VIRTUAL VISION QUEST

led by Wanda Patterson, Chair

American Indians Committee

Fielding Lewis NSDAR

April, 2024

(Chairman's note: So many readers have commented about how tragic my previous articles have been, that I determined that this month's topic would not be sad.)

Totem poles and potlatches

Northwestern tribes observe colorful traditions

American Indians and Canadian First Nations tribes have lived on the Northwest coasts of both countries for thousands of years, thriving on the bounty of the waters and forests of the area from southeastern Alaska to northern Washington State. Since the history of these people has not been as full of conflict and treaties as the history of tribes in other parts of America, little information about them has drawn the attention of historians and travelers. Most prominent among the Indigenous people of the Pacific Northwest were the Kwakiutl, Nootka, Haida, Tsimshian, Tlingit, and Suquamish tribes. In the past during the warm months, the year-round survival needs of these Natives were met through fishing and hunting, so they had plenty of time during the winter to devote themselves to traditional events, ceremonies, and artistic creations. Tribesmen occupied their winter months with activities which celebrated their ancestors and the spirits of the earth around them. Two of these traditions, an elaborate event called the **Potlatch** and the carving of **totem poles**, are particularly fascinating.

The Potlatch was a feast provided by a Pacific Northwest chief and his clan, both to entertain and to impress the members of a neighboring clan. The guests were invited to witness a celebration which, in early days, might require as many as twelve years to prepare. The event included an enormous feast, performances by costumed dancers, speeches and boasting, and a massive give-away by the host clan. The term "Potlatch" means "to give," and the host clan and chief gave their visitors an expensive stockpile of goods, such as blankets and brass teapots and beautifully carved items, which were collected for months or years in order to demonstrate the clan's wealth and prestige in the area. So expansive was the gift-giving that it might require years of penury on the part of the chief and clan to restore their wealth. Pictured below is an 1870 Potlatch in which host clan members stand on the roof of their communal house to throw gifts to their guests, who have arrived at the party in cedar canoes.

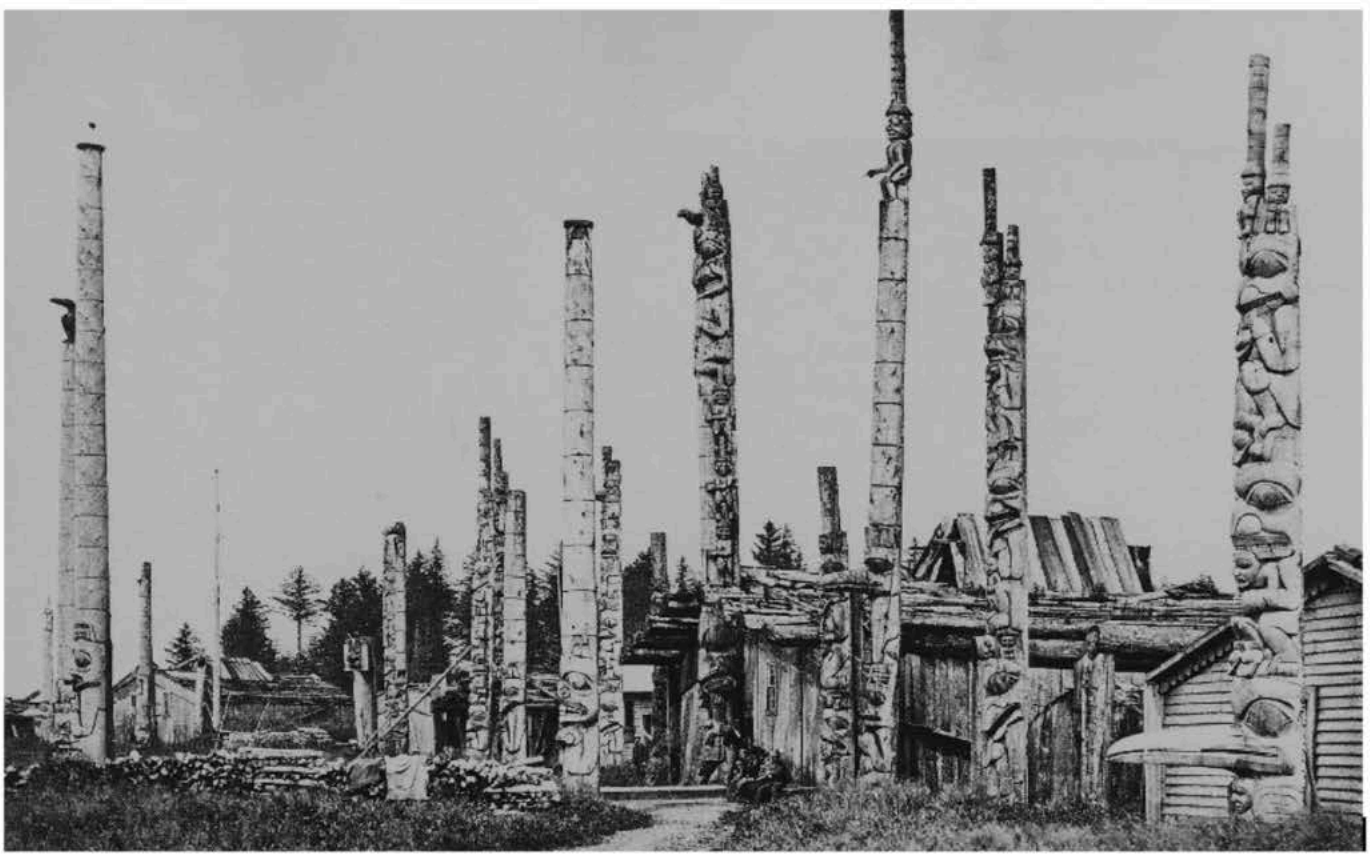
A Potlatch was given in honor of an important family event, such as a birth, a child's naming ceremony, a marriage, or a death. The week-long affair featured lots of singing and telling of family stories. Performances by elaborately costumed dancers enacted myths and legends. Most of the stories involved animals and monsters, and the dancers who enacted the roles were thought to be inhabited by the spirits of the animals or mythic creatures involved in the dance. Dancers wore headpieces and masks which were skillfully carved for the spectacle.

