

Anthropologist Wilson Duff of the Provincial Museum in Victoria, B.C., left, with Dr H. B. Hawthorne of the University of British Columbia, and Bill Reid, surveys the totems of Ninistints on arrival at Anthony Island in the summer of 1957.

HAIDA TOTEMS

A Salvage Operation

By John and Carolyn Smyly

IN THE SUMMER OF 1975, the new ethnology display area of the Provincial Museum in Victoria will be opened to the public. Almost 20,000 square feet of exhibition area has been assigned to the display of the art and artifacts of the several tribes of British Columbian Indians. A central area is devoted to that most dramatic of all Indian works, the totem pole.

Totem poles represent a formidable set of problems, both in their collection and in their eventual display. At the turn of the century, when the totem pole villages of British Columbia were largely abandoned and there was the opportunity for purchasing any number of fine poles in magnificent condition, there was little knowledge of or interest in them. Despite the pleas of a few pioneer anthropologists, there were never funds available to make such a collection possible. Chiefly through the interest of Dr C. F. Newcombe of Victoria, the Provincial Museum was able to acquire several of the larger poles, some of which were stored in warehouses around Victoria for almost 75 years. These were collected before their exposure to the elements had done much more than bleach out the original colours, and the wood itself was still in sound condition. Years of storage have not marred the carvings; their lines remain crisp and sharp.

The poles left in the villages were soaked by innumerable rains, dried and cracked by the winds, bored by insects and torn apart by the roots of sapling trees; they began one by one to fall, to be blanketed in moss and a layer of pine needles, to rot, to disappear. By the 1930s, the museum in Prince Rupert had made an attempt to salvage some of the remaining poles, but no one seemed to have thought that a complete and scientific record of every remaining pole warranted the necessary expense.

By the 1950s, when interest in North American Indian art was once again on the upswing, the poles remaining in the totem-pole villages were in sad condition. One rescue expedition to Skedans and Tanu on the Queen Charlotte Islands was financed, and succeeded in gleaning the last of the salvable poles. Wilson Duff, then anthropologist at the Provincial Museum, yearned to visit Anthony Island at the southern tip of the Queen Charlotte group. There, in the abandoned Haida village

of Ninstantins, stood what he later described as the 'best and richest source' of totem poles.

Anthony Island is almost inaccessible, even during the summer months. There is no permanent human settlement of any size within 150 miles. The coastline is broken and rocky, open to winds off the Pacific Ocean. There is no harbour where a vessel any larger than a row-boat can shelter close to the island. Collecting totem poles is not like collecting sea shells or white-footed mice. Some of the poles are almost fifty feet in height. They weigh tons. Unlike the metal and concrete sculptures which are swung about by art galleries with apparent ease, the totem poles are incredibly fragile in comparison to their enormous size. Exposed for years to the relentless grind of wind and rain, they have become soft, porous, and crumbling.

In 1957 probably the last totem pole rescue operation of all time was undertaken. The Provincial Museum in Victoria, and the University of British Columbia in Vancouver, were equally concerned with the destruction by natural forces and by the occasional vandalism of the remaining monuments. Neither institution was funded to undertake a rescue operation but the determination of several individuals eventually resulted in a co-operative venture between the two institutions, an anonymous private benefactor, and the Canadian navy.

In October 1956, with the assistance of the H.M.C.S. *Brockville*, members from the museum paid a brief visit to Anthony Island, primarily to examine the totems and to obtain the information necessary for salvage work. Travelling late in the year, heavy weather was a certainty and they encountered gales of up to eighty miles an hour. The wind moderated enough to allow two brief landings upon the rocky little island.

Having obtained information on the number and condition of the totem poles left in Ninstantins, Wilson Duff flew to Skidegate in April 1957, to confer with the Band Council over the proposed salvage. Each pole was still the property of the descendants of the person for whom it was carved and, after seventy years, ownership often posed an elaborate geneological problem. It was necessary to obtain both the owner's permission and the permission of the Band Council as a whole before salvage operations could be undertaken.

