

CONSERVATION AND RESTORATION OF TOTEM POLES

Conservation of Totem Poles.

James Deans, who collected Haida totem poles for the World's Fair at Chicago in 1893, seems to have inaugurated the period of their conservation, after they had ceased to be erected in large numbers on the Queen Charlotte Islands.

The conservation of totem poles and house posts was eventually to assume two forms: first, their preservation in museums, away from the corrosion caused by seasonal change and natural elements; and second, their restoration and re-erection in cement bases in public parks after they were treated so as to ensure their comparative longevity in the open. Left alone in their original location, most of them were bound to crash down some fifty or sixty years after their erection. It is doubtful whether any pole erected in 1875 is now standing; even with immunity to wilful destruction (many have been taken by careless native villagers as firewood), it would be impossible.

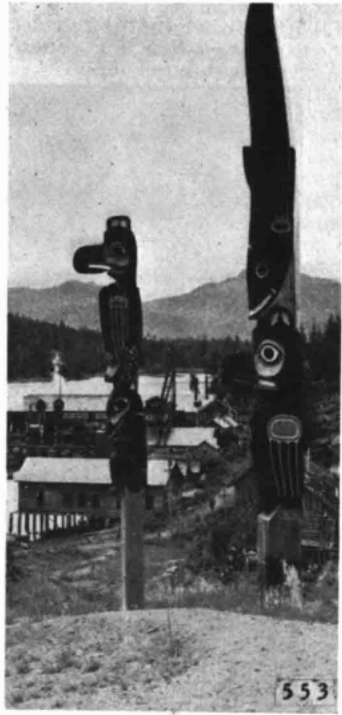
Only a dozen or so Haida totems figured at the World's Fair at Chicago. Once the exhibition was over, they remained as part of the ethnological collection of the Field Museum of Natural History, until the building they were housed in was replaced by the Art Institute, and they were dispersed or lost sight of.

Many more poles from that date on were collected, not a few of them by Dr. C. F. Newcombe and his son W. A. Newcombe, for the museums of the United States, Europe, and Canada. The author in this way, too, contributed to the saving of whatever remained standing of the totem poles on Nass River, fifteen in all, most of them among the best in existence.

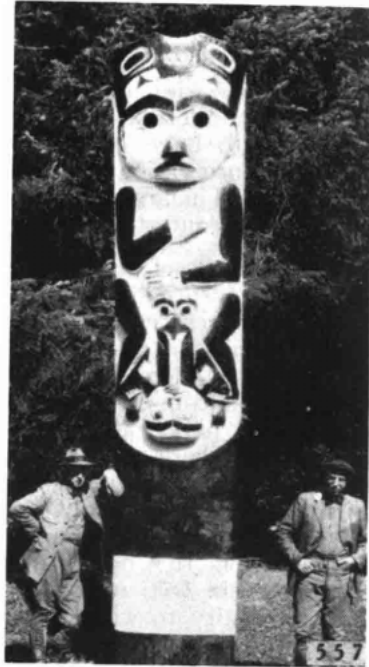
Public parks in a few cities in Canada and Alaska became modern totem pole centres: here they were re-erected for preservation in the open. The fruits of this labour may be seen in Victoria, Vancouver, and Prince Rupert, in British Columbia; and in Saxman and Ketchikan, Klawock and Sitka, in Alaska. Under the efficient and far-seeing Forest Service of the American Government, many poles of deserted Kaigani-Haida and Tlingit villages have been saved. At Wrangell, new totem poles were carved and erected under



