The Haidas

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Correlation

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The Best of Times

From the east, four Haida (HY-duh) war canoes approached the island. They bobbed in the choppy water of the **strait**.

On the rocky shore, young Squawally watched with excitement. The warriors—more than a hundred of them—had been gone for three days. Now they whooped **triumphantly** as they paddled the long cedar dugouts into shore, their tattooed bodies sweating from the effort. When the canoes scraped bottom, the braves jumped out and dragged them onto the rocky beach.

The men pulled a dozen captives from the canoes and pushed them toward the village. The prisoners' hands were tied behind them with leather straps. One of the returning warriors turned to Squawally with a grin. He gave a tilt of his head toward the captives. "They will make fine slaves."

Squawally envied the braves their victory. He wished he could have gone with them. But at thirteen years old, he was still too young for war.

"Was it a tough fight?" he asked. The brave **sneered**. "No, it was easy. Most of their warriors were sick. The whole village was filled with sickness. They say it came from the white people."

Squawally looked east across the water. It was a soft, late-summer day. Large, puffy clouds hugged the horizon. Behind him, the people of his village went about their daily lives with smiling faces. Cooking smoke rose from the cedar **longhouses**. Outside the houses, tall totem poles stood in silent majesty. Children played.

It was a fine day, and a fine time to be Haida. Their world in Haida Gwaii—a crescent-shaped group of islands west of mainland Canada—was good. Nothing could ever harm it. At least that's what Squawally wanted to believe. But lately he wasn't so sure. "I've heard stories of the white-people's illness," he said. "I didn't know if they were true."

The brave made a **dismissive** gesture with his hand. "The people on the coast are weak. We Haida are strong and need not fear this illness."

The man gave Squawally a slap on the back. "Don't worry. You especially, young Squawally—you have some important days ahead of you. Right now, you are the pride of the Ravens. Soon, some Eagle girls will be making eyes at you."

Squawally blushed. The warrior laughed and walked toward his longhouse.

Ravens and Eagles

All the Haida people belonged to one of two large social groups, called Raven and Eagle. Each group was divided into more than 20 families. A member of the Raven group could only marry a person from the Eagle group, and vice versa. Children became members of their mother's social group. Names, honors, and chiefly rank were passed down through the mother's line.

A New Totem Pole

The Haida craftsman ran his hands down the long, thick cedar log. The log, stripped of its bark, was lying on its side on supporting timbers. The craftsman was the most renowned totem-pole carver in this part of Haida Gwaii. His two assistants stood quietly by as he examined the log. Squawally and his uncle, Chief Brave Bear, also watched him in respectful silence.

Finally the craftsman turned to Squawally and Brave Bear with a smile. "It's a good log," he said. "I've never seen a finer one. You chose well."

Brave Bear nodded proudly.

The craftsman patted the log. "I'll make it into a pole that will impress the entire village. And it's time you had a new one." He gestured to the aging totem pole that stood nearby, outside of Brave Bear's longhouse.

"The time is now right," Brave Bear replied. "Squawally is becoming a man."

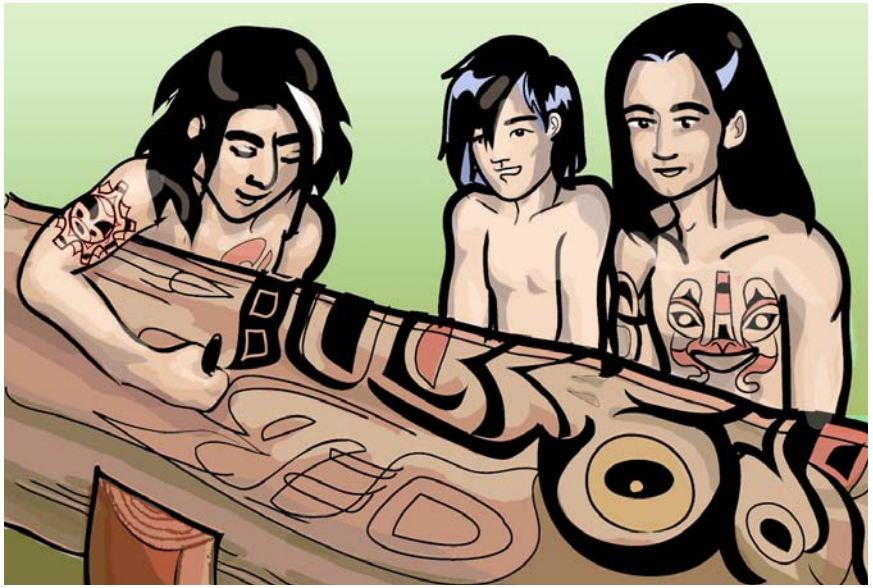
"Someday he will succeed you as chief of the family," said the carver. He turned to Squawally. "How will that be, huh—to rule the longhouse?"

