors. He was a storyteller and had a number of traditional songs in his repertoire as well as being the Smokehouse Keeper at Skokomish. Other teachers were

Tom Jackson, Quileute, Mary McQuillen, Makah, Peggy Deam, Suquamish, Connie McCloud, Puyallup, and others who had already been traveling in the canoes, including a number from the first journey to Bella Bella two years before and also the Paddle to Seattle.

The canoe had allowed us to take our work out to the communities. On the "Full Circle Journey" we worked with families and youth from several Native communities. Our objective was to take the canoe, and its rules and protocols, and work with these communities to restore their traditional practices and culture. We wanted to build Native pride, and structure a knowledge foundation upon which to build a working culture for the future.

On the second year of Full Circle we grew from 50 people to 282 and from the original three canoes to seven. By 1998, on the Power Paddle to Puyallup, we were already over 1,000 participants and 21 canoes.

### Significance of the Copper Ring

I feel that the strongest point in the success of the "Canoe Movement" was the Copper Ring Ceremony. In the early planning stages of the Full Circle Journey we felt that we needed an agreement with those participating in the process. We already had the "Ten Rules of the Canoe" as a foundational guideline, and we needed to build on it. We just needed a device to symbolize that agreement.

Tom felt that it should be a Native American symbol. We thought of several designs and began to visit businesses dealing in metal jewelry. We went to three businesses in Seattle and began to realize that we had a problem; not enough money. Since I have a degree in Metal Design from the U-Dub [University of Washington], I told Tom that I would make a simple copper ring for our device, and he agreed.

We went straight to hardware store and picked up some copper wire and I developed a way of making the ring. We both felt that we should be able to make rings on the beach as we moved from one place to another. We had no idea of how many to make. Once formed, I would make adjustments to the rings with my bare hands as we traveled. Over the years, I added other tools in order to save wear and tear on my hands. I learned a little trick concerning hand pain that first year, stones on the beach. I picked up a stone one day at Birch Bay near Bellingham in 2001 and held it for a while. When I put the stone down among others on the beach, the

### TOM HEIDLEBAUGH Native Canoe Cultural Leader

An inspirational Native leader, Thomas Andrew Heidlebaugh was born in Seattle, Washington, on February 1, 1942, at the outbreak of World War II. His father George was a Harvard educated attorney, and Tom claimed Lenape (Delaware) ancestry on his mother's side.

He graduated from St. Michael's High School in Spokane in 1960, and then attended and later graduated from the University of Washington with a degree in English. Tom then joined the Peace Corps and was sent to Kenya, where

he became an agricultural trainer, working with tribes in the country's barren rural region. In 1965, he met his future wife, Patricia, while on a trip to Nairobi, and they were married two years after he left his Peace Corps service. After the couple returned to the United States in 1968, Tom entered graduate school at Western Washington University, and Patricia gave birth to their daughter Meroe. Following graduation, Tom moved the family to the Makah reservation to teach at Peninsula Community College, and then relocated again to southwest for two teaching jobs. In the summer of 1979, he drove back to Washington to look for work. While driving Meroe to summer camp, their car was hit by an oncoming car, Tom and his daughter were rushed to the hospital, where with help of family and friends, they both slowly recuperated. They resettled and Patricia found work at Tacoma Community College. In 1980, Tom formed the Cedar Tree Institute to support and promote understanding of Native coastal people, values and practices. In 1983 Tom was diagnosed with a cancer which he fought for years, but finally proved fatal. After organizing and presenting several annual Tribal Canoe Journey events, he passed away in his sleep in March, 1997, leaving an enduring legacy of Native cultural accomplishment.



pain was gone. I made many trips to the beach for these stone treatments during the next few years.

From the beginning, Tom would say that the copper ring symbolized unity and strength amongst those participating in the journeys. I wholeheartedly agreed.

Copper has been a symbol of wealth among most coastal nations since early times. Also, the Circle represents unity, cooperation, togetherness and strength amongst many of these nations, and especially those participating in Tribal Journeys.

The Copper Ring Ceremony originated as a part of The Full Circle Journey during the summers of 1995 and 1996, and was conducted by Tom and me. It was designed to be a Contract Ceremony, to insure that everyone on the journey understood the rules, and that each canoe paddling team or "family" had discussed everyone's conduct while on the journey. It is a tradition that the rules of conduct and protocol are agreed upon, and a contract signed, by those participating in any canoe journey.



