A decade of understanding

Tribal members visit Tomanowos on 10th anniversary of agreement with American Museum of Natural History

Photo by Michelle Alaimo
Tomanowos timeline:

Billions of years ago: Scientists believe Tomanowos was the iron core of a planetesimal that was shattered in a stellar collision.

More than 10,000 years ago: Tomanowos falls from the sky, most likely landing in the southern Alberta region of Canada. The Great Missoula Flood eventually transports Tomanowos to a spot near the falls of the Willamette River.

10,000 years ago to 19th century: Tomanowos’ resting place becomes a sacred site for western Oregon Indian Tribes, particularly the Clackamas Chinooks, who believe it was sent to Earth by the Sky People.

1850s: The Clackamas Chinooks, along with more than 25 other Tribes from western Oregon, southern Washington and northern California, are relocated to the Grand Ronde Reservation, separating them from the sacred site.

1902: Tomanowos is found by part-time miner Ellis Hughes, who removes it from coded Tribal land that then belonged to Oregon Iron and Steel Co.

1902-05: The miner charges 25 cents for people to view Tomanowos.

1905: By judicial order, Tomanowos returns to Oregon Iron and Steel.

1906: New York philanthropist Mrs. William Dodge buys Tomanowos for $20,600 and donates it to the American Museum of Natural History in NYC.

1999: The Confederated Tribes of Grand Ronde, citing the Native American Graves Protection and Repatriation Act, seeks return of Tomanowos. The museum counters, asking a judge to declare it Tomanowos’ owner.

2000: The Tribe and museum reach an accord that keeps Tomanowos in New York City and provides annual ceremonial access to Tribal members, as well as acknowledgement of the meteorite’s religious importance.

2010: The Confederated Tribes of Grand Ronde and American Museum of Natural History celebrate the 10th anniversary of their agreement with events that run from June 14-16. Former Tribal Chairwoman Kathryn Harrison, on her ninth visit to Tomanowos, leads the Grand Ronde delegation.

Graphic by George Valdez
Tribal contingent reconnects with Tomanowos

By Dean Rhodes
Smoke Signals editor

The Delta Airlines 737 paused momentarily on the tarmac of Portland International Airport slightly after 6 a.m. Sunday, June 13, its cockpit crew awaiting final clearance to take off, as almost 20 Confederated Tribes of Grand Ronde members and staff waited to fly to New York City.

As the engines roared and fuselage vibrated, the plane lifted off and banked over the Columbia River, heading east, the Columbia River Gorge spread out beneath and pointing the way for Tribal members to an old friend.

Tribal members were flying over the ancient passageway carved out of the Pacific Northwest landscape by the Missoula Floods that deposited Tomanowos — or the 15.5-ton Willamette meteorite — in the ancient homelands of the Clackamas Chinooks and commenced a centuries-old relationship that continues today.

Tomanowos is believed by scientists to be the iron core of a planetesimal that was shattered in a stellar collision. Captured by Earth’s gravity some 13,000 years ago, it fell from the sky at more than 40,000 miles per hour and landed, most likely, in the southern Alberta region of Canada.

There, it lay encased in an iceberg in the great ancient Lake Missoula until the water pressure burst the ice dam that held the lake back and unleashed a flood hundreds of feet high on what is now southern Washington and northern Oregon.

The deluge of water, rocks and ice effortlessly carved out the Gorge like a child’s finger creating a swath through a cake’s icing.

Tomanowos traveled the hundreds of miles westward, jostled amid the rocks and ice, eventually coming to rest outside of what is now West Linn near the Willamette River falls.

Its highly cratered surface, pockmarked by tortuous journeys through outer space, the Earth’s atmosphere and then down the Gorge, collected water that the ancient Clackamas Chinooks invested with divine qualities. The water combined with iron sulfide in Tomanowos to create sulfuric acid, which only served to deepen and create new craters on its surface.

The Clackamas Chinook dipped their spearheads in the water and venerated the otherworldly object, believing it was sent to them by the Sky People and was a union of the sky, earth and water.

Susap, a Klickitat Indian, testified that his mother talked bow and arrow in that they have filled them with Tomanowos and wash their faces there and put their spearheads in there and fill that rock when it is raining and the water drops in there and fills that rock and the Indios go in there and put their how and arrow in that they have got for war.”

Another Native American witness, 47-year-old Sol Clark (Wasco), testified that his mother talked about Tomanowos, saying it possessed magical qualities.