Because the Potlatches involved great extravagance, missionaries and Indian agents pressed the government to prevent the events. Thus, in 1895 the Canadian government outlawed the gift-giving ceremonies on the grounds that they were wasteful and pagan. Ignoring the law, most tribes continued the practice in secret until the ban was lifted in 1950. The American government did not go so far as to outlaw the Potlatch, but authorities strongly discouraged the practice.

Potlatches continue today among the Indigenous people of the Northwest, and the

events contain most of the same ceremonies as those practiced by their ancestors. The elaborate giving of gifts continues in the modern-day Potlatch with gifts including such items as luggage, electric appliances, linens, and coffee mugs. Bundles of cash are frequent substitutes for piles of material gifts. Other modern changes involve guests arriving in motor boats; and instead of weeklong parties, the events are cut to a single day and night because most of the participants have full-time jobs. These simplified versions of the traditional occasion usually require only a year of preparation. The reasons for the celebrations are much the same as those observed hundreds of years ago, marking important events in the lives of the clan hosts. There is a catch to the host clan's spending so much of their wealth on the Potlatch, however, because the guest clan is expected to host a larger and even more elaborate Potlatch in the near future to thank their generous hosts.

The most easily recognized tradition practiced by the Indigenous people of the Northwest is the carving of totem poles. These freestanding poles ranged in height up to 100 feet. Totem poles were carved mostly from Western Red Cedar trees. Because cedar decomposes quickly, few examples of these massive structures created prior to 1900 still exist today, thus tracing the tradition back to its origin is a murky business.



Contrary to popular belief, totem poles were not the basis of a religion. The figures featured on the pole were symbols of a tribe's history, values, and traditions. Some represented legends, clan images, or notable clan members, as well as marking important celebrations within the tribe. Most of the images on a pole represented

animals important to the clan's survival or the aggressive animals dangerous to tribal members. Each animal carried spiritual significance known only to the clan and the totem carver. Certain images represented persons within the tribe. It is widely believed that the least important person or animal carved on the pole appeared near the bottom of the pole, thus the popular phrase "lowest man on the totem pole." In reality, the most important figures were often found on the bottom or below the middle of the pole. Clans which have created the most totem poles are the Eyak, Tlingit, Haida, and Tsimshian people.

