

**Joseph James**

**Seattle, Washington**

**December 28, 2000**

**for**

**Southwest Seattle Historical Society**

**by**

**JonLee Joseph**

# Joseph James

Interviewed by: JonLee Joseph

December 28, 2000

1st Oral Interview

Seattle, Washington

**JonLee:** This is JonLee. I'm interviewing Joe James James of Ye Olde Curiosity Shop, Seattle, Washington.

**Joe James:** To get to West Seattle, where it's not so much [tape stops and is blank for approximately 17 minutes]

**JonLee:** Okay.

**Joe James:** On page 57 of Kate Duncan's book, entitled *1,000 Curious Things, Ye Olde Curiosity Shop and Native American Art*, it tells about the Chief Seattle hat that we have loaned to the museum. This is by my grandfather "Daddy" Standley, noted on a Ye Olde Curiosity Shop information card, history of Chief Seattle and Princess Angeline. "I bought Chief's old cedar bark hat from Moses, the dwarf Bowleg. Moses was Chief's nephew, free rider on all boats." Apparently they gave him free passage on any boat he wanted to ride.

**JonLee:** That would also include where the headband came?

**Joe James:** I'm not sure about that. It would be logical, but I'm not positive. Anyway, where were we?

**JonLee:** That's wonderful. That's exactly where we were.

**Joe James:** It's kind of interesting. Because until Kate Duncan had done a lot of research for this book, I learned many different stories. But she was impressed with all the records we had kept, even though we have moved so many times. We moved two or three times, before we finally got on the ferry dock in 1904, we had to move out to have the dock remodeled in 1917, and were out for about a year. And then we moved in and out again in 1937. In 1917, they rented space on Second Avenue and were there for about a year while they remodeled the dock. And then in 1937 we were up on First Avenue for 6 months while they again remodeled the dock. We moved back in, in 1938. And then in 1959 we moved to the south end of Colman Dock which is where Sunde and D'Evers, Ship Chandlers, were located for many years. And gee, we had tremendous space there, it's what we always needed. We were so jam packed. Paul Thiry designed the lights for us there. Paul Thiry was the chief architect for the Seattle World's Fair. He told us to paint the ceiling gold, which we did. We fixed it up and it was a wonderful location. We no sooner got in there than they talked about redoing the dock, again. So, we were there only from 1959 to 1963. We were there during the Century 21 World's Fair in 1962. Our business just tripled during the World's Fair. It was unbelievable, really something else. A wonderful space. Anyway, in 1963, we moved to a long house on Pier 51. The long house building that Paul Thiry designed. We were there for



twenty-five years, from 1963 to 1988, until we moved to where we are now, adjacent to Ivar's restaurant on Pier 54. We did, in the early '80's get a location on Pier 55, because we wanted to protect ourselves with a waterfront location. So, we leased that space in 1985 and built a very nice shop which we called the Waterfront Landmark. It did overlap some of the things that we carried at The Olde Curiosity Shop, but it had a lot of other things too, and a little more space. And that shop is still in existence. That's how we happened to end up with two places on the Seattle waterfront.

**JonLee:** Because I grew up in Seattle and I remember visiting your shops at different times in my life, just briefly would you talk about the mummy, which most people remember? I remember being fascinated with the shrunken heads.

**Joe James:** Well, the shrunken heads were our top attraction up until the time we got Sylvester the Mummy. [laughs] But we got the shrunken heads in the late '30's from George Heye, who was the Curator and Owner of the Museum of the American Indian then, in New York City. He was also a good friend and customer of my grandfather.

**JonLee:** And how are they made? Because we discussed this before, but bone doesn't shrink. Skin does.

**Joe James:** No. No, they peel the skin off the skull and boil it in a solution of alum and lime and then mold the features with their fingers. For years nobody knew exactly how they did that. But by boiling it and working it, it gradually shrunk the head. And they'd pour hot



sand in and out of the head. They sewed the eyes and the mouths shut. A lot of people said it was to hold the ingredients as they did the process. But also, they were very superstitious, and they wanted to do away with a person so that he could never come back to haunt them. This would keep him from talking or seeing again. That's one of the theories, at least.