Native Americans in the area knew that Tomanowos, no matter how it arrived in their homelands, was a gift from the Creator.

Tomanowos remained in its West Linn resting spot even after the Clackamas Chinook, like so many other western Oregon Tribes and Bands, dwindled in population and were eventually forced off their land by white settlers. The Clackamas were sent to the Grand Ronde Reservation in the 1850s, severing the longstanding tie between the Tribe and Tomanowos.

For almost 50 years, Tomanowos sat unheralded and ignored, partially submerged below ground level on land littered by fallen logs and tree stumps.

But for Tomanowos, five decades of solitude was but a blink of the eye considering it was created eons ago, perhaps even at the birth of our Solar System some 4 billion to 5 billion years ago.

It knew that sooner or later, its people would return.

Kidnapped

In the fall of 1902, part-time miner Ellis Hughes “found” moss-covered Tomanowos sticking 18 inches out of the ground. Realizing its commercial potential, he camouflaged it with hazel brush.

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It took Hughes more than a year to remove Tomanowos from ceded Tribal land that then belonged to the Oregon Iron and Steel Co., dragging it three-quarters of a mile.

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Tribe set out to reclaim Tomanowos in 1999

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to his property. He built a shed to protect it.
Hughes, who lived a hardscrabble life, charged people 25 cents to view the meteorite and it soon became the talk of the Portland area. Visitors from Oregon City and Portland would take a streetcar line to its terminus and then walk two miles to see the space rock.
However, after being sued by Oregon Iron and Steel and three successive trials, Hughes was forced to return the meteorite to the company, which hired men with horses to move it along the Willamette River at the junction with Tualatin. It was then loaded on a barge and shipped to Portland to go on display at the 1905 Lewis and Clark Exposition.

At the exposition, New York philanthropist Mrs. William B. Astor, on a hot August day, became entranced with Tomanowos as it was unveiled from under an American flag. In February 1906, with cash provided by Mrs. Dodge, the American Museum of Natural History purchased Tomanowos and took the meteorite away from its land and peoples, sending it to New York City.
In New York, spectators lined the streets to watch a horse team haul Tomanowos to the museum that overlooks the western edge of Central Park on April 14, 1906. Tomanowos was about 2,600 miles from its home and people. The connection between the Clackamas Chinooks and their descendents and Tomanowos would lay dormant for 93 years as Confederated Tribes of Grand Ronde members faced other, more immediate hardships that ultimately tested their mettle— the continued loss of reservation land in the first half of the 20th century; the Western Oregon Indian Termination Act in 1954; a 29-year fight for Restoration, which occurred in 1983; and the re-establishment of the Tribe and its cultural history.

Meanwhile, unbeknownst to the Tribe, Tomanowos was no longer just a “space rock,” but a big star in New York City, being viewed by millions of visitors annually. It also was set to become the centerpiece of the new Dorothy and Lewis B. Cullman Hall of the Universe, in February 2000.

Tribal Council member June Sell-Sherer, left, takes photos of artifacts from various western Oregon Tribes during a collections tour at the American Museum of Natural History in New York City on Tuesday, June 15.

Reclaiming Tomanowos

In 1999, the Confederated Tribes of Grand Ronde, citing the 1990 Native American Graves Protection and Repatriation Act, began legal proceedings to regain possession of Tomanowos. Tribal representatives visited the museum, seeking culturally sacred artifacts, and filed a NAGPRA claim for Tomanowos before leaving New York City. According to some reports, museum staff “freaked” at the prospect of losing one of its most popular specimens.
The early 20th century court testimony by Susap and Sol Clark tied, through oral histories, Tomanowos to Clackamas Chinook Chief Wochimo and other members of the Tribe.

After nine decades, the possibility of Tomanowos returning home was resurrected.

The NAGPRA claim’s timing couldn’t have been worse for the museum, which opened the Rose Center for Earth and Space, which includes the Cullman Hall of the Universe, in February 2000. Because of Tomanowos’ weight, the center was constructed around Tomanowos.

Not surprisingly, the museum sought to have a court rule that Tomanowos belonged to it.

The following year, in June 2000, the Tribe and museum reached an agreement, signed by then-Tribal Chairwoman Kathryn Harrison and museum President Ellen Futter, allowing Tomanowos to remain at the museum. The agreement saved the Tribe substantial legal fees, which could then be spent on other necessary Tribal services.

