

The Indian Tribes



*D'sonoqua mask, Kwakiutl
Campbell River gift shop.*

The origins of the native inhabitants of the Pacific Northwest, from Oregon to Alaska, have never been fully established. It is believed they migrated from Asia via Siberia, (between fifteen and thirty thousand years ago,) over a narrow isthmus of land, which in later times became submerged beneath the waters of the Bering Straits. There may well have been successive waves of migrants who gradually dispersed themselves all over the North and South American continents.

Whatever their beginnings, by the time the first European sailing ships were sighted in our coastal waters, the great Northwest was already settled by diverse people, speaking many different languages and dialects, and with rich cultures of their own. Essentially children of nature, they enjoyed an almost mystical affinity with her forces. Indeed, they saw humans and nature as one, and this belief profoundly affected their attitude to life. Children were taught never to interfere with, or molest, any living creature. A very old totem pole, which stood for many years at the ancient Haida village of Tanu, graphically illustrates this fact. It was known as the “Weeping Totem Pole of Tanu” and the strange legend surrounding it was told around the lodge fires long before the arrival of the Europeans.

It all happened on a tragic day long ago, when Chief Always Laughs ruled the people of the northern island of the Queen Charlotte group. Always Laughs was a wise man who knew that the Great Spirit would not deal kindly with people who molested or hurt any creature having life. People could kill for food, but not for pleasure.

One day the chief led a hunting party, including seven sons, two grandsons, and seven canoe loads of people to the isle of Tanu to hunt for deer. The hunting party split into small groups and went off to hunt, leaving the two grandsons to guard the fire which had been laboriously lit by rubbing together sticks and tinder against a pile of driftwood gathered for the purpose.

When the hunting party returned they found the fire out. The frightened boys explained that while they were gathering more driftwood they found a large frog and threw it on the fire. It swelled to very large proportions and then burst with a loud bang. After that, the boys gathered all the frogs they could find, both large and small, and threw them on the fire to hear them burst. "But the last frog was the largest," recalled the younger of the boys. "When he burst, he put out the fire!"

The chief and his party were horrified. At first they merely lectured the boys telling them that those who harm the Great Spirit's creatures will surely suffer a similar fate. Finally, overcome by a great foreboding, and urged on by the grieving old chief, the whole party made a dash for their canoes. Not even the fat deer of Tanu could interest them now.

But it was too late. As they ran to the shore the earth began to tremble and roar. The ground opened beneath them and the hunting party disappeared. The only person to survive was the old chief, and when he arrived home he became known as "the chief who always weeps for his children."

In memory of the chief the remaining relations and tribe erected a totem pole carved from a large cedar tree. It depicts the chief, wearing his conical ceremonial hat, weeping two very long tears each of which terminates on the head of a grandson. On the chief's breast sits a large frog. The pole was carved with great imagination and power, and became famous among the Haida, where it was known as the Weeping Chief Totem of Tanu. However, the true origin of the Weeping Pole of Tanu is lost in time, and there are several conflicting legends surrounding the pole.

Famed anthropologist Dr. Marius Barbeau (1883-1969) wrote that the pole was still standing in the bush when he visited Tanu in 1947. The main portion of the pole, featuring the Weeping Chief, was eventually removed to the Royal BC Museum. Francis Poole, the English civil and mining engineer who spent two years among the Haida in the 1860s, complained in his book "Queen Charlotte Islands" about a Haida chief stopping him at his favorite sport of taking pot shots at seals and crows, and ordering him never to do it again.

According to early Indian belief, all living creatures shared in a world of mutual harmony and understanding. The main difference between them was in their external appearance. Strip a bird of his

*Weeping Chief Totem
of Tanu.*



feathers, or the fur from a bear, or the scales from a fish, and the form was indistinguishable from human form. To interfere in any way with the environmental dwellings of the salmon people, or the bear people, would be unthinkable and would surely bring swift retribution from the spirits of the creatures involved. This oneness of life” philosophy also led to the concept of “animal-people” — beings with the characteristics of both.

Instead of great bustling cities of steel and concrete there were only isolated Indian villages scattered along the shorelines and riverbanks. There were no roads, only a few Indian trails skirting the waterways and rarely penetrating far into the great pathless forests of cedar, fir, spruce, hemlock and pine. Transportation was by canoe or on foot, since in those days the Indians had no horses. In some areas there were vast marshlands, inhabited by many varieties of waterfowl and cranes.

Today most of these marshlands no longer exist. They have been drained off to make room for farmland, housing developments, and highways. An example of this is the great Sumas Lake basin. Before the days of the early settlers, great portions of the central Fraser River Valley were under a shimmering expanse of shallow water.

Picture then, a beautiful, yet lonely and silent land as it must have been in the days when the great forests were still intact, when the waters literally teemed with fish, and when the skies were sometimes black with myriad migrating birds. Vigorous and extremely creative people — the Indians of the Northwest Coast — occupied the coastal regions, from Alaska down through British Columbia and into the States of Washington and Oregon. The coastal Indians of British Columbia were divided into seven linguistic groups, speaking totally different languages and dialects, and yet enjoying a similar culture and life style.

Further inland, where the mild coastal winter rains gave way to snow and bitter cold, life for the two Plateau tribes in the Interior and southeast, and the seven Athapaskan tribes in the north, was necessarily of a harsher nature. These tribes were forced into a nomadic or semi-nomadic existence, resulting in less complex social organizations. They were, nonetheless, virile and energetic people and were as creatively and artistically inclined as their cousins on the Northwest Coast.




The Prairie Indians were subject to much colder weather and utilized more animal skins for clothing. With colorful headdresses of eagle feathers, leggings, moccasins and tunics of deerskin, they remain the stereotypical image of the noble Aboriginal of long ago. But the fact is that the coastal tribes didn't wear feathered headdresses, leggings, or moccasins; in fine weather the men preferred to go around totally naked. Yet never were a people so imbued with love of decoration and design. Indeed, when clothing was worn it was usually for decorative effect, or as a slight protection against rain.

The usual form of headgear was in the shape of a truncated cone with a wide, flared base. These hats, made from spruce roots or cedar fibers, were often exquisitely woven works of art, beautifully painted with bird or animal designs, cleverly adapted to the shape of the hat.

For ceremonial occasions, chiefs and nobles of the tribe who could afford them wore carved and painted wooden helmets or headdresses, sometimes intricately inlaid with abalone shell and with white fur pelts fastened to the sides and back, giving a grand effect as they hung in snowy splendor around the shoulders of the wearer.

Nootka woman in traditional cedar attire.





*West Coast Native with
speared octopus.*

Interior of a Tlingit longhouse showing a medicine man performing a shamanistic ritual. (From an early engraving by W. B. Styles)