The Skidegate Band Council agreed to allow a salvage expedition to go to Ninstantins. The totem poles were to be brought out for storage at Victoria and the University of British Columbia. That summer the expedition members, together with a C.B.C. television crew and a provincial government photographer travelled south from Skide-

John Smyly of the Provincial Museum, Victoria was a member of the salvage expedition to Ninstantins.

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An inside house post 14 feet in height was the first to be cut and lowered to the ground.

Waiting for a break in the rain are Wilson Duff (left), Dr H.B. Hawthorne, Bill Reid and C B C photographer Kelly Duncan.



gate with the three-man native crew of the chartered fishing vessel *Seiner II*. The naval auxiliary vessel *Laymore* was appointed to meet the crew at Louscoone Inlet later on to pick up the crated poles.

On Thursday, 20 June, the seiner anchored off the eastern side of Anthony Island, near the entrance to Ninstints cove. A rocky, brush-covered islet sat right in the middle of the cove. Behind the islet, and tucked around the rim of the cove was the totem-pole village of Ninstints, decimated by war and disease in the nineteenth century and abandoned almost a century ago.

The channel on the north side of the islet was not navigable, even when high tide filled the cove with water; it was entirely blocked with huge boulders. When the tide receded, the cove emptied and uncovered rocks in the south channel as well. All journeys to and from the seiner with camp gear and crating materials were made in a skiff and a row-boat, at favourable tides, and even then caution had to be employed to navigate the double hazard of rocks and thick kelp beds.

Circling the cove in a long irregular line with only a grassy border separating them from the beach, stood the largest remaining group of carved poles anywhere in the world — more than thirty in number. Most of them were the stubby mortuaries, usually about twenty feet high, which were designed to hold grave boxes in a hollowed cavity at the top. Some of these mortuaries were partly burnt as the result of a brush fire that had destroyed part of the village before 1900. Two tall memorials stood at the south end of the village, and two

house frontal poles stood to the north. All poles were weathered to a silver-grey and were in varying stages of decay. At all other abandoned villages, standing totems could be counted on two hands. The sheltered eastern-facing bay of Ninstints had undoubtedly contributed to this remarkable survival.

On that first day of arrival at Ninstints, a campsite was established, the supplies unloaded from the seiner and a preliminary photographic record of the village site made before nightfall. The next morning the heavy work and the famous Queen Charlotte Islands rains began together.

The cutting and lowering of the poles soon achieved a kind of pattern. An inside housepost which had originally been erected in a position of honour inside a plank house some 40 feet square, still stood with the house framework in ruins around it. The pole was roped securely to nearby trees to keep it from falling, and the column was cut through at the base. When it was gently lowered, face down, everyone heaved and pushed to turn it over onto supports until it could be crated.

A tall house frontal pole was next. This once stood against the outside front wall of a dwelling, and a doorway had been cut through the base to allow entrance into the house. There were four major carvings

and many minor figures on the pole; a bed of spruce boughs was prepared to prevent damage to the carvings when the column was lowered to the ground. Added to the general difficulties was the fact that the huge poles had to be sawn through by hand. A power-saw which had been included as part of the essential equipment had gotten damp on its journey and could not be made to function. Fortunately, someone had added a cross-cut saw to the inventory of tools and that was made to serve.

