

Traditional means: Man teaches ways of his Native American ancestors
By VINCE DEVLIN of the Missoulian



At his shop on Finley Point, Tim Ryan makes items used by his Indian ancestors with the same materials and the same tools they had. Ryan is a Native American and environmental educator who uses his skills to not only teach traditional ways of constructing items big and small, but also to show the importance of preserving the environments that produce the raw materials that go into those items.

Photo by TOM
BAUER/Missoulian

POLSON - Not to let the cat out of the bag, but Tim Ryan reaches this certain point when he's explaining to schoolchildren how he built a knife the same way his ancestors would have.

Understand, it's been fascinating up to this point: shaping and sharpening the obsidian blade on sandstone, carving out a section in the wooden handle to insert it, concocting a glue made of tree pitch and black charcoal to hold it, tying strands of wet rawhide around the base of the blade that, when it dries, pulls the blade even more tightly into place.

Ryan has also fashioned a rawhide wristband so the knife can dangle at his side. One flick of the wrist and the knife is in his hand, ready to cut whatever needs cutting.

The wristband is attached via a hole in the handle, and this is that certain point in the presentation.

“Do you know how I made the hole in the handle?” Ryan asks.

When they shake their heads “no,” Ryan gives the kids his sheepish answer.

“With a cordless drill,” he admits, eliciting “that's cheating” groans from the children.

Then Ryan shows them his “cordless” drill - a sharp bit made of chert rock again attached to a handle with the tree pitch/black charcoal glue and rawhide, and twisted by hand through the handle to carve out the hole.

A handmade tool, in other words, to help make other handmade tools.

Tim Ryan's "shop" on Flathead Lake is unlike most you'll come across.

Sure, it's full of things he's made or is working on - fish catchers, baskets, digging tools, snowshoes, even a miniature canoe - but you won't find a radial saw, electric sander, not even a simple hammer hanging from the wall.

If his Indian ancestors didn't have it prior to the mid-1800s, Ryan doesn't either. Within reason, anyway. His ancestors didn't have an enclosed shop, workbench or wood stove, and Ryan does.

But he uses the same materials they did, to make the same tools they did, to make the same items they used.

And he uses some of what he makes to gather the same berries and roots they did. He'll take off into the mountains for eight to 10 days at a time with little more than the traditional foods he's gathered, and the fishing line and deer bone hooks he's made by hand.

"When you're one-on-one with nature, in the middle of nowhere, lost in the woods, you learn a lot about yourself," the 48-year-old Ryan says.

The neat thing is, the one-time carpenter has turned it into a career. Ryan is the founder of Ancestral Skills and Technologies Northwest. He contracts out his services as a Native American and environmental educator, often to schools who hire him using funds from Montana's Indian Education for All Act.

"When I do presentations, probably 80 percent of it is to non-tribal children," Ryan says. "But I tell them it isn't just Native American education, it's your culture, too. Every culture of man had to figure this out - how to kill a deer, catch a fish or make clothing or shelter."

On the far reaches of Finley Point, an SUV teeters on a steep and slippery slope leading down to Tim and Rae Ryan's home on Skidoo Bay, partway on the narrow road and partially hanging in midair.

"We've got a little situation out here," says Ryan, who warns visitors he knows are coming to park high above his home and hike down. The last 100 yards or so are difficult even in summer, when some cars spin out on the gravel while trying to get back up the hill.

But Wednesday morning, after a night of unrelenting snow, a carload of Jehovah's Witnesses slid off and nearly flipped over and down the hillside, just a few yards from Ryan's shop, coming in.

"I looked out the window, saw this car sliding toward me and went 'Whoa,'" says Ryan, who helped the five occupants escape the unstable vehicle.

There are some jobs he doesn't have the tools for, and rescuing the endangered SUV was certainly one.

But Ryan has so many others he's made that helped his ancestors survive, and they're all fascinating to look at, and to ponder the resourcefulness of the people who invented them. There's the fish trap made with willow branches. It looks like a narrow cone about four or five feet long.

The branches are tied together with string made from dogbane plants at one end. At the other, protruding into and away from the mouth of the device, are smaller branches with sharp ends.

The fish trap would be placed in the middle of a small feeder stream, and passage down the river on either side of it blocked in some way - say, with more willow branches.

Then the fish would be chased downriver - it was a fun job for the children - and as they desperately sought a way to get downstream, they would invariably find the opening in the fish trap.

Once in, there was no getting out.

The Indians would take the trap to shore, untie the enclosed end, dump the fish out, tie the trap back up and return it to the stream.

Ryan's interest in these things began, he says, in third grade, when his mother would dress him in colorful costumes to dance at powwows.

"I was curious how they had made these things way back when," says Ryan, who later would spend his summers living in a tepee.

The Hellgate High School graduate attended the University of Montana for three years, switching majors at the start of each new school year - pre-law, to forestry, to wildlife biology - before quitting school to work as a carpenter.

"I had a few close calls where I almost cut my fingers off, and one where I nearly put a saw into my chest," he says. "I'd always had an ability with my hands, I could sketch, so I decided, 'Well, I'll go back to school and learn something where I don't endanger my body.'"

He graduated from the Art Institute of Seattle, and spent six years in the Puget Sound area as a self-employed sign-maker and graphic designer.

"I was in Seattle too long," Ryan says. "I really missed my tepee."

So he returned to Missoula and started a similar business.

“I did it for two years, and the business was successful, but I was working too hard, and I got sick,” he says. “I was directed to come to work for the tribe.”

It was a spiritual direction, he says, and his first job with the Confederated Salish and Kootenai Tribes - blood from both, plus Pend d'Oreille and a couple others, run in him - was in agriculture.

Then, another direction - to transfer to the Tribal Preservation Office - got him started on his current path. He loved the work.

“I've always had an ability to find cultural sites,” Ryan says. “It's almost as if they find me. I don't know how to explain it.”

One of the best parts of the job was the contact he made with tribal elders, Ryan says.

He still counts on them to review the things he builds for Ancestral Skills and Technologies Northwest, and their input is invaluable, he says.

For instance, he shows us a couple of his root-digging tools. One is an elk horn.

The other is a tree branch. He used his “cordless” drill to manufacture a handle and a knife to sharpen the end.

But he points to a small stub from a limb he snapped off and left near the sharp end of the digging tool.

“My own invention,” he says, showing how he can set the sharp end on the ground, then step on the limb stub and push the tool into the ground, very much like you might a shovel.

“I showed the elder that and said, ‘What do you think?’ ” Ryan says. “And he said, ‘It's wonderful - if you're wearing a shoe.’ ”

Ryan plans to open a shop in Pablo with 10 work stations where he can teach tribal members to build the ancestral tools and items he makes; his other goal is to begin outdoor schools where he takes them into places like the Bob Marshall Wilderness to live for a week like he does, and like their ancestors did.

But he's already busy with his classroom presentations.

“It's pretty amazing to watch the kids hold something in their hands that's not plastic and marvel at it,” he says. “When I show them the drill, I tell them, ‘You can go buy an electric drill made in China at the hardware store and if you break it, what do you do then? Here's a drill that if it breaks, you just walk into the woods and get the replacement part.’ ”