**JonLee:** Were they from Ecuador?

**Joe James:** From Ecuador. The J'lvaro Indians in Ecuador. Shrunken heads were quite popular in the '20's and '30's and then the United States passed a law prohibiting bringing them into the country.

**JonLee:** But you still have some.

**Joe James:** Well, we do. We've got several that were the original, I think the law was passed somewhere in the '40's, but we still have the original group that we got from George Heye we still have. Including a shrunken torso of a female Indian. And the man's head that we had was considered the smallest one that's ever been found in the world. And we've had people from Ecuador say that this is one of the finest collections of shrunken heads they've ever seen anywhere. Anyway, we've had those on display ever since we got them. And I just happened to be in the shop as a young boy. (I used to come and work a little bit when I was fourteen, fifteen and sixteen years old, in the afternoons and on Saturdays.) I just happened to be in the shop when that shipment came in from George Heye. And I can see my grandfather and father and uncle all standing around trying to figure out how they were going to pay for them. They wanted

them badly but of course, it was still during the Depression, and they debated whether they could afford them or not. Well, fortunately they bought them. And they've been some of our key attractions ever since. But the torso's, the head was broken off from the shipment and my uncle had to repair it. I can see him now, trying to figure out the best way to do that and make it look, you know, as natural as possible.

**JonLee:** How did he?

**Joe James:** Well, [laughs] he used a combination of some kind of plaster, I guess, or whatever it was to hold it on there. But, you could probably detect that to this day if you look closely under her chin. Anyway in, it was in 1955, Fall of '55 we got a letter from a lady down in California that wanted to sell "Sylvester." Her father-in-law had found him. And when her father-in-law died, of course it went to his son, and when the son died, which was her husband, she didn't want it in the house. I guess she had enough skeletons in the closet. She was paying storage on it and wrote us that she wanted to sell it. Well, we receive a lot of crazy letters over the years, and we weren't sure just exactly what it was, but she sent us magazine articles and clippings about him and we could tell that he was for real. So we bought him from her and I remember when came in. It was shipped in a long black metal box. Like just a plain coffin and the railway express people who delivered it, were so interested that several of them came with it to see what in the heck was in this box. And then since then, we've had a case built for him and he's been in the shop since late 1955.



**JonLee:** Do you remember where he's from? I mean the mummy, where the mummy was from?

**Joe James:** They found him in the Gila Bend Desert in Arizona. And the story is that these two cowboys came across his body and he had been shot. There's a bullet hole in his stomach. He'd gotten rid of a lot of blood, apparently. The heat of the sand and the chemicals in the sand, that was either shifted or blown over him, brought about that condition within 24 hours. Which prevented any form of decay. Naturally, we were quite pleased to get him. They were never able to identify him, which is probably a good thing, because if somebody could, they might claim him as a relative. He's been a great source of entertainment for people.

**JonLee:** Yes, when I mentioned Ye Olde Curiosity Shop people will say to me, "That's where the mummy is!"

**Joe James:** We have another little mummy there called Gloria, who was a species of Indian that lived in Arizona, several hundred years ago. We had the Discovery Channel people come in and video tape, or record, a documentary on mummies. They showed us packing her up and then sending her down to this mummy expert in Arizona. He said that he thought she was about seven hundred years old. But he couldn't identify whether she was an Indian or a white person. But it was a small girl. The original story was that she was a species of Indian that averaged only about 42" tall. But, I'm not so sure that that's right after listening to this expert. But he still wasn't able to identify her. He said it was a little girl and not a full grown person, or a fully mature person. But she has been a puzzle, too. This documentary, or



this film appears on the Discovery Channel and also on the Learning Channel, every once in a while. And it's extremely interesting. It's an hour show and if you ever get a chance to see it, I think you will find it fascinating.

**JonLee:** I'll look for it.

**Joe James:** And we were quite pleased with it.

**JonLee:** Now, I just want to ask you in terms of looking ahead. Now that you're no longer concerned with the day-to-day of the business.