The museum, in return, installed displays explaining the meteorite’s scientific history and Native American religious significance. And, most importantly, the museum agreed to annual visits by Tribal members to hold a spiritual ceremony with Tomanowos.

The museum also established an internship program that allows young Tribal members to work at the American Museum of Natural History every summer, learning about Tomanowos and expanding their horizons while living in New York City.

Starting in 2001, Tribal members have visited Tomanowos every summer, except in 2009, when the depressed economy prompted both organizations to take a one-year break.

Appropriately, on the 10th anniversary of the agreement, Harrison and Tribal Council member June Sell-Sherer accompanied the Tribal contingent to New York City, where Harrison spoke about the “power” she feels when in Tomanowos’ presence.

Sell-Sherer was on Tribal Council in 2000 when the agreement was struck.

“This is an ongoing tradition now for the Tribe,” Sell-Sherer said. “It’s part of our culture.”

Even more apropos, Futter remains as president of the museum and attended anniversary events.

Celebration Day
Monday, June 14, was a pleasant, early summer day in New York City—partly cloudy, not too hot and the sticky summer humidity had yet to envelope the city.

With a private ceremony with Tomanowos scheduled for 5:30 p.m. that day, rejuvenated Tribal members used the time to visit another

Public Affairs Director Siohban Taylor shows off a paddler that sits inside the canoe that was gifted to American Museum of Natural History President Ellen Futter, left, during a breakfast at the museum on Tuesday, June 15. The canoe was carved out of llder wood by Tribal member Travis Mercier. On the right is Tribal Elder Kathryn Harrison.

Name: Tomanowos (the Willamette meteorite)
Original weight: Probably about 20 tons
Current weight: 15.5 tons
When did it land: Probably 13,000 years ago.
Where did it land: Southern Alberta region.
Type of meteorite: It is an “oriented” meteorite, meaning its alignment when entering the Earth’s atmosphere was stable and it stayed pointed in a single direction instead of spinning and tumbling through the atmosphere.
Composition: 85 percent to 95 percent iron with the remainder being nickel. Tomanowos is among a relatively rare specimen of meteorites; about 7 percent of all meteorites found are iron.
How long has it been in New York City: Since 1906.
By Dean Rhodes
Smoke Signals editor

On Wednesday, June 16, American Museum of Natural History staff visited the Tribal Resources and Tribal Cultural Resources Department Manager David Lewis, Tribal member and Tribal Youth Education Culture Specialist Travis Mercier, Tribal member and museum intern Santiago Atanacio, Tribal Elder and Tribal Council member June Sell-Sherer and former Tribal Chairwoman Kathryn Harrison about Tomanowos’ cultural importance to the Confederated Tribes of Grand Ronde and their experiences visiting Tomanowos.

Some of the quotes are featured below:

“I was at the University of Oregon for many years pursuing my degree and they have a replica of Tomanowos there, outside the museum. It is almost exactly the same...”

“But when I walked into the room, I could feel the power of Tomanowos. It is the reason why we are all here. Tomanowos has a draw to the Grand Ronde Tribe because many of the Tribes that came to Grand Ronde looked at Tomanowos as a sacred object. ...”

“For many years I thought this agreement was a mistake. We were spending a lot of money on a rock from the Willamette Valley. ... But then I’ve seen the relationship that it has built between the Tribe and museum, and how it inspires people to do wonderful things on behalf of the Tribe. I really do appreciate this relationship (between the Tribe and museum) now. ... It is actually something we can all learn from.”

Tribal Cultural Resources Department Manager David Lewis, who was on his first visit to Tomanowos

“My ancestors were involved in some of the original ceremonies that went on with Tomanowos. They used it for not only spiritual healing, but for physical well-being...”

“It’s like I’m in the presence of something that has been here for so long. It’s been through so much... For it to land in that particular spot and for our people to be able to take part in that experience to me is really important. It forms the basis for why we are here today, because of Tomanowos. ... It is such an important thing.”

“I’m happy we made the agreement. We came together under what could have been a contentious situation because we came here hoping to reparm. ... It is better that it be left here. Forget NAGPRA and we’re going to form an agreement that is the best thing right now for Tomanowos and us. ...” (Tribal Council member). It (the internship program) is very valuable. I’ve learned so much from it. For it to land in that particular spot and for our people really believed that it was sent to us to help us, and that it has a lot of power. ...”

“It’s like I’m in the presence of Tomanowos — the World Trade Center’s meteorite. It was really breathtaking...”

