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THE MAGAZINE OF NATIVE PEOPLES, COMMUNITIES, AND WAYS OF LIFE



# First Alaskans

## 'We Can Do It'

Voting Rights, Land Rights

The Fairbanks Four

Wrangell Renaissance

One People Canoe  
Society





# WOOSH TEEN AYXA'A! WE PADDLE TOGETHER,

The Chilton brothers  
craft more than art

BY LESLIE HSU OH

DAVID REED



On the Sealaska Canoe, Yakutat crew paddlers Devlin Anderstrom, Darin Bremner, Lydia Henry, Marry Knutsen, Cynthia Petersen, Alin Vale, Adam Williams, and Eli Hanlon III, with skipper Doug Chilton, try to stay calm amid rolling seas, wind, and drizzling rain on their journey to Shakes Island.

# **DAA NAAY TEE!** **IMITATING OUR ANCESTORS.**

**O**N A SHEET OF WATER as lustrous as liquid silver, ten safety boats drift protectively around six canoes. From the north: Juneau/Yakutat. From central southeast: Sitka, Kake, Wrangell. From the south: Thorne Bay and Kasaan.



**‘AS SOON AS WE  
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**Alicia Chilton**

**IN ALL, 86 PADDLERS**, gender and race hidden beneath woven Northwest Coast hats, ancestral regalia, sunglasses, life jackets and raingear, are united, just a few miles from Wrangell to rededicate the Chief Shakes Tribal Clan House. (See related story page 7)

After nine days of 15-foot waves and relentless rain, the paddlers finally get a moment to appreciate the significance of this journey spearheaded by the Chiltons (Tlingit), a family renowned for their carvings and cuff bracelets.

Some are quiet, watching the moody clouds and thick fog smudge the surrounding mountains and sky. Some raft their 40-foot canoes together. Others start races and paddle wars. Giggles and “paddles up, paddles forward, dig and a HOO! HAA!” echo across the channel.

Cynthia Petersen (Galyix-Kaagwaan-taan, Eagle/Beaver/Wolf, of Yakutat), Business Manager of Yak-Tat Kwaan Incorporated, tightens her grip on her paddle. It’s not the red cedar paddle she made in a workshop she helped the One People Canoe Society organize in Yakutat five months before this voyage. That beautiful paddle was lost to the sea along with 39 handcrafted paddles just a few days ago when two canoes drifted loose into open sea.

Petersen reminds herself of the reassuring words that Brian and Doug Chilton voiced as the crew helplessly watched from the safety boats as the canoes disappeared on the waves.

The canoes and paddles are a gift to our Ancestors. Be grateful that we are not lost ourselves. Our Ancestors are making sure we are all safe.

The beat of drums drifts down the channel from the crowd waiting patiently on the shore of Wrangell. It’s time to paddle hard against the current to the finish line.

Doug Chilton signals Petersen to begin setting the pace. Every few minutes, Doug kisses the soft head of his six-month-old baby boy, strapped to his chest.

Admiring the six canoes stretched across the horizon, Doug smiles. He

volunteered to be the skipper of Petersen’s canoe since none of the eight Yakutat crew members had paddled together before. He knows that Petersen has feared water since she was a child, that she had never even set foot inside a canoe before this trip. Doug knows that despite her fears, she wanted to join the One People Canoe Society to do something about the high rates of suicide in Yakutat.

Now, here she is, sore muscles, aching shoulders, pushed beyond her endurance, drenched with water from head to toe, but feeling completely safe and transformed. As Petersen slips her paddle into the water, she finally understands the eighth rule of the society’s Ten Canoe Rules (see page 33): “The journey is what we enjoy...being done with a journey requires great awareness; being on the journey, we are much more than ourselves. We are part of the movement of life. We have a destination, and for once our will is pure, our goal is to go on.”

When the paddlers hear Tlingit, Haida, and Tsimshian songs from the harbor, they raise their paddles in a salute. The canoes line up to wait for permission to come ashore Shakes Island. There is a rush of tears and laughter and excitement. Elders and clan leaders in Chilkat blankets exchange Tlingit and English words with the paddlers. Then, in sync, all the paddlers pound their paddles on the bottom of their canoes, a beat so loud and strong, it silences the crowd for a moment. Each beat cements a sense of being, knowing who you are, where you come from and who you want to be.