"I'm in no hurry to be a chief," said Squawally. "I wish my uncle long life."

The two men smiled. Then the craftsman returned to discussing the carving. "So what stories is this pole going to tell?" he asked Brave Bear.

Brave Bear gave him detailed instructions on the various family crests that he wanted carved into the pole. At the top would be a great Thunderbird, its wings outstretched. Other animals, including the Grizzly Bear, would have lower positions. Every crest had special meaning to Brave Bear's family group.

Brave Bear and Squawally left the carver to his work. He began drawing figures on the log with a stick of charcoal.



Initiation into Manhood

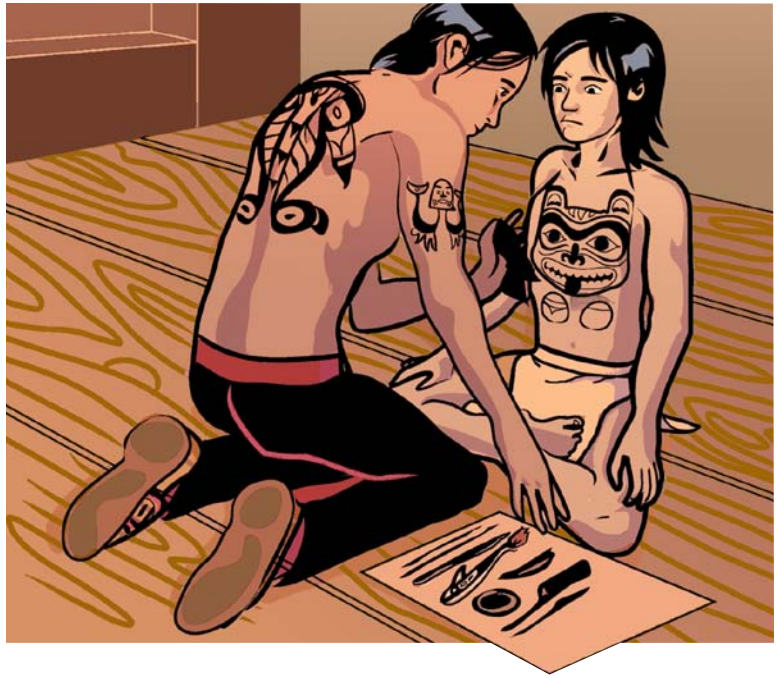
I will not show pain. I will not show pain.

Squawally repeated those words to himself silently as he sat cross-legged in the center of the longhouse near the **communal** fire. Around the longhouse, the several dozen members of the family, including Squawally's mother and father, watched in silence.

Brave Bear stood above Squawally. "Today Squawally begins his **ascent** into manhood," he said. I bestow on him my name of Brave Bear. May he bring it honor, as I hope I have. In recognition of his second name, he will receive his first tattoo—of our powerful brother, the Grizzly Bear. What prouder image can a young man have on his chest?"

Brave Bear turned and gestured to a man who stood a few steps away. The man walked over to Squawally and knelt down. He opened a leather pouch and removed some fish-bone and thorn needles as well as bags of powdered **pigments**.

The tattoo artist began pricking the skin of Squawally's chest with a needle. He made a series of closely spaced puncture wounds in the shape of a **stylized** grizzly bear. The holes in the boy's chest dripped blood, which the man wiped away.



Throughout the ordeal, Squawally stared straight ahead. He gave no sign of the intense pain the needle was causing him. *I will not show pain*, he kept repeating to himself.