“Native people feel everything has a spirit. To come in and actually see and touch something that your ancestors and other Tribal people have used, it is a wonderful experience...”

“It’s been a very great experience for me. It’s hard to explain. It was a feeling as though if we didn’t fight for it, we’d be giving up something sacred that our people had used since time immemorial. It turned out to be the right thing to do because we had other priorities for our people, housing and different things.”

“When you come here and see it as a centerpiece of the museum, you realize that it is much bigger than just us, much bigger than the Tribe.”

“Tribal Youth Education Culture Specialist Travis Mercier, who was chaperoning Tribal interns in New York City

“When I first heard about it, it was really just a rock. It really wasn’t anything else. ... Then, getting ready for the internship, I found out that our people really believed that it was sent to us to help us, and that it has a lot of power. ...”

“When you come here and see it as a centerpiece of the museum, you realize that it is much bigger than just us, much bigger than the Tribe.”

“The agreement has been a good thing. It has enabled a lot of opportunity for our young people to come back here and be able to experience the internship. To see it in a different context, I think they get more out of it. If it was at home, they would not get that whole experience...”

“We need to remember how to listen to what it has to say.”

“When you walk into the room, it definitely has a presence about it. And I think that is probably the same for any visitor to the museum. It tends to vibrate on its pedestal...”

“A lot of our teachings tell us to listen to these old things; listen to the trees, mountains and rocks. It has all of our creation stories. It has been there for as long and much longer than our people. It’s like sitting there with an Elder and then having a lot of information. We need to remember how to listen to what it has to say.”

Kathy Soderberg, Sandy Bobb, Tina Snyder (Jeanne’s daughter-in-law), Esther Stewart, Tribal employees Siobhan Taylor, Michelle Alaimo and Dean Rhodes, Patricia Rhodes and Ken Margolis of the Native Arts & Culture Foundation.

The museum is quiet, Lewis prepared Tomanowos by smudging with a smoldering wrap of sage and cedar. He laid obsidian blades created by Tribal Elder Don Day in one of the meteorite’s crevices before starting the ceremony.

“One blade will be brought back

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Edited by Dean Rhodes
Beaded necklaces dipped in Tomanowos

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to Grand Ronde for its power,” Lewis said.

Travis Mercier created a cleansing solution of Mill Creek and rose water, which Tribal members dipped beaded necklaces in after the service, capturing some of Tomanowos’ power.

Travis Mercier and Tribal intern Santiago Atanacio started the ceremony with an honor song, which was followed by a blessing given by Harrison. Lewis delivered an opening speech and invited other Tribal members to share their experience of being reconnected with Tomanowos.

Travis Mercier spoke of how Tomanowos knows “our history of the land and our people. It is out of place here.” He said he hopes that one day Tomanowos will return to its people and be placed in a protected area near where it used to sit on Tribal ceded lands.

Tribal Council member Chris Mercier remembered his first visit to the museum in 2001 and not knowing any of the meteorite’s history. “The connection between this meteorite and our ancestors has gone on for a long time,” he said. “It has a fascinating history and there is an interesting story that circulates around this meteorite. And it will go on.

“It blows my mind that this is not of this Earth. You can’t get more heavenly than that,” Soderberg said he regretted not attending the ceremony sooner. “This is mind-staggering,” he said, “and it was found on the land of my ancestors.”

Snyder said she was honored to attend and happy that her daughter-in-law, Tina, could witness the event and take it home to share with her grandchildren.

“It’s not just important for our Tribe, it’s important for the children,” said. “Every time I visit, it’s a big experience for me,” Travis Mercier said. “It was a life-changing experience to me,” Travis Mercier said. “It is a pilgrimage I want to make until it returns home.”

“This has been a really great experience for me,” Sell-Sherer, who attended with her sister, Tribal Elder Nancy Coleman, said of her time alone with Tomanowos. “I’m happy. I have a much more peaceful inner-being.”

Lewis discussed how the Tribe and museum made an agreement that benefits the Tribe and youth with the annual internship. “Even though it is 2,500 miles away,” Lewis observed, “Tomanowos is still helping us. That is a great thing to take away.”

Museum intern Santiago Atanacio, 18, said the ceremony was the coolest experience he has had while in New York City. “Everyone younger than me in the Tribe can know they can do this,” Atanacio said.