#### **THE ONE PEOPLE CANOE SOCIETY**

From a family of 13, Gene (Sgunax yaa), Brian (Aan Yaá), and Doug (Yaa nak.ch) are of the Yéil Naa (Raven moiety), Deisheetaan (people of the Beaver Clan), from the Yéil Hit (Raven House) of Angoon, Alaska. Most people do not know they are the force behind The One Canoe People Society. The Chilton brothers are mostly known as



full-time carvers of silver, gold, copper, wood, ivory, bone and soapstone.

The One Canoe People Society provides anyone, regardless of nationality or age, the opportunity to travel in a 30-foot or longer canoe. It advocates for sobriety and healthy ways of life. All society activities encourage team-building, self-awareness, confidence and character development through art, language, song, dance, and, of course, paddling.

According to Doug, “By bringing our Elders into the group and having them share traditions, history, culture, our stories, people are starting to stand up and recognize who they are and take pride in what they do and have a sense of purpose. There’s more to life than sitting around and waiting for life to happen. You got to get out and do

something. That’s what we are doing. We are getting out there and doing something and inviting everybody to come along.”

So far, the Society has made over 500 paddles, held annual paddle workshops in Juneau since 2000, and paddled to over 30 events like Tribal Canoe Journeys, Fourth of July, and the biennial Celebration. Its Facebook page brims with testimony after testimony of how the Chiltons have made a difference in someone’s life.

Alicia Chilton (Aleut), a member of the Board of Directors and Brian’s wife, says, “As soon as we push off the beach, the modern days of society disappear and you are part of something special...When you have a canoe in [your] community or sitting in your docks, there are paddles, life jackets,

Unable to get out of Kake due to high seas, Devlin Anderstrom, Darin Bremner, Doug Chilton, Tim Flannery, Lydia Henry, Marry Knutsen, Cynthia Petersen, Alin Vale, Adam Williams, Giana Willard, and Eli Hanlon III go on a sea otter hunt in the Raven Canoe (LIINGIT XA’A).



Doug Chilton and his son, Richard Chilton, are welcomed on Shakes Island.



Doug Chilton teaches students how to design their own paddles at Yakutat Tern Festival Kid Paddle Workshop in 2013.

and events. People are inspired. They want to sing their traditional songs or make their own regalia or make their own paddle and feel that accomplishment and these are all healthy activities, providing an outlet for youth, adults, and Elders.”

### GENEROSITY AS ARTISTS

This generosity of knowledge and desire to make a difference fuels the Chilton’s artistic endeavors as well. Gene says, “I really like to teach kids because what I see is a way for kids to not only learn about their heritage but also learn something they can use throughout their entire life, especially if they get into a tight spot. When I was a kid, things were really hard and as we grew older we learned how to help each other. That’s the most important thing. We teach our kids to do the same thing. You can’t take the knowledge with you.”

Gene began in 1978 studying under Ed Kasko of Klukwan, Alaska. In 1982 at the age of 37 he became a full-time artist, mostly working in silver, gold, and copper jewelry because he liked how he could finish something in a few hours. With a work ethic of waking up at 6:30 a.m. with a cup of coffee, then walking downstairs into the basement, a twenty-foot by ten-foot “shop,” and working until midnight seven days a week, Gene is prolific, producing 150 bracelets a month.

Brian launched his career in 1993 at the age of 31. Besides jewelry, he creates three-dimensional totems, large paddles, small paddles, dance paddles, bowls, masks, and drums.

Doug carves until he gets bruises on his arms. He began a wood carving apprenticeship in 1979 under Ray Peck, a member of the Deisheetaan Clan of Angoon and an established carver of totemic and panel carvings. By 1989 at the age of 24, he became a full-time artist after “chasing Gene all over the state” to learn the business.

In Washington, D.C., Yéil Yeik, a 26-foot-long Tlingit Raven Spirit canoe, carved from red cedar by the Chilton

*continued on page 35*

# TEN CANOE RULES

1

## **Every stroke we take is one less we have to make.**

Keep going! Even against the most relentless wind or retro-grade tide, somehow a canoe moves forward. This mystery can only be explained by the fact that each pull forward is a real movement and not a delusion.

2

## **There is to be no abuse of self or others.**

Respect and trust cannot exist in anger. It has to be thrown overboard, so the sea can cleanse it. It has to be washed off the hands and cast into the air, so the stars can take care of it. We always look back at the shallows we pulled through, amazed at how powerful we thought those dangers were.

3

## **Be flexible.**

The adaptable animal survives. If you get tired, ship your paddle and rest. If you get hungry, put in on the beach and eat a few oysters. If you can't figure one way to make it, do something new. When the wind confronts you, sometimes you're supposed to go the other way.