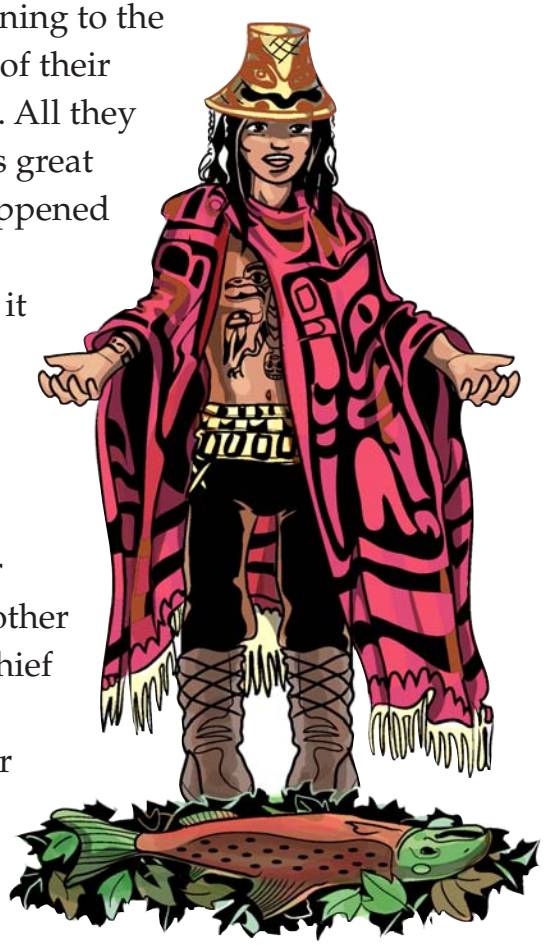
When the design was finished, the artist rubbed some parts of it with black pigment. Other parts he rubbed with red pigment. The pigments would be part of Squawally's flesh for the rest of his life.

The tattoo, still oozing blood, was finished. Squawally stood and displayed his chest to the family. They smiled and nodded in approval. Squawally had passed his first test of manhood.

The First Salmon of the Year

A large, pink salmon lay on a bed of leaves in the center of the village. The village's head chief stood over it, his hands held out before him. The fish was the first salmon to be caught in the annual **spawning** run.

The Haidas did not know why this yearly event occurred. They didn't understand that the salmon were returning to the lakes and streams of their birth to reproduce. All they knew was that this great rush of salmon happened once a year in late summer. And that it might end forever if they did not show the salmon proper respect.



"Thank you for sending us our brother the salmon," the chief **intoned** as all the villagers gave their own private thanks for the salmon.

Later, the salmon was cooked over a wood fire. When it was done, everyone in the village ate a small piece of it. A woman tending the fire gave a piece to Squawally. He ate it in two bites, **savoring** its taste of both sea and smoke. The return of the salmon in their great numbers had been guaranteed for another year.

The Bounty of the Pacific

The Haidas and other Native Americans of the Pacific Coast had unlimited amounts of food for the taking. Their most important food was salmon, which people caught by the thousands. Salmon were eaten fresh as well as dried for later use. In addition to salmon, the Pacific waters were filled with other kinds of fish and with sea mammals, including whales and seals. The beaches overflowed with clams, oysters, and crabs. The forests yielded plants, nuts, and berries, as well as game animals. It was impossible to go hungry on the Pacific Coast.

Raising the Totem Pole

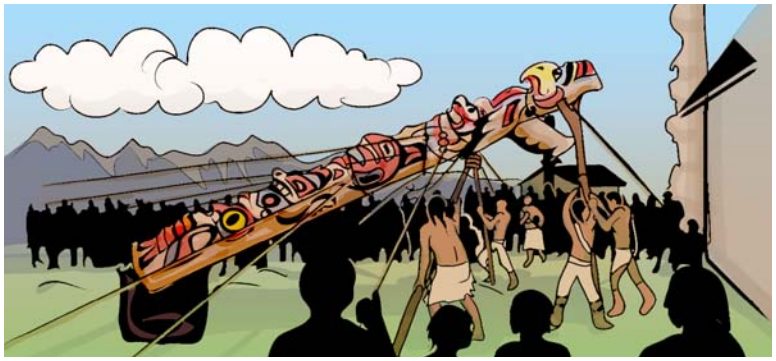
For ten days, the craftsman and his assistants had labored over Brave Bear's new totem pole. Slowly and carefully, they had carved out the drawn designs. They worked with European-made steel tools obtained through trade networks. Today, they made the finishing touches, applying colorful pigments to the carved designs. Now it was time to raise the pole into position.