Tribal member Camille Mercier, left, and Tribal Council member Chris Mercier both take pictures of Tomanowos before the private ceremony at the American Museum of Natural History in New York City on Monday, June 14.
Tribe, museum mark historic partnership

By Dean Rhodes
Smoke Signals editor

NEW YORK CITY — On Tuesday, June 15, the American Museum of Natural History and members of the Confederated Tribes of Grand Ronde gathered in the Frederick P. Rose Center to mark 10th anniversary of an historic agreement recognizing the Tribes’ spiritual and cultural connection to the Willamette meteorite, or Tomanowos.

The meteorite is the centerpiece of the Dorothy and Lewis B. Cullman Hall of the Universe which sits on the west side of Central Park.

Former Tribal Chairwoman Kathryn Harrison said a blessing before about 50 people who gathered for the 11 a.m. news conference.

Ellen V. Futter, president of the American Museum of Natural History, kicked off the event with a speech.

“I’m so excited that on the 10th anniversary of this historic agreement that I can see my friend and partner, Kathryn Harrison,” Futter said. “Tomanowos did his job. This is a stirring day.

“We worked hard to reach this agreement and we hope to see it endure.”

Harrison and Futter also joined forces on Wednesday, June 16, for an interview with museum staff to create a video about the 10th anniversary.

Harrison said the impetus for the Tribe in trying to repatriate Tomanowos was being informed by Tribal Cultural Resources employees that Tomanowos was the meteorite and might be reclaimed by Tribal Cultural Resources employees that Tomanowos was at the museum and might be reclaimed under the 1990 Native American Graves Protection and Repatriation Act.

“From there, it just progressed to, ‘If we do get it, where are we going to put it?’” Harrison said. “One of things we looked at, if we go to court, how long would we be in court? Forever?”

“It came up just as we were completing the Rose Center and were preparing to open it, which was intended to be a moment of great institutional triumph,” Futter recalled.

“We had not considered that we were doing anything that would have an impact on anyone else. And certainly did not mean to. For us, it was an enormous surprise in trying to do this in a way that did not upset the joy and excitement of the new Rose Center.”

Although the controversy was presented initially to Harrison and Futter in a legal battle context, Futter said that a “shared spiritual approach” of wanting to work the controversy out helped craft the agreement.

“I think we inherited it in a confrontational, legal setting, and then the work of figuring out what was at stake and what each side cares about and really needs, and how do we work that out in way that doesn’t have that animus,” Futter said. “I think that is a long process that we were fortunate to have come out the way it did.”

“We had housing and other things we had to think about first,” Harrison said. “It (repatriation) was high on our list, but it wasn’t No. 1.”

Futter said millions of museum visitors see Tomanowos annually while the Tribe continues its annual visits and Tribal youth benefit from a summer internship program at the museum. Compensatory plaques erected next to Tomanowos explain both its scientific and Native American cultural importance, respectively.

“This has been a glorious partnership and collaboration,” Futter said. “I hope it continues for many years.”

After Futter’s speech, Tribal members Travis Mercier and museum intern Santiago Atanacio performed a song, which drew the attention of curious museum visitors on the higher floors.

Tomanowos is the largest meteorite ever found in the United States, weighing in at 15.5 tons. It was donated to the museum in 1906 and has been on continuous display since and been viewed by millions of visitors from around the world.

Harrison was Tribal chair in 2000 when the museum and Tribe signed a memorandum of understanding that kept the meteorite in New York City, but provided annual access to Grand Ronde Tribal members for religious and cultural events, as well as created the Tribal youth internship program.

After the news conference, Tribal members were then taken on a behind-the-scenes tour of the museum’s anthropology collection, where they viewed Umpqua and Shasta Costa baskets and Shasta bows and arrows, among other Pacific Northwest Native American artifacts, held by the museum.

“It’s been a sense of great accomplishment for the Tribe and museum to come to an agreement like this,” Harrison said.

“It has exceeded our expectations,” Futter said. “With a good spirit and an open mind, there are opportunities to work things out. This resolution offers a model of how things can be done.”
Tribal members who attended the 10th anniversary of the annual visit to New York City for a private ceremony with Tomanowos were, front row from left, Destiny Bishop, Kristen Ravia, Jeanne Snyder, Raymond Petite, Kathryn Harrison, Wink Soderberg, Chris Mercier, Camille Mercier, Kalim Mercier and Corey Stryker; and, second row from left, David Lewis, Santiago Azcasas and Toby Williams. Photo by Michelle Alaimo.