A restored Tlingit totem



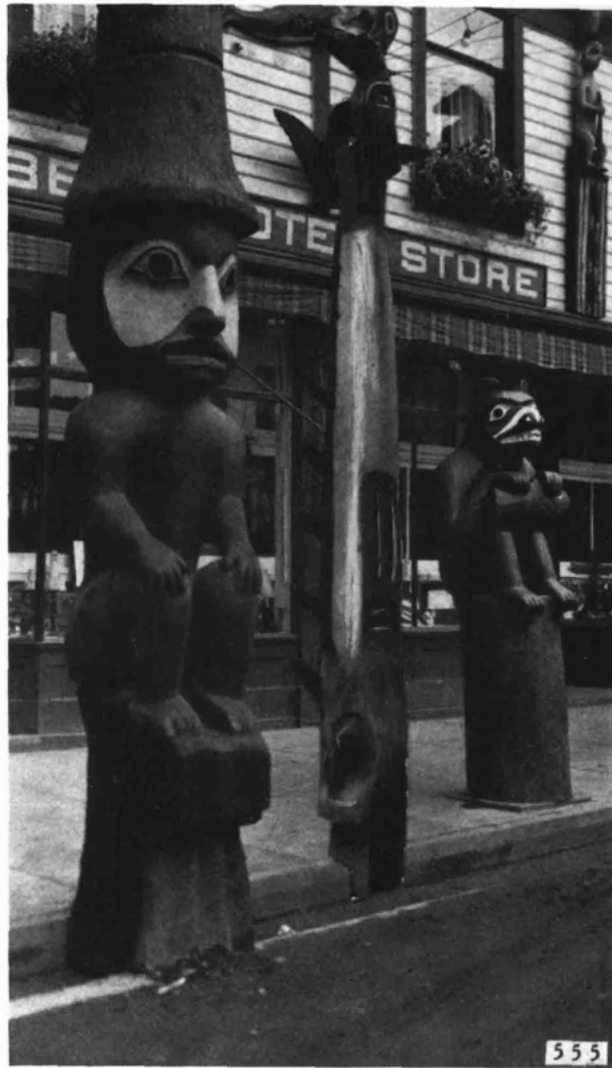
Tlingit totems in Klawock park,
Alaska



Tlingit house post in Sitka Park



Tlingit totems of southern Alaska in front of the Bear Totem Store, Wrangell



Tlingit totems at Wrangell

the WPA Plan by Indian carvers to replace the earlier ones in the same location. The new carvings were derisively called "Barbecue poles" by the Tlingits, because they lacked any real significance and were required by the white man only for purposes strange to the older natives.

The Canadian Government and Canadian National Railways jointly undertook, after having been urged by the author, to preserve the totem poles of the Gitksans in their several villages up Skeena River. Unfortunately, the work of restoration was not very successfully carried out because

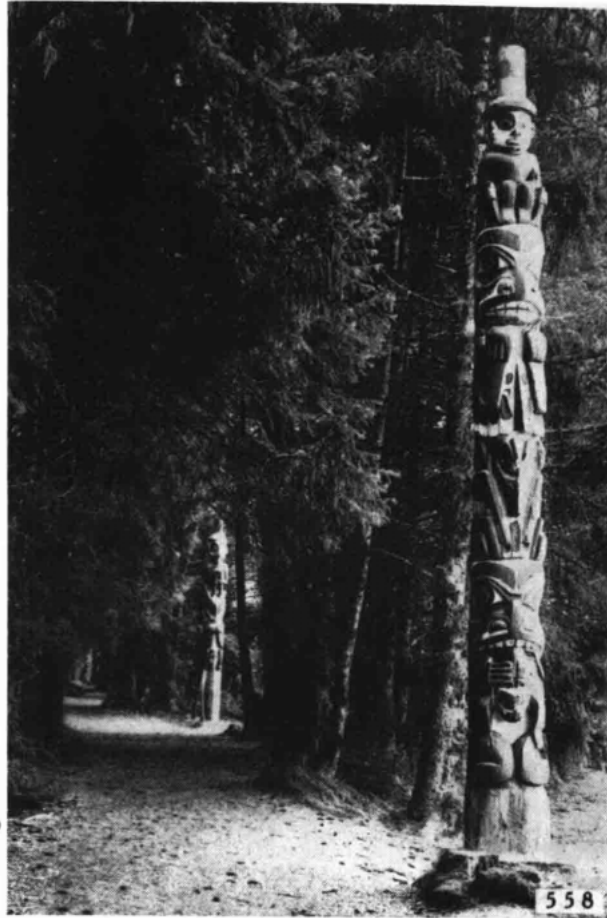


A tall Kaigani pole in Sitka Park, Alaska

of deficiencies in the personnel in charge, and it was given up after only two groups had been taken care of—those of Kitwanga and the Gitsalas Canyon (on one side only).