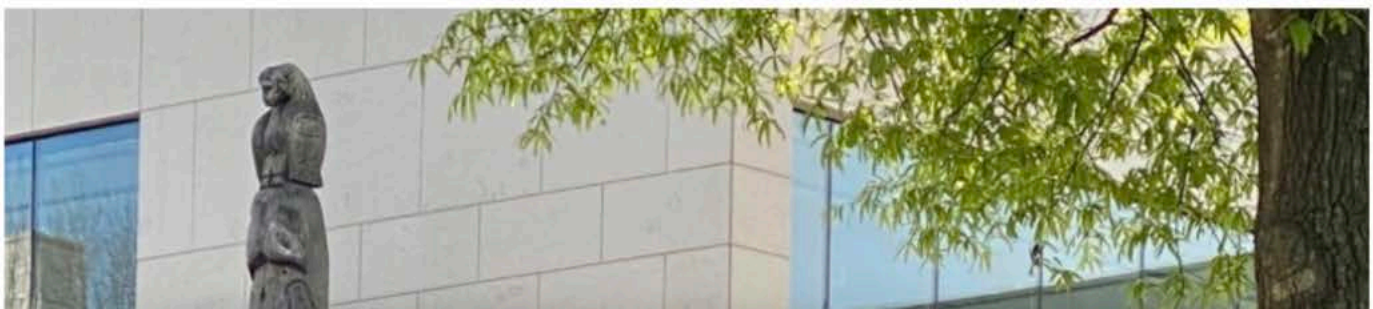
One type of totem pole is called a mortuary pole. A cavity was carved in the back of the pole near the top. The cremated remains of an important clan person was placed in the cavity as a form of ritual burial. Unfortunately, there was much need for mortuary poles in the 18th Century when white Europeans brought fatal diseases to the Indigenous residents. Entire islands of clan members were decimated by diseases such as influenza, measles, whooping cough, scarlet fever, tuberculosis, venereal disease, and especially smallpox. The population of island-based fishing villages was reduced from 7,000 to 1,000 people, and surviving residents left their once thriving island homes to escape the plagues of disease. By the 19th Century, fishermen only returned to the uninhabited islands occasionally, using them as fishing camps. Particularly hard hit were the Haida people. Their totem poles rotted and disappeared into the forested landscape or were taken by museums or burned for firewood.