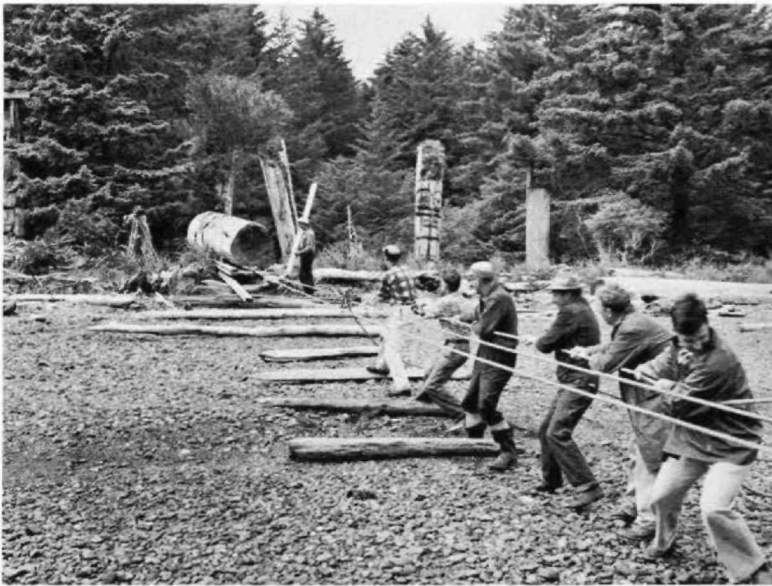
The house frontal pole was 48 feet 7 inches high. It had to be sawn into three sections for crating, because of its enormous size and weight. No one enjoyed dividing it and every care was taken that the cuts came between carved sections.

The days that followed were punctuated by heavy downpours that flooded out the camp tents at one point and forced the seiner to remove to a more sheltered location. During this time the crew succeeded in lowering and crating sixteen sections of totem poles. The most difficult was the mortuary of Chief Kanskinai. It had been carved from a log almost four feet through at the wider end, and bore the design of a grizzly bear and a small whale. The top portion of the column surrounding the grave-box cavity had to be cut off to do away with

A view of the Ninstints beach as the crated totem poles were towed away to be loaded on the 'Laymore'.



excessive weight even though this meant sacrificing a relief carving of the whale's dorsal fin on each side at the top. Like all the poles, the mortuary was soaking wet and a tangle of roots grew all through it. The cross-cut saw, which was none too sharp to begin with, would either snag upon these roots or the cut would close, jamming the saw. Then wedges were driven in or pieces were chopped away with the axe so that sawing could continue. The original measurements of the pole were 20 feet 3 inches long, by 4 feet in diameter. Its weight was estimated at about two and a half tons. Even with 5 feet cut off the top, all of the crew shoving together could not budge it.



The weight of the mortuary column of Chief Kanskinai was estimated at two and a half tons. The top portion surrounding the grave box was cut away before it was pulled, inch by inch, to the beach where the poles were crated for transfer to Victoria.



Blocks and tackle from the seiner's rigging were brought into use. A sled was constructed and a track of driftwood was laid down to the beach. Small round logs were gathered to be used as rollers. With ropes snubbed around each end and padded to keep them from cutting into the carving, the column was rolled over onto the improvised sled. It inched over, an enormous dead weight, and finally flopped with a crash onto its cradle, breaking some of the sled's cross-pieces in the process. For a tense moment it seemed that its momentum would carry it off the other side, but it settled back into place.

The tackle was then dragged down to the beach, one end fastened to the huge mortuary, the other end tied to rocks projecting from the small island in the cove. The pole was then pulled, inch by desperate inch, down to the beach. It was a two-hour struggle and then it began to rain. As soon as everyone stopped to suit up in rain gear, the rain would stop and the sun would reappear. When the crew became uncomfortably warm and discarded their outer clothing, it would rain again.

Because of the great weight of the pole, crating it brought a new set of problems. With the other poles, crates had been constructed around three sides and then the pole and crate were turned together to allow the fourth side of the crate to be nailed into place. With Chief Kanskinai's pole, however, it was decided that the best approach would be to crate it on the beach below the tide level so that when the water surrounded the pole and floated it, it could be turned over in the water, secured by ropes to the beach and then finished when the tide receded once again. All went according to plan. The crate was turned and the fourth side nailed into place at low tide. Then the crate was tied to logs higher up the beach. Unfortunately, the ropes worked loose one night when the wind and rain set up a light chop in the tiny bay, and the following morning the crew woke to find their precious crate adrift and knocking hard against the rocks in the wilder water at the mouth of the bay. A long-suffering crew member, already soaked to the skin by the night-long downpour, was sent to fasten a rope around the crate and to secure it to rocks so that it would not wash out to sea. When the weather settled down, it was pulled back to the beach.