The carvings in the Totem Park of the Provincial Government in Victoria have been well handled and repainted, and constitute the best cluster of its kind in Canada. Very soon the University of British Columbia will have another group of poles collected by the author and the artist Arthur Price, in the summer of 1947, at Fort Rupert, Alert Bay, and on Nass River.

The totems of Stanley Park in Vancouver and of Prince Rupert, like the one standing in Jasper Park, count among the best specimens from the



Tlingit totem in Sitka Park

Haida, the Kwakiutl, and the Niskæ countries, but they have been gaudily painted and disfigured after replanting. For this reason very few of them have been included here in their present garb. The restorers as a rule forget that the totems of the northern natives of the coast were carvings, not paintings.

Paint was used on house fronts and very sparingly on some, not all, totem and house poles.

Some isolated poles, after being restored and replanted, stand in the open. Such ones are the Eagle's Nest pole from Nass River, in the Zoological Garden near Quebec; a Haida pole, in front of the Museum of the American Indian in New York City; and two Nass River poles, near the Annex of the same museum in the Bronx; a Tlingit pole in front of the Alaska Commissioner's residence at Juneau, Alaska; a few in the streets and the parks or in front of stores in Ketchikan, Wrangell, and Juneau, Alaska.



Restored Tlingit totems in Sitka Park

The largest number still remaining in their original location (about a hundred in all) are those of the Gitksans on upper Skeena River. These have seriously deteriorated since 1925. A few new ones of inferior quality have been carved and erected there in the past ten years. A festival for raising new poles and re-erecting old ones was held at Gitsegyukla in the winter of 1946, but, as the new generation is not totem-pole-minded, this may be the last effort of its kind.

Totem restoration in recent decades in the United States and Canada, as explained by Edward L. Keithahn (62: 118-128).

Extracts from Mr. Keithahn's interesting chapter—

Through the conspiracy of climate and social usage a cedar totem pole could hardly be expected to stand much longer than the man it honoured. So long as new poles replaced those rotting away, there seemed no need to be concerned lest this unique art disappear from the earth. Yet, when totem-carving practically ceased at the turn of the century, it was plain that unless something was done soon to preserve those monuments left standing, it was only a question of a few years when there would not be a single totem pole left standing in sight on the whole Northwest Coast.

While a great many totem poles had been removed from their original settings to grace the parks and museums of the United States, Canada, Alaska, and even Europe, the first recorded instance of an effort to preserve totem clusters in Alaska, intact, was in Sitka. A "Public Park" was created there by proclamation on June 21, 1890, on the site of the old "Kiksadi" Indian village where in 1804 the battle for Sitka was won by the Russians and where a cluster of totem poles stood. This park became the "Sitka National Monument" on March 23, 1910.

The National Monument of Old Kasaan was originally established by executive order in 1907, amplified by the Presidential Proclamation of October 25, 1916. It is about 40 miles east of Ketchikan on Prince of Wales Island. The village, deserted since 1900, contained many fine totem poles and the ruins of community houses.

In the spring of 1926, Dr. H. W. Krieger of the U.S. National Museum, on loan to the Bureau of American Ethnology, was detailed to inspect the houses and totem poles at Old Kasaan with a view to their preservation. He found many poles beyond the possibility of recovery, but the remaining monuments were scraped and treated with creosote.

In the years intervening between 1921 and 1938, restoration of Alaska's totem poles was a sporadic enterprise carried out by a few far-seeing individuals in their own communities or by local service clubs. The late Walter Waters of Wrangell purchased several poles and totem figures and moved them from deserted West Coast villages to Wrangell, where they may still be seen.