**Joe James:** Well, I'm concerned, but I'm not down there doing it! [laughs]

**JonLee:** But your son is. Do you foresee that this is going to be held by the family in the future, too?

**Joe James:** Well, my son just loves the business so he's not about to sell it, you know what I mean? He loves it and he looks forward to going to work everyday. And it is an interesting business. There's so many different facets to it. And everyday is like Christmas around there. Really, you're getting in different items and people come who are interesting, people from all over the world. Of course, there area lot more world travelers now than there were right after the War. There were a lot of world travelers before the First World War, but few during the '30's Depression. Andy has two sons. Now whether they'll come into the business, who knows? But, one of them, the older one, when he was about six years old, he's now ten, said to his father one day he'd like to work in the shop when he gets big.

Hannah -

On the Cover -

Joseph James

P.S.

He's agreed to redo  
the 1<sup>st</sup> part upon his  
return to Seattle in May

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**JonLee:** Okay.

**Joe:** *James* On page 57 of Kate Duncan's book, entitled *1,000 Curious Things, Ye Olde Curiosity Shop and Native American Art*, it tells ~~here~~ *the* about Chief Seattle hat that we have loaned to the museum. This is by my grandfather Stanley, noted on a Ye Olde Curiosity Shop information card, history of Chief Seattle and Princess Angeline. "I bought Chief's old cedar bark hat from Moses, the dwarf ~~bow leg~~ *BOWLEG*. Moses was Chief's nephew, free rider on all boats." Apparently they gave him free passage on any boat he wanted to ride ~~on~~, this nephew of Chief Seattle, ~~S NEPHEW~~ *DADDY* STANDLEY

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wonderful space. Anyway, in 1963, we moved to a long house on Pier 51. The long house building that Paul Therry designed. And we were there for twenty-five years, From 1963 to 1988, until we moved to where we are now, adjacent to Ivar's restaurant on Pier 54. We did, in the early '80's get a location on Pier 55, because we wanted to protect ourselves with a waterfront location. So, we leased that space there in 1985 and built a very nice shop there which we called the Waterfront Landmark. And it did overlap some of the things that we carried at The Olde Curiosity Shop, but it had a lot of other things too, and a little more space. And that shop is still in existence. That's how we happened to end up with two places on the Seattle waterfront.

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HE ALSO WAS A GOOD FRIEND AND CUSTOMER OF MY GRANDFATHER.

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**JonLee:** Were they from Ecuador?

**Joe:** <sup>James</sup> From Ecuador. The <sup>JIVARO</sup> Hebro(?) Indians in Ecuador. <sup>SHRUNKEN HEADS</sup> And they were quite popular in the '20's and '30's and then the United States passed a law prohibiting ~~them from~~ bringing them into the country. ~~Prohibiting us from bringing them into the country.~~

**JonLee:** But you still have some.

**Joe:** <sup>James</sup> Well, we <sup>DO</sup> ~~did~~. Well, we've got several that were the original, I think the law was passed somewhere in the '40's, but <sup>WE STILL HAVE</sup> the original group that we got from George <sup>HEYE</sup> High(?) <sup>HEAD</sup> we still have. Including a shrunk torso of a female Indian. And the man <sup>THIS IS</sup> that we had was considered the smallest one that's ever been found in the world. And we've had people from Ecuador say that ~~that was~~ <sup>THEY'VE</sup> one of the finest collections of shrunk heads they'd ever seen anywhere. Anyway, we've had those on display ever since we got them. And I just happened to be in the shop as a young boy. (I used to come and work a little bit when I was fourteen, fifteen and sixteen years old, in the afternoons and on Saturdays.) I just happened to be in the shop when that shipment came in from George <sup>HEYE</sup> High. And I can see my grandfather and father and uncle all standing around trying to figure out how they were going to pay for <sup>THEM</sup> ~~these things~~. They wanted them ~~real~~ badly but of



course, it was still during the Depression, and they debated whether they <sup>COULD AFFORD</sup> ~~should buy~~ them or not. Well, fortunately they bought them. And they've been some of our key attractions ever since. But the torso <sup>IS</sup> the head was broken off from the shipment and my uncle had to repair <sup>IT</sup> ~~that~~. I can see him now, trying to figure out the best way to do that and make it look, you know, as natural as possible.