Everyone in the village was assembled outside Brave Bear's longhouse. As the women and children watched, dozens of men labored to raise the pole. First they carried the tall pole to a hole that had been dug outside the door of the

What Are Totems?

The poles that were erected by First Nations People of the Pacific Northwest are called totem poles. So what are totems?

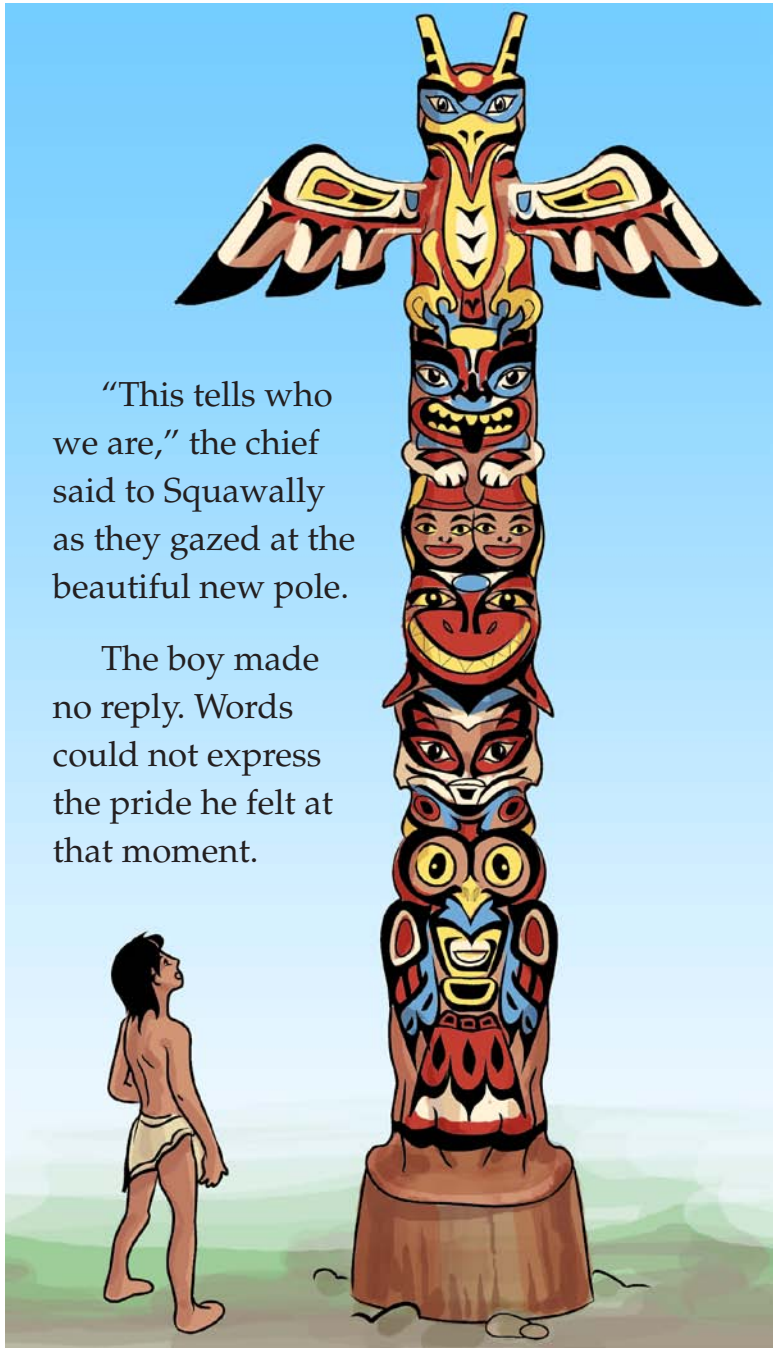
Actually, the correct term is "crests," and totem poles are more accurately called "crest poles." Crests were the various animals, in supernatural form, that were associated with the two main social groups of the Haida—Eagles and Ravens—and with individual families. Early **anthropologists**, or people who study human culture, mistakenly called these symbols "totems." That term had been used more accurately for a system of animal symbols used by Native Americans of the Great Lakes region.



longhouse. Next, they laid the bottom of the pole next to the hole. Then they wrapped ropes around the pole. Some of the men pulled on the ropes while others pushed from behind with long wooden rods.

