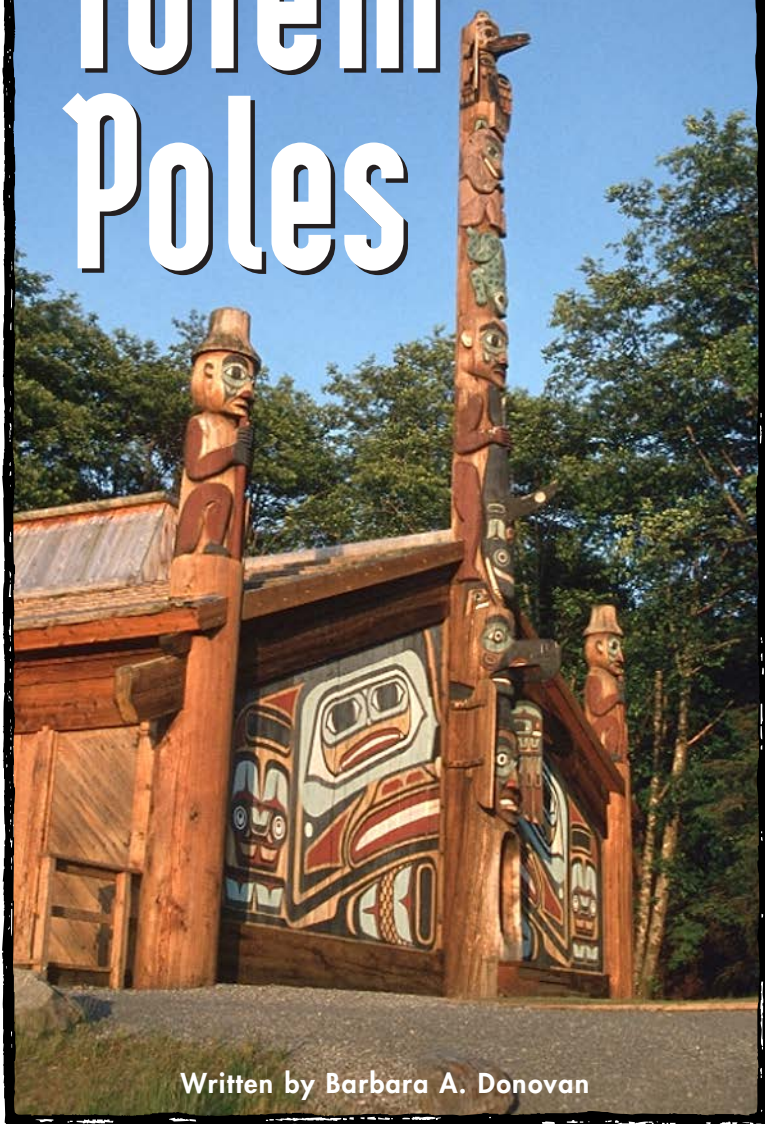


LEVELED BOOK • N

# Totem Poles



Written by Barbara A. Donovan

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## Table of Contents

Monuments of Cedar .....	4
Totem Poles Speak .....	5
Carving a Totem Pole .....	12
Totem Poles Come Home .....	15
Glossary .....	16
Index .....	16

# Monuments of Cedar



Totem poles are made from cedar trees that can be as tall as 40 feet (12.2 m)

Carving a bird from a block of wood is hard work, but imagine carving animals on a piece of wood as long as a tree trunk! Native peoples living along the Pacific coast of Alaska and Canada have been doing just that for hundreds of years. These carvings are called **totem poles**.





# Totem Poles Speak

Totem poles are carved in different styles and for different reasons. The figures carved on the poles have special meanings and help tell stories. **Memorial poles** describe someone's life or a special event. Other totem poles tell the history of a **clan**, or family group, and still others welcome visitors.

Each figure on a totem pole has its own meaning.





The totem pole and painted housefront of the potlatch house at Totem Bight State Historic Park, Ketchikan, Alaska

Many houses have totem poles that are part of the house itself. House poles are carved into the doorways, on the outside corners, or on poles that support the roof. These poles show the wealth and status of the family.

## Do You Know?

Whenever a totem pole is raised, a **potlatch**, or special ceremony, is held. In 1884, the government of British Columbia passed a law making potlatches illegal, and most tribes stopped carving totem poles. But in 1951, the law was dropped and tribes began carving totem poles again.

**Mortuary poles** are like gravestones. The carvings on the pole honor the life of a person who has died. They tell about important events and family relationships in the dead person's life.

Some totem poles welcome visitors to a village. These are typically single human figures. They are put near a beach to show visitors that they are welcome.



Mortuary totem poles

This totem pole tells the legend of how Killer Whale clan took Black Bear for its **crest**, or special symbol.

*One day, a hunter went into the mountains looking for mountain goats. Black Bear captured him and brought the hunter to his den. The man lived with Black Bear. Although they became friends, the man missed his village.*



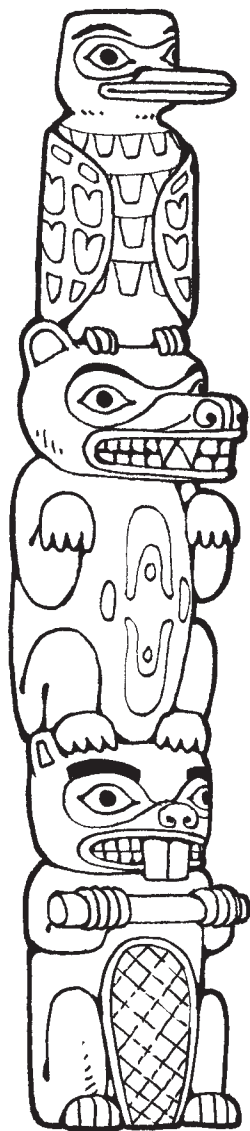
Totem pole at entrance to Van Dusen Gardens, Vancouver, British Columbia, Canada





*After two years, Black Bear let the man go home. By now, the man looked like a bear. The villagers ran from him. Finally, one kind man rubbed medicine on the man's body. Soon the man looked human again, and he took Black Bear as his crest. His friend Black Bear always protected the man's family.*

These illustrations show some of the most common figures you can see on totem poles.



