

Storytelling Trees

By Micki Huysken

Cedar trees grow in the Alaskan forest. A Tlingit (CLING-it) Indian walks among them searching for the right one. He finds a strong, straight tree that has been growing long before his grandfather's grandfather lived there. He marks its rough bark. This is the first step in making a magnificent storytelling tree.

Long ago, before writing was used by Indians, totem poles were carved to tell stories of battles or to record events happening in the tribe.

Shapes of bears, wolves, whales, eagles, and other wild creatures were carved into soft tree trunks.

A storyteller read the tree from top to bottom. Stories often included animals with superhuman powers and stories about Eagle and Raven clans. These totem poles were read again and again like a library of wooden stories.

Have you seen pictures of totem poles or visited the state of Alaska or Washington where poles stand? Even today, totem-pole carving continues in Ketchikan, Alaska, where Tlingit Indians still live.

Once, a stone adze (an ax-like tool) brought down an 80-foot giant. Today, chain saws do the work in less time.

Thick bark is stripped away; then knots, once burned with hot rocks, are sanded smooth. At last, the tree is ready for the master carver chosen by the tribe. Poles that once took a year to carve can be completed in three months.

The carver chants to help his concentration and to keep a

cutting rhythm. It is a chant that he learned from his father who learned it from his. Wood chips pepper the air. Animals with beaver tails, whales, wolves, and birds with oversized beaks are chiseled into the soft wood. Some carvings have human shapes. Black paint dabbed into pale wooden eyes gives them a look of power. Long ago, artist's mixed salmon eggs with minerals like hematite, graphite, and copper to make bright-colored paint for the poles.

At last, the weary carver puts down his tools. He is ready for a crane to lift the new pole. He thinks back and remembers stories of his grandfather's first pole rising. That one took place at the river's edge. No crane was used then, just dozens of men holding tightly to ropes.

Their groans rippled like a chorus of bears; sweat beaded on their backs. Drums and voices swelled like thunder when the pole rose.

The old carver blinks away the memories as a ray of sun touches his sensitive eyes. The steel arm crane is placing his new pole upright facing the road. Arriving visitors look up in awe. Cheers and laughter roll forth like water from a bubbling pot. What was once a mighty cedar growing tall in the Alaskan forest, is now a magnificent totem pole.

Think about the stories told by your parents and grandparents. If you put those stories on a totem pole, what would your storytelling tree look like?