Slowly the top of the pole reached toward the sky. A moment later, the bottom thunked down into the hole. Everyone laughed and cheered. Chief Brave Bear and Squawally beamed happily.

At the top of the pole, the figure of the mighty Thunderbird looked down on the village, his long beak and extended wings adding to the pole's dramatic appearance. The other main parts of the totem pole were equally impressive: a grizzly bear holding two children, a killer whale, a wolf, an owl. Each crest told a tale relating to the origins of the Raven group or encounters between Brave Bear's ancestors and **supernatural** beings in the forms of those animals.



"This tells who we are," the chief said to Squawally as they gazed at the beautiful new pole.

The boy made no reply. Words could not express the pride he felt at that moment.

The Potlatch

Squawally's introduction to manhood and the raising of the new totem pole were important events in the Haida village. As such, they had to be properly celebrated.

Chief Brave Bear had been preparing for this occasion for many months. He saved great stores of food and gifts. Now the great celebration, known as a potlatch, was under way.

For several days, the people of the village and their guests would feast, sing, play games, and dance. Throughout the festivities, Brave Bear would give everyone gifts of food, blankets, carved boxes, animal hides, and other objects.

Coppers

At the end of a potlatch, the chief hosting the event would present one or more chiefs with "coppers." These were expertly crafted copper objects shaped like a small shield, each decorated with the image of an animal. Coppers were the most highly prized objects in Haida society. They were a symbol of wealth. As a challenge, a chief would sometimes break a copper and offer the pieces to another chief. The other chief would then have to break a copper of his own of equal or greater value—if he had one. If he didn't and was unable to meet the challenge, he was **humiliated**.

Only a wealthy man could hold a potlatch, and at the end of such a celebration, all of his wealth was gone. But Chief Brave Bear wasn't concerned about that. He knew that he would regain what he had lost—and more—at future potlatches held by other chiefs.

Brave Bear smiled broadly as he watched his fellow villagers and the many visitors enjoy the great party he was throwing. The air was filled with talk, laughter, and singing. His heart swelled with joy.

Brave Bear saw Squawally seated on a log, eating a chunk of roasted elk meat. But the boy did not seem to be eating with much appetite, and his face looked glum. The chief walked over to his nephew and sat down.

"Why are you looking so downcast?" he asked. "This celebration is for you. You should be happy."

"I know, uncle," the boy replied. "But . . . the **shaman** just told me that the prisoners captured in the raid have gotten sick. He's used all his knowledge to cure them, but it isn't working."

Brave Bear shook his head and smiled. "Why should you care about a few slaves? Let them go to the afterlife. They'll be happier there."

"It's the sickness I'm thinking about. I'm afraid our people will get it."

"Don't worry yourself. The Guardian Spirits will look after us. Now enjoy yourself."

Squawally nodded. His uncle gave him a pat on the back and departed.

Squawally looked out across the water of the strait. The eastern horizon was blanketed with gray clouds. Autumn was approaching.

Afterword

Haida Gwaii had been the home of the Haida people since early times. Their ancestors from Asia may have settled there at the end of the last ice age, more than 10,000 years ago.

For generation after generation, the Haidas lived prosperous lives on their beautiful forested islands. They were fierce warriors who took many captives as their slaves. At least 7,000 Haida people were living there in the late 1700s, when they encountered the first European explorers. They were divided into at least fifty villages in areas now part of western Canada and the northwestern United States. Another group of Haida people had settled in Alaska.