In February 1937, Dr. Ernest Gruening, then director of Territories and Insular Possessions, reopened the question by recommending to Chief Forester Silcox that something be done to preserve the poles. During the greater part of the next 2 years the Forest Service collected data on location and condition of existing totem poles and community houses, the rightful owners of them, and ways and means of securing title so that they could be moved to various centres for rehabilitation if such a project were instituted.

The program of Totem Restoration was actually initiated as a C.C.C. project in July 1938, by Regional Forester B. Frank Heintzleman, who was director for the Alaska C.C.C.

In the project, which did not formally close until June 30, 1942, approximately 250 Indians were employed. Totem poles from Cape Fox, Old Tongass Village, Village Island, Pennock Island, Old Kasaan, Sukkwan, Klinkwan, Howkan, Tuxekan, Seattle, Sitka, Wrangell, and Ketchikan were removed for restoration or duplication. It is interesting to note here that Seattle's famous Pioneer's Square totem pole, purloined in 1899, was duplicated for Seattle by the descendants of the Indians from whom it was stolen on that memorable "Good Will" excursion.

Since many of the above sites were in hidden "canoe harbours" seldom visited by anyone, most of the renovated poles were set up in clusters in more accessible places, often in the towns where the descendants of the old totem carvers now reside. Hence, clusters were placed at New Kasaan, Saxman, Totem Bight (near Ketchikan), Hydaburg, Klawock, Wrangell, and Sitka, forming unique totem parks in those communities.

Individual totems were set up in Ketchikan, Wrangell, Juneau, Old Auk Village site, Sitka, and Seattle. In all, 48 old poles were restored, another 54 beyond restoration were duplicated by native artists, and 19 poles which existed only in memory were carved anew. Besides this, three Indian Community houses were duplicated, one at Mud Bight, Ketchikan; another at Kasaan; and a third on Shakes Island, Wrangell harbour.

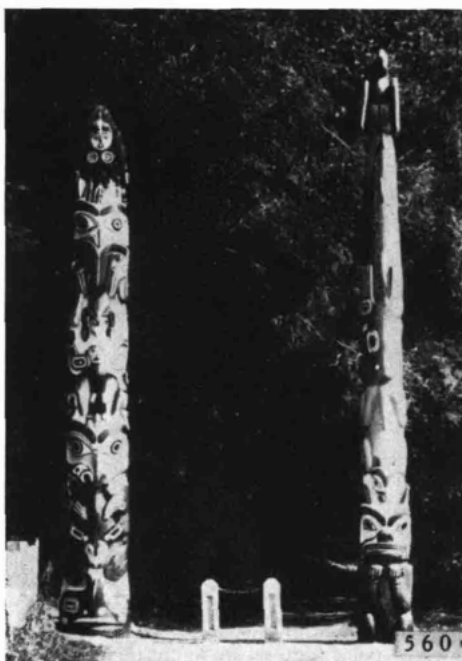
Although the project was initiated, directed, and carried out by the U.S. Forest Service, it had the co-operation of the U.S. Indian Service, the Governor's Office, many other interested public agencies and individuals, both white and native. Through it a cross-section of the most remarkable art in America has been preserved for public enjoyment for many years to come.

Totem poles destroyed, as reported by Edward L. Keithahn (62:86)

In Kake village all totem poles were chopped down and burned on the pretense that they were a health menace. Many of them did contain charred bones of the dead, but the real motive behind their destruction was to remove an important symbol of an allegedly unholy past.

Totem poles at Sitka are not really Sitkan, as explained by Edward L. Keithahn (62: 54).

A few years ago one could be certain that Tlingit poles would be found only in the territory occupied exclusively by the Tlingits, and Haida poles in Haida territory. However, many have since been taken up and transported to new locations even within the totem-pole regions. Sitka, in Tlingit country, now has many fine Haida totems brought there from Howkan and Klinkwan, and Tlingit poles brought there from Port Chester. There is not a genuine Sitka pole in Sitka, for only mortuary poles were carved there and these have long since disappeared. A fine old Haida pole from Sukkwan stands in Juneau, also in Tlingit country.



