

The Potlatch Tradition

(Editor's Note: This account of a 1929 potlatch at Tanana was written by A. X. Grant of Takotna, appeared in the August, 24, 1929 issue of the Fairbanks News Miner and was furnished to the Tundra Times by Alfred Starr of Nenana.)

Tanana was the gathering place last month for Natives from many points along the Tanana and Yukon Rivers who came together to hold a big potlatch, according to Peter Vachon, who returned to Fairbanks a few days ago after having made a trip to Tanana.

Led by the tribal chieftains about 150 Indians congregated at Tanana, he says, and for two weeks the ancient ceremonies of Alaska Natives were re-enacted. Some of the leaders were Chief Peter Henry of Crossjacket, and his wife; Chief Albert of Tanana and his wife, Former Chief Justen, an important medicine man; Former Chief Matthews of Tanana and his wife; Chief Johnny Smoke and his wife from Stevens Village; Chief Pitka, a bachelor of Kokrines; Chief Jimmy Charlie and his wife Tiny from Minto.

Thousands of dollars worth of presents were given away during the festivities, Mr. Vachon declared, and the potlatch was one of the biggest held along the river in many years.

Shortly before it opened Chief Matthews was married to Jenny Evan, wife of Chief Andrew Evan of the Crossjacket Indians, who died three years ago after a long rule. All Chief Andrews heirlooms and prize possessions were given away during the potlatch to relatives and friends. Among the heirlooms was an old spear handed down to him by his father who ruled over the Crossjacket tribe all his life. The spear came first, it is believed, from chief great-great-grandfather and was used in early days before the advent of firearms to kill brown bear and other big game. A fine moose-hide coat, beaded and fur trimmed, which had been prized by the Chief was presented to a relative in accordance with Native custom. There were also valuable necklaces and other articles which were distributed.

The potlatch was given in honor of Chief Andrew Evan and other notable dead of the Tanana and Yukon valleys.

In two weeks time Chief Henry and his wife gave away \$4,000 worth of Hudson Bay blankets, leather suitcases, bags, guns and clothing.

Presents distributed by former Chief Justen and his wife were worth about \$2,000 and Albert (Pilot) gave away blankets and clothing to the value of \$1,500. Beaded moccasins, blankets and other valuable gifts worth at least \$2,500 came from Chief Jimmy Charley and Tilly Charley. Harry Sam and Theodore John from Stevens Village brought \$3,000 worth of high priced guns, leather articles, clothing and Hudson Bay blankets to Tanana as gifts.

Everyday a different Chief would have charge of feeding the potlatchers who lived in tents. They ate in the open, oilcloths spread on the grass.

Talks were made by Chief Peter, Chief Justen and former Chief Jacob Starr. The last evening of the celebration was one of great rejoicing. It was then that the presents were given away. The ceremony started at 9 at night and was not finished until 4:30 the next morning.

Tribal dances were held in the dance hall and their songs composed in honor of the dead were sung. All the Natives received presents but Mr. Vachon and his brother Andrew, were the only white men so honored. Each was given a pair of beautifully beaded moccasins and in recognition of their friendship with Chief Andrew Evan.

The Indians came to Tanana from Minto, Tolovana, Hot Springs and Crossjacket on the Tanana and from Kokrines, Ruby, Moses Point, Rampart and Stevens Village on the Yukon. All have now returned to their fish camps to spend the remainder of the summer. Democratic ideals are changing the ancient customs of the Indians regarding choice of leaders Mr. Vachon said. Formerly the position of chief was hereditary but now has become elective. The old chiefs are not removed but upon their death a new leader is chosen by ballot of the tribe for a specified time and if he does not fulfill his post satisfactorily he is recalled by a majority if possible.