Clockwise from top left: A Northern style canoe passes a shore-side welcoming crowd at Lummi, near Bellingham, while other canoes and paddlers lined up in the background, await their turn to be greeted and granted permission to land during the 2007 Tribal Journey to Lummi. Photo: Philip H. Red Eagle. Right: In the Swinomish canoe (at right), young Bella Long, her father Tyler, foreground in cedar bark hats, and members of the Cladoosby family, wait to land at Tulalip in 2012. Photo: Philip H. Red Eagle. Lower left: Paddlers raised, canoe family members patiently prepare to land at Olympia's Swantown Marina during the Paddle to Nisqually in 2016. Photo: Wendy Eklund, Carver's Camp.

## THE TEN RULES OF THE CANOE

- Rule One:** Every Stroke We Take Is One Less We Have To Make.
- Rule Two:** There Is To Be No Abuse Of Self, Or Others.
- Rule Three:** Be Flexible.
- Rule Four:** The Gift of Each Enriches All.
- Rule Five:** We All Pull and Support Each Other.
- Rule Six:** A Hungry Person Has No Charity.
- Rule Seven:** Our Experiences Are Not Enhanced through Criticism.
- Rule Eight:** The Journey Is What We Enjoy.
- Rule Nine:** A Good Teacher Always Allows The Student To Learn.
- Rule Ten:** When Given a Choice at All, Be a Worker Bee — Make Honey!
- (Endnote 2)

On each copper ring necklace there are a number of different colored symbolic beads strung on the leather thong, on the left side, over the heart. These beads represent each person's story while participating in each year's journey. It must be noted that these beads do not represent status

and authority, but are rather Story Beads so that one can remember each journey in which they participated over the years. If anything, they represent Wisdom and Lessons Learned, and should be looked upon in this way. Currently, some elders have as many as 20 beads, and the necklaces of a number of the youth who started with us in 1995 and 1996 will also have those 20 beads. Symbolically and powerfully, the copper ring necklaces represent so many stories and so much wisdom!

On the right side of the necklace are the Honoring Beads. To date, the red faceted bead is to honor Emmett Oliver who brought back the canoe to our peoples back in the late 1980s. The teal blue bead is the Veteran's Bead, earned for military service.

On some rings, there is a silver bead built into the ring itself. This bead signifies a person who has carved, or constructed, a canoe or several canoes. It was initially designated as the Canoe Carver's Bead, but is currently called the Canoe Maker's Bead.

I have been making the rings since the beginning and conducting the ceremonies since Tom passed away in March, 1997. In recent years a number of volunteers have been helping me make the rings and assemble the necklaces, as well as to conduct the ceremony. As of 2016, more than 500



ceremonies have been conducted, and over 6,500 necklaces have been placed around the necks of participants who choose to make the Canoe Journey commitment.

Including the Paddle to Seattle in 1989, there have been 25 annual journeys through 2016. We have been using the Ceremony format since 1995. The canoe journey has grown continuously and exponentially from the beginning. By any possible measurement it has been a great success.

The Tribal Canoe Journeys movement has been shared on both sides of the United States — Canada border. The tribes in the U. S. are somewhat wealthier than our First Nations neighbors to the north due to the success of tribal casino gambling operations, yet the response on both sides of the border has been extremely good. In fact, the participating tribes from the U. S. have stepped up and have shared their financial success with our First Nations hosts.

On the canoe journey to Bella Bella in 2014, a lot of the logistic support came in with the tribal canoes from the south in Washington State. However, the response from our First Nation host in British Columbia was major in-kind community support, including tens of thousands pounds of halibut and herring eggs, a traditional delicacy, from Native fishermen. All of the people in this village community stepped up and provided food and lodging, along with handcrafted gifts, and homemade meals. They also offered traditional elements such as seven foot clear cedar “Copper” medallion representations for each canoe, skippers’ paddles, canoe lances and spears, cedar ropes, blankets and shawls. And, in the final presentation, some songs, dances and masks that had not been previously presented, were performed. These dances, in and of themselves, were the greatest gifts of all.

Looking back, there are **Six Elements** that have been very important to me personally with regard to the Canoe Journeys:

**One:** the return of our cultural practices; not just songs and dances, but the return of Salish weaving, Cedar weaving, canoe carving, paddle carving, construction of fishing weirs, and the return of our native languages and cultural gatherings.