Kaigani and Tlingit totems in Sitka Park

The Restoration of Gitksan Totem Poles jointly by the National Museum of Canada, the Department of Indian Affairs, and the Canadian National Railways, from 1926 to 1928.

The author succeeded in inducing the above-mentioned Canadian Government departments and Sir Henry Thornton, Chairman of the Canadian National Railways, to preserve as many as possible of the totem poles of the Gitksans, where they could be seen by tourists. Harlan I. Smith for the National Museum, and T. B. Campbell, bridge engineer for the Canadian National Railways, were placed in charge. The villages later brought into this scheme were Kitwanga and Gitsalas.

Here is the report of Harlan I. Smith after his first season in control (quoted from Bulletin No. 50, Ann. Rept. Nat. Mus., Canada, 1926, Dept. of Mines, pp. 81-83).



Kaigani and Tlingit poles in Sitka Park

The writer spent the summer at Kitwanga, B.C., superintending the preservation of the Indian totem-poles along Skeena River. This work was commenced in 1925 under the direction of a committee consisting of Dr. D. C. Scott, Deputy Superintendent General of Indian Affairs, Mr. Charles Camsell, Deputy Minister of Mines, Mr. J. B. Harkin, Commissioner of Canadian National Parks, Mr. E. Sapir and Mr. C. M. Barbeau, of the Museum staff; and the same committee directed the work in 1926, except that Mr. Sapir was replaced by his successor as Chief of the Division of Anthropology, Mr. D. Jenness. The Department of Indian Affairs defrayed all the running expenses, and the Canadian National Railways co-operated by supplying considerable quantities of material free of charge and by placing at the writer's disposal the services of a special engineer, Mr. T. B. Campbell.

The initial step was to gain the goodwill and consent of the Indian owners of the poles. This was not easy, for they were unfavourably disposed toward white men in general, and particularly toward Government officials. There were many grievances they could cite, some no doubt real, and some imaginary. The white men had settled on their land and were pushing the Indians more and more to the wall; they had built canneries on the coast that

were destroying all the fish; they were cutting all the best timber in the country so that within a few years none would remain for the Indian; they sold whisky in Government liquor stores and put the Indians in jail when they drank it. A few years ago, they had prohibited the erection of totem poles; why did they wish now to preserve them? Much tact and patience were necessary to answer these and other objections the Indians raised to any interference with their poles, but in the end most of the difficulties were happily overcome.

The engineering work progressed favourably under the able direction of Mr. Campbell. Poles that had decayed at their bases (and they were in the majority) were cut off at ground-level and bolted to new, well-seasoned bases. The fresh portions were then creosoted, and the older parts of the poles treated with linseed oil, since paint cannot be applied satisfactorily over a creosoted surface. All the original poles had been painted, but the colours were almost obliterated through exposure to the weather. They were repainted on the ground and re-erected in a cement setting capped with plastic gum that reached slightly above the ground-level to prevent seepage of water between the wood and the cement. The lowering and raising of each pole was accomplished with an A-frame and a winch.

The repainting represented the greatest difficulty. To apply the colours in conformity with ideas derived from European technique would have destroyed the aboriginal character of the poles, and produced a hybrid art. If restored at all, the colours should conform to those originally painted on the poles. In many cases the oldest natives alone retained any memory of their former appearance, and even they could reach agreement only after long discussions and arguments. Another problem arose in connection with the method of repainting. The weathering of the wood had been accompanied by a fading of the original colours, giving to each pole an archaic and subdued appearance in harmony with the landscape. Only the Indians themselves, who owned the poles and who alone knew the original colours, could be employed for repainting, and they were not experienced in reproducing antique forms; so although they toned down the new colours as far as they were able, they could not avoid a gaudiness in the repainted poles that contrasts unpleasantly with the mellow colours of those still untouched. It should be remembered, however, that new poles were gaudy even in olden days and that exposure to the weather for one or, at the most, two years will produce all the fading that should be necessary to restore an archaic appearance. The poles that were repainted in 1925 now appear quite satisfactory in this respect, although they were extremely gaudy immediately after their restoration.