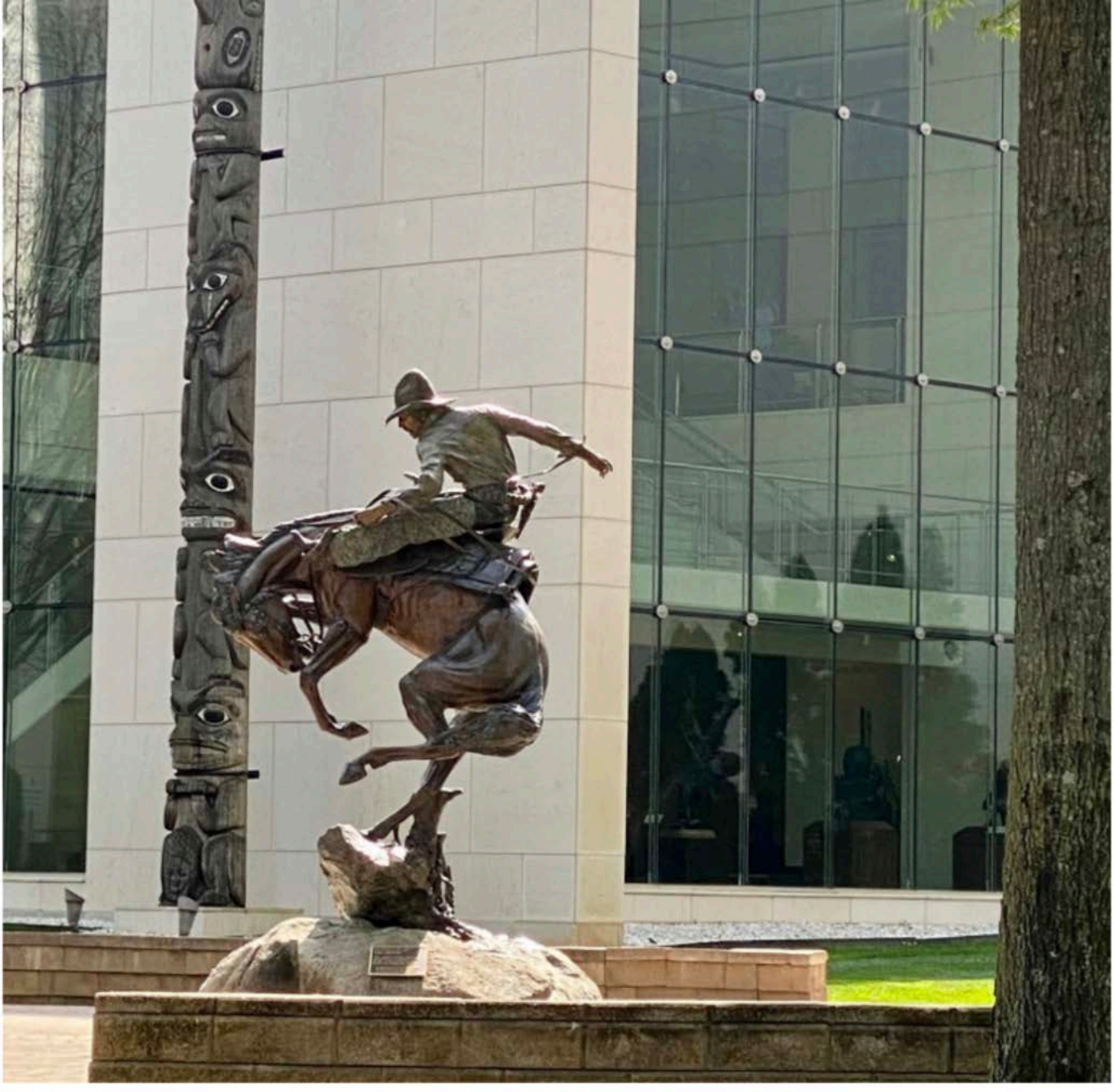
In the 20th century, young Indigenous residents of the Northwest have demonstrated a renewed interest in the cultural history of their ancestors. Of special interest have been totem poles, and young woodcarvers have developed their skills such that new totem poles now dot the landscapes of their once historic villages and northwestern cities. Carvers of the poles spend years honing their woodworking skills, and the carvers are very much respected by members of their communities. The carvers must have an artistic eye because part of the design of each pole requires the balancing of the images and decorative aspects of the pole, right to left, with each side being equal. Balancing the images of animals must be taken into consideration, as well, creating a composition which includes a passive animal such as the beaver to counterbalance an aggressive animal like the wolf. Of course these modern pole makers use modern carving tools and electric devices, as opposed to their ancestors who employed natural tools, such as beaver teeth to complete their slow, painstaking work. It is difficult to envision the enormity of the task of creating such a tall art piece, but the picture below shows a carver hired by Native residents of Juneau, Alaska, to carve an Eagle and Raven totem pole to display in the Sealaska Heritage Institute. The height of the totem pole is astonishing.

Once the totem pole is complete, it is painstakingly taken to the site where it is to reside. A day-long ceremony by clan elders dedicates the pole before it is set into place. The event involves much singing, dancing, and prayer, including a traditional pole-raising song. Able-bodied guests gather around the pole, roll it onto its face, and secures ropes around the pole. The ropes are used to pull the pole into the upright

position and lower its base into the hole. The pit is filled with boulders, rocks, and gravel to anchor the much-revered totem pole. Solemn ceremonies are replaced with dancing, singing, feasting, and celebration at the home of the individual who owns (pays for) the totem pole. Below is a photo of a modern pole being levered into place.

Over 30 totem poles from the 19th Century have been relocated from their original villages, preserved, and are available for viewing in the Totem Heritage Center at Ketchikan in southeastern Alaska. The world's largest collection – over 80 standing totem poles – are scattered around Ketchikan with more being added by artists and traditional clan members each year. Companies such as Ketchikan Native Tours offer guided tours, or visitors may explore the area and find totem poles on their own, thanks to readily available maps. Additional large collections of totem poles may be found in Juneau, Alaska, and in British Columbia, Canada, at Alert Bay, Kitwanga, and Haida Gwaii.





Locally, the Booth Western Art Museum in Cartersville, Georgia, proudly displays an authentic totem pole in the sculpture garden near the entrance to the museum. The pole was secured from a museum in Alaska.