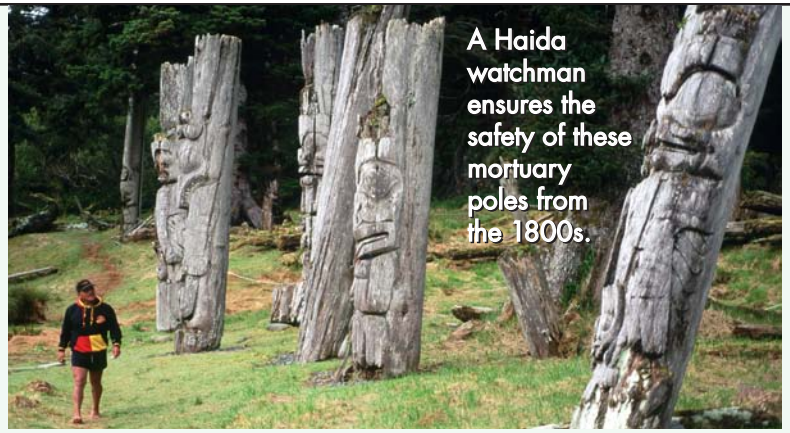
The Haidas' world came crashing down in the 1860s. A series of smallpox epidemics, transmitted by settlers from Europe, wiped out many Native American villages. More than 90 percent of the Canadian Haida died of smallpox and other diseases against which their bodies had no natural defenses.

Later, their troubles continued. Beginning in the 1870s, Christian missionaries arrived in the islands to convert the surviving Haidas. The missionaries persuaded the Haidas to forget their old ways. The missionaries pulled down many of the totem poles and destroyed them. Some totem poles were burned for firewood.

Modern Haida dancers wear traditional button blankets.

The Canadian government also began taking steps to turn Native Americans away from their traditions. In 1884, it outlawed potlatch celebrations. Some Haida continued to hold potlatches, though they tried to keep them secret. The last potlatch was held in 1921. The government discovered it and **confiscated** all the gifts.

It appeared that the Haida culture was heading toward **extinction**.



A Haida watchman ensures the safety of these mortuary poles from the 1800s.

Things began to improve for the Haidas in the mid-1900s. In 1951, the government repealed its ban on potlatches. Although the celebrations would never again be the huge events that they had been, they would at least be legal.

The Haida population, which numbered fewer than 600 in the early 1900s, has increased to at least 4,000. About 1,500 of those people live in two villages, Skidegate and Old Massett. The villages have been **designated** Native American reserves, or reservations, by the Canadian government. Each Haida village is governed by a village council. There are also five other population centers in Haida Gwaii.

Like all Native Americans in Canada, the Haidas are full citizens and can live where they choose. The Haida people are one of Canada's First Nations, as the country's Native American populations are called.

The two Haida villages have been prospering, bringing in many tourists. Arts and crafts have become a leading industry. Many Haida artists make a good living selling their works to visitors.

Students and volunteers from a Seattle, Washington, school paddle *Ocean Spirit*. *Ocean Spirit* is a traditional Haida canoe the students helped carve with artist Saaduuts.

Remnants of the old Haida culture can be seen at the Gwaii Haanas National Park Reserve and Haida Heritage Site. Part of this historical area, Anthony Island, features the remains of ten Haida longhouses and thirty-two totem poles. The island can be reached only by boat or seaplane.

Glossary

anthropologists *(n.)* people who study human societies around the world (p. 13)

ascent *(n.)* movement upward in position, power, or importance (p. 9)

communal *(adj.)* for, or shared by, everyone in a group or community (p. 9)

confiscated *(v.)* took someone's private property by authority or perceived authority (p. 20)

designated *(v.)* marked, named, or chosen for a special purpose or position (p. 21)

dismissive *(adj.)* having or showing a lack of interest (p. 5)

extinction *(n.)* the process by which an entire group of animals or plants dies out (p. 20)

humiliated *(adj.)* completely embarrassed (p. 16)

intoned *(v.)* said in a serious and formal way, often as a chant or as nearly singing (p. 11)

longhouses *(n.)* long buildings made from local materials used by some Native American nations as shelter for family groups (p. 5)

pigments *(n.)* substances that give color to something (p. 9)

savoring *(v.)* tasting with joy or appreciation (p. 12)

shaman *(n.)* a healer or spiritual leader in a tribal society (p. 18)

sneered *(v.)* showed a strong feeling of dislike (p. 5)

spawning *(n.)* the process of producing and depositing eggs (p. 11)

strait *(n.)* a narrow passage of water connecting two large areas of water (p. 4)

stylized *(adj.)* made using particular artistic effects (p. 9)

supernatural *(adj.)* beyond what can be explained by natural laws; often relates to religion (p. 14)

triumphantly *(adv.)* in a manner indicating joy at succeeding (p. 4)