**Two:** the growth of our youth into powerful adults and leaders in their communities; seeing both young men and women taking responsibility on these canoe journeys and in their canoe families, and more recently, seeing the young ones that we started with those many years ago, taking on the organization and responsibility of hosting these annual journeys.

**Three:** Seeing those adults and elders, who had been denied their cultures for so long, stepping up and becoming the leaders of this dream to be who we are, who we were.

**Four:** Watching the young begin to take on the responsibility for our environment and the protection of our traditional “re-sources” (Endnote 3).

**Five:** The return of PRIDE, in our selves and what we represent.

**Six:** The return of high levels of Generosity and Sharing.

Both Tom and I felt that the most perfect return to ourselves would take seven generations. Today we have only journeyed for one generation and we have accomplished so much. Since 1995 we have grown from three canoes and 50 participants, to more than 100 canoes and over 10,000 participants from the United States, Canada (First Nations), Hawaii, New Zealand, Japan, and the Philippines, and we are working our way east across America.



*The handcrafted Tribal Journeys banner, showing the 24 Journeys from the Paddle to Seattle in 1989 to the Paddle to Nisqually in 2016, was gifted by the Nisqually Tribe during its potlatch ceremonies. Photo: Philip H. Red Eagle.*



While visitors watched, Native canoes crowded into the Hiram Chittenden Locks at Ballard, on their way from Puget Sound to Seattle's Lake Washington, during the Paddle to Muckleshoot in 2006. Photo: Philip H. Red Eagle.

Of course, the energy and destiny has shifted over to the younger people of the movement. Many of the elders who started with us back in 1995 are now gone, and we continue our work in their names. The young people that we started with more than two decades ago have become its leaders today. And our First Nations brothers and sisters in Canada continue bringing their wisdom, knowledge and energy to us every year. And We all continue! 🇺🇸

*AUTHOR'S NOTE: My article is very personal to me. I know many of the people mentioned in this written piece and are very close friends with several of them. As a result I chose to write this article in First Person narrative rather than Third Person. I am not separate from them, or a neutral observer, I am a part of them. I lived this experience with them. -PHR*



*Because the Tribal Canoe Journeys program has become more culturally inclusive during its history, the wood frame, fabric-covered Umiak design canoe of the Arctic-Eskimo people has been added to the growing array of participating Native watercraft. The wood frame, fabric-covered Umiak shown here being paddled by its Carver's Camp keepers, was on its way to participate in the Paddle to Nisqually in 2016. Formed in 2003, Carvers' Camp is an inter-cultural canoe repair and construction support group for Tribal Journeys. Photo: Sam Tower.*

### Endnotes:

1. Lincoln, Leslie. "Paddle to Seattle: A Native Washington Movement to 'Bring Them Canoes Back Home,'" Master's Thesis, Anthropology, University of British Columbia, 1990.
2. Forlines, David. "Ten Rules of the Canoe," *Oceanedge: The Journal of Applied Storytelling*.
3. No. 3, Spring, 1995, *Tales of the Canoe Nation-1*, p. 12, 1995. Developed as part of a presentation by the Quileute People for the Northwest Experiential Education Conference, University of Puget Sound, Tacoma, Washington, 1990.

Those who worked in The Cedar Tree Institute movement decided that a special vocabulary was needed for others participating in the "re-culturation" process. The words, "re-culturation" and "re-source," were intended to communicate circularity. The word "re-sourcing" is not simply taking things out of the environment and using them, but signifies working with the environment, giving back to the environment, and helping the environment, or elements of the environment, to sustain itself.

### ABOUT THE AUTHOR: Philip H. Red Eagle

*Philip H. Red Eagle was born and raised in the Pacific Northwest. Except for his service in the Navy during the Vietnam War era, he has lived entirely in Washington and Alaska. Phil is of Dakota and Salish ancestry. His grandfather on his mother's side is John Steilacoom, and his father is from the Fort Peck Reservation in Montana. Phil is a published author, poet, publisher, jewelry designer and maker, and canoe and paddle carver. He has two degrees from the University of Washington, a Bachelor of Arts in Editorial Journalism and also a Bachelor of Fine Arts in Metal Design. He has been working with the Tribal Canoe Journeys program for 25 years.*