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**Joe:** <sup>James</sup> They found him in the <sup>GILA BEND</sup> ~~Heliabin~~(?) Desert in Arizona. And the story is that these two cowboys came across his body and he had been shot. ~~There's~~ <sup>There's</sup> a bullet hole in his stomach. ~~And he'd~~ <sup>And he</sup> gotten rid of a lot of blood, apparently. ~~And that~~ <sup>And that</sup> the heat of the sand and the chemicals in the sand, that was either shifted or blown over him, ~~they said~~ <sup>they said</sup>, brought about that condition within 24 hours. Which prevented any form of decay. ~~And so, we~~ <sup>NATURALLY</sup> were quite pleased to get him. They were never able to identify him, which is probably a good thing, because if somebody could, they might claim him as a relative, ~~or something. And so, that's one reason why we still have him, I~~ <sup>guess</sup>. He's been a great source of entertainment for people.

**JonLee:** Yes, when I mentioned Ye Olde Curiosity Shop people will say to me, "That's where the mummy is!"

**Joe:** <sup>James</sup> We have another little mummy there called Gloria, <sup>WHO</sup> ~~that~~ was a <sup>years ago</sup> species of Indian that lived in Arizona, several hundred. We had the <sup>CHANNEL</sup> Discovery people come in and <sup>VIDEO TAPE</sup> photograph, or record, a documentary on mummies, ~~so they came in the shop. And they~~ <sup>HER</sup> showed us packing <sup>HER</sup> this up and then sending <sup>HER</sup> it down to this mummy expert ~~down~~ in Arizona. ~~And he~~ <sup>And he</sup> said that he thought she was about 700 years old. But he couldn't identify whether she was an Indian or a white person. But it was a small girl. The original story was that she was a species of Indian that averaged only about 42" <sup>listening</sup> tall. But, I'm not so sure that that's right after ~~listened~~ <sup>listening</sup> to this expert. But he still wasn't able to identify her. He said it was a little girl and not a full grown person, or ~~you know~~ <sup>you know</sup>, a fully mature person. But she



<sup>A PUZZLE</sup> has been ~~interesting~~, too. <sup>DOCUMENTARY</sup> ~~And this article appears~~, or this film appears on the Discovery Channel and also on the Learning Channel, every once in a while. And it's extremely interesting. It's an hour show and if you ever get a chance to see it, <sup>I THINK</sup> ~~it's very~~ <sup>you will</sup> interesting. <sup>FIND IT FASCINATING.</sup>

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**Joe:** <sup>James</sup> And we were quite pleased with it.

**JonLee:** Now, I just want to ask you in terms of looking ahead, <sup>now that</sup> you're no longer concerned with the day-to-day of the business.

**Joe:** <sup>James</sup> Well, I'm concerned, but I'm not down there doing it! [laughs]

**JonLee:** But your son is. Do you foresee that this is going to be held by the family in the future, too?

**Joe:** <sup>James</sup> Well, my son just loves the business so he's not about to sell it, you know what I mean? He loves it and he looks forward to going to work everyday. And it is an interesting business. There's so many different facets to it. And everyday is like Christmas around there. Really, you're getting ~~things in and~~ <sup>WHO ARE</sup> different items and people come in <sup>and it's</sup> interesting <sup>to talk to</sup> people from all <sup>OVER</sup> around the world. Of course, <sup>THERE ARE</sup> a lot more world travelers now than there were right after the War. There were a lot of world travelers before the First World War, <sup>BUT FEW DURING THE 30's DEPRESSION.</sup> you know, and then some afterward. <sup>ANDY</sup> But it's an interesting business. <sup>?</sup> And he has two sons. Now whether they'll come into the business, who knows? But, one of them, the older one, when he was about six years old, he's now ten, said to his father one day he'd like to work