4

## **The gift of each enriches all.**

Every story is important. The bow, the stern, the skipper, the power puller in the middle – everyone is part of the movement. The Elder sits in her cedar at the front, singing her paddle song, praying for us all. The weary paddler resting is still ballast. And

there is always that time when the crew needs some joke, some remark, some silence to keep going, and the least likely person provides.

5

## **We all pull and support each other.**

Nothing occurs in isolation. When we aren't in the family of a canoe, we are not ready for whatever comes. The family can argue, mock, ignore each other at its worst, but that family will never let itself sink. A canoe that lets itself sink is certainly wiser never to leave the beach. When we know that we are not alone in our actions, we also know we are lifted up by everyone else.

6

## **A hungry person has no charity.**

Always nourish yourself. The bitter person, thinking that sacrifice means self-destruction, shares mostly anger. A paddler who doesn't eat at the feasts doesn't have enough strength to paddle in the morning. Take that sandwich they throw at you at 2.00 A.M.! The gift of who you are only enters the world when you are strong enough to own it.

7

## **Experiences are not enhanced through criticism.**

Who we are, how we are, what we do, why we continue, flourish with tolerance. The canoe fellows who are grim go one way. The men and women who find the lightest flow may sometimes go

slow, but when they arrive they can still sing. And they have gone all over the sea, into the air with the seagulls, under the curve of the wave with the dolphin and down to the whispering shells, under the continental shelf. Withdrawing the blame acknowledges how wonderful a part it all every one of us really is.

8

## **The journey is what we enjoy.**

Although the start is exciting and the conclusion gratefully achieved, it is the long, steady process we remember. Being part of the journey requires great preparation; being done with a journey requires great awareness; being on the journey, we are much more than ourselves. We are part of the movement of life. We have a destination, and for once our will is pure, our goal is to go on.

9

## **A good teacher allows the student to learn.**

We can berate each other, try to force each other to understand, or we can allow each paddler to gain awareness through the ongoing journey. Nothing sustains us like that sense of potential that we can deal with things. Each paddler learns to deal with the person in front, the person behind, the water, the air, the energy; the blessing of the eagle.

10

## **When given any choice at all, be a worker bee — make honey!**



On their journey to Wrangell, paddlers carry the Kake canoe to the shore for launch.

brothers, hangs from the ceiling of the Smithsonian's National Museum of Natural History.

The brothers teach carving at prisons, halfway houses, and schools. They used to own their own shop and allow anyone to drift in and learn about their culture and carving. Their favorite memories occurred in these shops: Brian proposed to his wife Alicia over a cup of coffee one morning; Eric, the brother born between Gene and Brian, who has since passed, carved alongside his brothers and gained sobriety with each red cedar chip that fluttered to the ground.

Now, each brother works out of their home, either in a basement or garage set up strategically to foster learning opportunities. Brian says he would most like to be remembered as "changing people's lives. I am most

appreciative of what my brothers have taught me and want to help other struggling artists who ask for help. We have always been willing to help anyone or anybody who asked not only our knowledge of the arts, but the use of the big tools no matter where their skill level was at."

Those who own Chilton pieces often benefit from their generosity and ethics based on a traditional upbringing. On Doug's Facebook page, he posted a photo of one of his Tlingit cuff bracelets that had been lost and found on Prince Wales Island. He promised to repair it and ship it to the owner who claimed it.

Whether in paddling or art, the Chiltons strive to make a difference. They hope that when someone is homesick for Alaska, they can tug on their Chilton salmon earrings and

imagine themselves chest-deep in icy waters waiting for fish to bump against their legs.

Doug's son Michael (22) says, "By starting a new paddle or totemic project, or working on my form line totemic designs, I feel my ancestors and teachers are with me at all times." His products are a spinoff from the traditional jewelry designs that his dad and uncles use. "My uncles and dad have taught me to never give up. By connecting with people, the wilderness, and traditions that are older than any of us, my artwork and spirit will grow throughout my creations and make me a stronger person." ◀

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On a beach in Auke Recreation Area, Rae Austin-Fulmer, Deondrae King, Michael Chilton, Doug Chilton and Brian Chilton (left to right) show their gratitude to Jeff Erickson for recovering paddles that were lost at sea on April 26, 2013 on route to Chief Shakes Island. Eagle and Raven One People Canoe Society designs were painted on the paddles for sponsorship.

ALICIA CHILTON

