

Sequim Gazette article, 7-22-09

Youngest puller set to paddle

by MICHAEL DASHIELL

Sequim Gazette

Unique Robinson-Adams knows that, between the splashes and singing and drumming, tribal members can see their ancestors, can hear them, can feel them.

It happened to her once, on a canoe journey with other youths on Lake Crescent.

"I turned around fast," Robinson-Adams says. "I thought someone was behind me. I said, 'I'm not going crazy.'"

At 13 years old, Robinson-Adams is the youngest Jamestown S'Klallam Tribe member to participate in the 2009 Tribal Canoe Journey, the 20-year anniversary of the first nine-canoe exposition that brought the region's tribes to Suquamish in 1989.

The tribes are going back to Suquamish this year, bringing with them a reported 12,000 paddlers — known as pullers in tribal parlance — ground crew members and others.

For her part, Robinson-

Adams is excited, although not so much about having to get up at 4 a.m., a matter she describes as the toughest part.

In past years she's helped as a ground crew member, meaning she helped set up camp at various stops, got paddlers food and other projects here and there.

"I loved it when I was ground crew," Robinson-Adams says.

Now she's on one of James-town S'Klallam Tribe's two canoes in the water for this year's journey. She says canoe paddlers spend up to eight hours on the water paddling from one tribal land to the next. This year, James-town paddlers stop in Port Townsend and Port Gamble before reaching Suquamish on Aug. 4.

To that end, Robinson-Adams and about 20 others have been practicing their paddling skills plus some canoe journey parliamentary procedures on the tribe's two boats: the wooden Laxaynəm (lah-kay-nam) and the part fiberglass E'ow-itsa.

Robinson-Adams admitted she's a bit sore from some of the practicing.

"I haven't been on a canoe for a while," she says.

It was a couple of years ago during a tribal mentorship activity that she felt the presence of her ancestors.

"I didn't know them, (but I knew) they're mine," Robinson-Adams says.

The youth says she has both Jamestown S'Klallam and Elwha roots. For this journey, she plans to be in the same boat as her mother, Jessica Johnson. Other family members (a brother, an

aunt and several cousins) also are making the journey.

While some tribes in the region have allowed youths to join the journey, the James-town S'Klallam Tribe's canoe policies and procedures did not — until this year.

At last count, the tribe has 22 pullers, 13 people on ground crew and two members on a support boat that follows both canoes.

Canoes from various points on the west coast of Vancouver Island — including Ucluelet, Ditidaht and Pillar Point — join the Elwha tribe's canoes in paddling onto Jamestown's beach on July 31.

Jamestown's two canoes and crew leave early Aug. 1.

Reach Michael Dashiell at miked@sequimgazette.com.