As the days passed, all the salvaged sections were crated and dragged to the beach. On the evening of 28 June, the crated totems were pushed down on the beach to await the incoming tide. Part of the crew stayed up half the night and at high tide, by the light of lanterns and using the rowboat, they secured all the crates together, then anchored them with ropes to the beach. The following day a message came in from the *Laymore* and the camp was dismantled. The seiner was loaded once again, and the crated totems were strung out in a long line and brought out from the cove to be fastened to the stern of the seiner. A rendezvous had been set up with the *Laymore* at Louscoone Inlet and with several



This Haida watchman figure topped a fallen pole. Hanging face down and undamaged over a bank, it survived some of the ravages of weather.

nostalgic backward glances, the crew turned to the final stages of the expedition.

At 5:00 a.m. on 30 June, the two vessels met in Louscoone Inlet and the long line of crates was drawn alongside the naval vessel and lifted aboard. A cable was passed around the centre of each crate and it was carefully winched upwards. The crated poles were piled on the deck and roped down. The seiner returned to its base at Skidegate, and the *Laymore* continued south down the west coast of Vancouver Island to Victoria. Some poles were to be unloaded in Victoria, and the remainder were to continue on to Vancouver in the sharing arrangement agreed upon by the Museum and the University of British Columbia.

Even this routine trip south was not entirely without incident. Part way across Queen Charlotte Sound the sea became rough. The ship tossed this way and that and the crew, warmly housed below deck, became aware of an ominous scraping sound overhead. They rushed on deck to find that the whole cargo of totem poles had shifted four feet to starboard, crushing a couple of the crates. If it had not been for the guard-rails, all of the crates would have gone into the sea. Crew members rushed to lash a few more steel cables around the crates and to put a brace or two in where it would do the most good. Captain John François expressed confidence that even if the crates had gone overboard, they would not have sunk and could have been recovered, but museum personnel were thankful that they were not called upon to witness the exercise.

The rest of the trip went smoothly. The poles destined for the Provincial Museum were unloaded in Esquimalt harbour and transported by truck to the

museum storage warehouse in the basement of a government building. There they dried out slowly over a period of several months. By the time they were moved yet again to the basement of the new Provincial Museum complex in Heritage Court, they had undergone careful inspection and treatment to kill any remaining wood borers. Badly rotted portions were repaired or replaced with new wood carefully aged to match in colour and texture the original surface. Sections that were to be displayed had individually designed and built supports which would not weaken the pole but would ensure that it remained erect even during an earthquake. Of the poles salvaged from Ninstints, three are presently on display at the Provincial Museum, with another included in the preliminary plans for the new ethnology gallery.

While this account has dealt primarily with one rather hazardous expedition to collect Haida poles, a similar tale could be told of the poles acquired from the Tsimshian, Bella Coola, Bella Bella, Kwakiutl and Salish villages. Confronted with these huge carvings now safely housed in carefully controlled conditions, few visitors will have any idea of the labour, expense, and careful planning that culminated in the dramatic display.

There will be some who doubt that the poles warrant the expense, though such individuals grow fewer as Indian art is better understood; there will be others who will resent the fact that the poles were ever removed from their native villages. But for the great majority of visitors, the more than a million persons who enter the Provincial Museum each year, the experience in three-dimensional reality of the astounding heritage left to the world by the Indian peoples of British Columbia will be one that they will not easily forget. ♦

The 'Laymore' with her cargo of totem poles arrives at HMC dockyard, Esquimalt, Victoria.

