

Candle light event acknowledges massacre of Chetco people, encourages healing

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The Tolowa Dee-ni Nation invited the community to come together in healing remembrances and in loving acknowledgement of the Dee-ni lives lost in the Chit-xu village massacre on February 15, 1853 that consisted of forty houses at the mouth of the Chetco River.

The Tolowa Dee-ni Nation held the candlelight event to help heal their past and remember their ancestors who lived at the Chit-xu Taa-ghi at the mouth of the Chetco River at the Port of Brookings Harbor on Sunday, Dec. 18.

The event included the lighting of candles, a welcome and prayer, a history of the massacre and keynote speaker Dr. Virgil Moorehead Jr., a licensed clinical psychologist and director of Two Feathers Native American Family Services. Everyone in the community was invited to attend.

“The idea is to grow our communities and join hands rather than pull apart. We find there are more commonalities than differences if we can look at it that way,” said Sheryl Steinruck, the Tolowa Dee-ni Nation education director.

“Yes, the history is very negative,” Steinruck said. “But, my dad always said it’s not so much what happens to you that matters but how you deal with what happens to you because there is always going to be something – there is always oppression happening somewhere in the world.”

The Chetco people lived at the mouth of the river with at least nine major villages on two sides of the river from the mouth to about 14 miles upriver. The main two villages were located at the river's mouth on the north and south banks, according to the Tolowa Dee-ni Nation.

The Tolowa Dee-ni Nation states that following the discovery of gold on the Klamath River in 1850, settlers poured into the Dee-ni Territory. Between 1851 and 1852 there were numerous conflicts between the Dee-ni and white settlers – precipitating a decade of massacres and attempts to exterminate Dee-ni people and their way of life.

Members of the Tolowa Dee-ni' Nation started holding candlelight events at different massacre sites several years ago and are planning to hold several more.

“It brings some healing to us when we gather together as human beings and acknowledge our ancestors here,” said Marva Jones, Tolowa Dee-ni' Culture & Language Manager.

Tribal members said they often encounter people who live here, and who grew up here, who don't know about the Tolowa Dee-ni' Nation, and the indigenous people who perished from the violence of white settlers in their ancestral homelands.

“I want them to know that we survived this. We are still here today and we are still a strong people and can offer good things to our community,” Jones said.

“We all need each other in some way and we need to be more open to each other and understand a history we aren't taught in school,” she said. “I want my kids to know our truth. We were always taught our truth in our homes. We have to acknowledge these things to heal from them.”