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Right to passage

Teen girl undergoes tribal coming of age ceremony

Kimberly Ross

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LAKE SHASTA – As with many 14-year-olds, being reminded that she's "becoming a woman" makes Marine Sisk-Franco wrinkle her nose, smile with embarrassment, or both. But not many teenage girls go through an official, four-day tribal ceremony to formalize the change.

Nor, as Marine did, would they feel the weight of reviving a rite of passage that hasn't been held in full since the 1920s.

As the focus of an American Indian coming-of-age ceremony last week, Marine's initiation included swimming down the McCloud River and emerging, out of breath, before a cheering group of about 50 members of the Winnemem Wintu tribe.

Earlier, women met with Marine in a bark house to share advice and the skills she will need as an adult: from choosing a good husband to correctly preparing acorn soup.

Although Marine said she felt self-conscious and a little apprehensive about entering adulthood, the tribe supporting her is eager for its own maturity, as well as hers, to be acknowledged.

The Winnemem are a federally unrecognized tribe of Indians that trace their homeland to the McCloud River watershed. Although they once were recognized by the government, that status changed for no clear reason in the mid-1980s, said Marine's mother, spiritual and tribal leader Caleen Sisk-Franco.

"The BIA (Bureau of Indian Affairs) decided to play peek-a-boo with us, and we're not in the 'I see you' part of the game," she said.

The tribe also lost its bid to have the McCloud River closed to boaters during last week's ceremony, which ended Tuesday. Shasta-Trinity National Forest representatives also denied the tribe's request to completely close a public campground, but agreed to set up voluntary closures. They stationed about six employees to help inform the public and ask that visitors respect the tribe's religious practice.

The campground occupies the site where the Winnemem's ancestors practiced the puberty ceremony decades ago, and where a sacred rock for the coming-of-age

ceremony is submerged in the river, Sisk-Franco said.

About 50 boats that neared the area agreed to avoid it, except for a houseboat, and later, a small ski boat. People in the slow-moving ski boat yelled obscenities and made mocking gestures at the group. Some said a woman in a bikini raised her beer can and exposed herself, all just before a high point in Marine's initiation.

After that, the Forest Service asked a sheriff's department boat to close the river so the ceremony could continue.

"There were ugly words and ugly actions," the Forest Service's tribal liaison Mike Hupp said Friday, adding that the forest service is trying to gain the legislative authority to temporarily close areas for such religious events.

While it fights for its religious rights, the tribe has come to expect interruptions and makes modifications to keep its culture alive.

The ceremony's tradition of grinding herbs in the tribe's Puberty Rock had to be replicated elsewhere, as the rock remained underwater. The last time the ceremony was held, there was no Shasta Dam, which during high rainfall years keeps the water level higher than in pre-dam years.

Other modifications simply stem from modern-day practicalities. A puberty belt given to a girl entering womanhood traditionally is made from the braided hair of her female mentors. But few women keep a thick mane of long hair anymore, so they used thin strands of black leather instead.

Some songs, not sung for decades, didn't sound very polished as the tribe members struggled to learn the foreign sounds, and some members live too far away to really practice.

Details of a deer dance, also not practiced in years, recently became clear to tribal dance captain Rick Wilson of Chico after he dreamed what it should look like. The result was stunning – men wearing deer heads, antlers and hoof rattles transformed themselves into a small herd of deer that froze, then fled, when pursued by a hunter.

Later, a traditional men's "silly" dance borrowed from modern humor to try to make Marine laugh – teaching her to keep her composure, Sisk-Franco said. It also reminds the men of their tribal role to set dignity and pride aside "to gain the smile of a woman," Sisk-Franco said.

The men's slapstick hijinks and ridiculous curtsies eventually made Marine burst into laughter.

Her cousin, Audrey Ward, 21, said Marine has undergone a change during the four days. As her attendant, Ward acted as Marine's constant companion while older women talked with her and gave advice.

"She's become more responsible, and more independent, and on the path of finding herself," Ward said.

Ward sees the importance of the ceremony for the growth of the tribe, too.

"It's kind of bringing back that we're here. We're still here," she said.

Marine's aunt, Helene Sisk of Jones Valley, was among the women imparting wisdom.

It was "advice about staying young for a while and not trying to grow up too fast. And to pick a guy that's really going to provide for her, not just pick a guy because she's in love," she said.

Sisk, 55, wishes she could have had a similar ceremony at the river when she was growing up.

Instead, Sisk remembers running away from her house in 1963 or '64, when officials came to take her to an Indian boarding school. It happened about three times, when she was around Marine's age, she said.

"It wasn't good to be an Indian in those days. We didn't have the religious freedoms," she said.

Being able to practice their religion in their traditional places is important, Mark Franco said. The tribe is directly tied to specific areas, where the spirits of ancestors remain, he said.

Trips to Washington, D.C., to meet with federal Forest Service officials and Sen. Barbara Boxer, and letters sent to the Forest Service and other agencies may have helped get more cooperation for Marine's ceremony than when the tribe attempted it last year, Franco said.

After the ceremony, Franco said he was most proud of his daughter when she rose out of the river. But he also was pleased to later see her at the shoreline, thanking the sheriff's boating officer who had closed the waterway for her ceremony.

"She walked down in her white moccasins and her white dress, in the mud, to give that policeman a thank you," he said Friday. "I was so proud of her. I broke down and cried after."

Reporter Kimberly Ross can be reached at 225-8233 or at kross@redding.com.
Photographer Andreas Fuhrmann can be reached at 225-8345 or afuhrmann@redding.com.