### **Raven**

*Bird with a straight beak*

Raven is a trickster who can change shape into almost everything—a bird, a human, or even a speck of dirt.

### **Bear**

*Round ears, many teeth*

Bear is a caring, godlike creature that can change from bear to human form.

### **Beaver**

*Long front teeth, flat tail with crisscross lines*

Beaver is a clever carver whose powerful tail-slap can cause earthquakes or turn him invisible.

## Watchmen

*Crouching men with  
very tall hats*

Watchmen are human figures who can spot danger from far away.

## Thunderbird

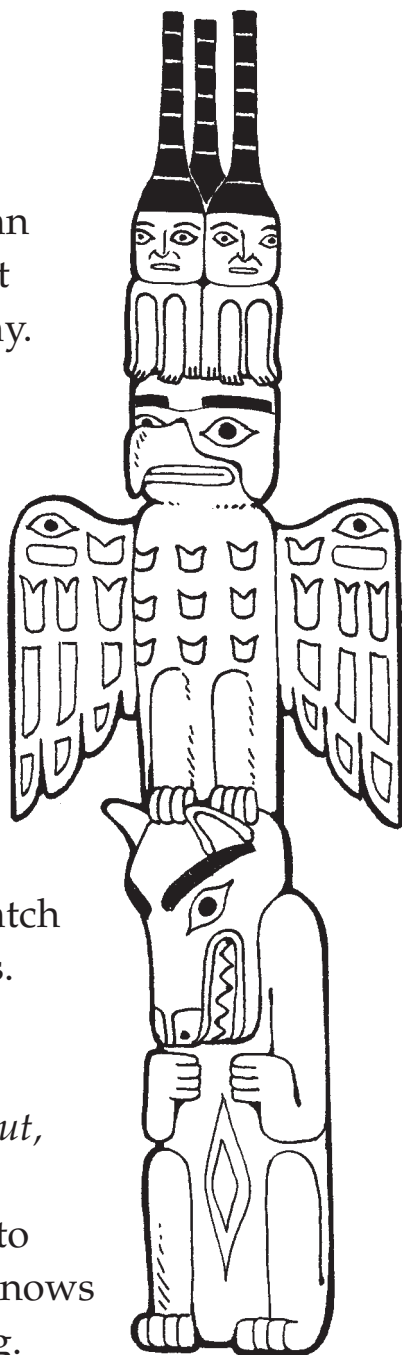
*Curly feathers that  
look like horns*

Thunderbird is one of the Native Americans' most powerful spirits. He causes thunder and lightning, and is large enough to catch a whale in his talons.

## Wolf

*Pointed ears, long snout,  
many sharp teeth*

Wolf is not friendly to humans, though it knows the secrets of healing.



## Carving a Totem Pole

In the past, a clan would hire a master **carver** to make a totem pole. Today, many museums, businesses, and people around the world also want totem poles created for them. First, they hire a carver and work with him or her to plan the pole.

The carver finds a tree with no knots or bends. The carver cuts down the tree, cuts off the branches, and hauls it to the workshop. Then the carver chips away the soft outer wood.



A Tlingit man carves a totem pole in Ketchikan, Alaska.





Alaskan natives carve a totem pole.

Often, a team of carvers works on the totem pole. The master carver draws the designs on the log with charcoal. The master carver works on the bottom figure of the pole because this figure is the biggest and most important, and everyone can see it up close. Helpers carve and paint other figures on the totem pole. Carving a big pole can take as long as nine months.

When the pole is ready, it is brought to the place where it will stand.

A potlatch is held to celebrate the raising of the pole.

There is feasting, dancing, singing, and gift giving, and the totem pole's stories are told. Prayers and blessings may be said for the pole and for the people who own it.



Raising a totem pole

## Do You Know?

You can see totem poles being carved at Saxman Native Village near Ketchikan, Alaska. The village was settled by Tlingit Indians in 1894. Today it is a small, independent community that has its own laws. Many visitors from all over the world go there each year to see the village's many beautiful totem poles and to watch carvers at work.

## Totem Poles Come Home

When European explorers came to the coast of Alaska and Canada in the 1800s, they were impressed by the many totem poles they found. Many of the poles were taken away and ended up in museums.

In 1990, the U.S. passed a law that said native peoples would be able to get back property that had been taken from them. Because of this law, many totem poles are returning to their original homes and to the people who created them.



## Glossary

<b>carver</b> ( <i>n.</i> )	person who carves a hard material, such as wood (p. 12)
<b>clan</b> ( <i>n.</i> )	a family group (p. 5)
<b>crest</b> ( <i>n.</i> )	a symbol representing a clan's history (p. 8)
<b>memorial poles</b> ( <i>n.</i> )	totem poles that represent the memory of a person, place, thing, or event (p. 5)
<b>mortuary poles</b> ( <i>n.</i> )	totem poles that honor dead people (p. 7)
<b>potlatch</b> ( <i>n.</i> )	a ceremony to celebrate important events (p. 7)
<b>totem poles</b> ( <i>n.</i> )	wooden poles carved from cedar by Pacific coast natives (p. 4)

## Index

bear, 8–10	Saxman Native Village, 14
carvers, 12–14	thunderbird, 11
crest, 8	watchmen, 11
potlatch, 7, 14	wolf, 11
raven, 10	



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