When the operations were begun in 1925 in Kitwanga, three totem poles had already fallen, and most of the remaining fifteen had rotted immediately below the ground-level, so that they were in danger of falling. In that year eight specimens were treated, seven totem poles and one totem figure, two of which had fallen. Last summer ten specimens were cared for in the same way, nine totem poles and one totem figure, a gain of 25 per cent, at the same expense. The gain was doubtless due to the experience gained in 1925, to more suitable equipment, and to better relations with the Indians, whose experience with the movement in the preceding year resulted in a more friendly disposition, fewer delays, and even voluntary offers of co-operation.

Ninety per cent of the totem poles at Kitwanga are now restored. Only two poles remain untouched, and for these the native owner refuses to give his consent. The Indians have given permission to work on eight poles at Gitseyukla, one at Hazelton, four at Hagwelget, and two at the forbidden village of Kitwinkul; it is understood, also, that they agree to the restoration of all the poles at Kispiox.

This work of preserving the totem poles at Kitwanga has already produced some interesting results. The "Out-of-Doors Totem Pole Museum" (as they have been called) has not only attracted tourists but stimulated the Indians themselves. In 1925, John Laknitz, a Gitksan Indian, opened beside it a museum of ancient Gitksan costumes, musical instruments, and other objects; he played phonograph records taken by himself of Gitksan songs and exhibited photographs of some Gitksan portraits painted by Mr. Kihn. His little museum was visited by many tourists but was closed a year later on the death of its owner. Soon afterwards, however, his father, Jim Laknitz, opened his own house, a much more suitable place. Its large size, its fireplace, smoke-hole, and two large ridge-poles with four carved house posts supporting them, are typically Indian features, although the pitch of the roof, the shakes, the lumber, the doors, and the windows are modern in character. Inside are a large number of excellent old Gitksan specimens. Visitors have expressed the opinion that this building should be preserved, because, among all the Indian houses in this part of the country, it perhaps approaches nearest to the old aboriginal type. During the lifetime of its owner it is probably fairly safe except from fire, but after his death measures might be taken to secure its preservation.

Incidental to the work on the totem poles, assistance was given to a representative of the Pathé Motion Pictures in securing information and pictures of the totem pole work which will further advertise the Canadian National Railways. Several moulds showing a mask and details of some of the totem poles were brought back to Ottawa. The figures reproduced from these moulds are useful as museum specimens, as advertisements in railway offices and depots, and as souvenirs to be used in the same way as animal heads. They may also prove of value for architectural work, since the architect of the new Hudson's Bay Company's store in Winnipeg was recently searching for suitable totem pole material to decorate the company's restaurant.

Restoration of Totem Poles among the Tsimisyans (Informant, Jack McLeod, Prince Rupert, 1947).

Henry Dudoward of Port Simpson, who paints the totem poles for the municipality in Prince Rupert, was ostracized by his own people, who consider his work the defilement of totem poles. It was the custom among the people to leave those monuments alone after they had been erected.

Why fallen totem poles are abandoned, according to Charles Mark, a Gitksan of Gitsegyukla (in 1924).

Chief Weegyey would like to raise his pole, which has fallen, but he and his people are afraid to do it now, because he would have to engage the whole tribe to help him. The job would require many hands, and the Government might interfere; it has such a wrong idea about raising totem poles. When the work is over, a feast would have to be given, and rejoicing would take place; all those who helped would get \$1 apiece, and the chiefs perhaps \$2. This cannot be undertaken now.

It gives the people great grief to see their totem poles falling and decaying on the ground. It is true that we are Christians, or would like to be, and we cannot have totems at the same time. Yet there is nothing written in the Bible anywhere that totem poles are wrong in themselves or that if a man raises a totem he will not go to heaven.

(In the winter of 1945 some of the old poles of Gitsegyukla were transplanted from the old village flat on the river-bank to the new village on the hill, and new ones were carved and raised in the course of a modernized form of potlatch.)