

Alaska Totems: Heritage In peril

By: Roxana Ayson Adams
Totem Heritage Center

Ketchikan, home of many Tlingit, Haida and Tsimshian people, is the resting place for Alaska's largest collection of original totem poles. The Totem Heritage Center houses the collection which is on the National Register of Historic Places. The preservation project, titled "Alaska Totems: A Heritage in Peril" began in 1967 and culminated with the opening of the Heritage Center in 1976. Led by Jane Wallen Demmert, then Director of the Alaska State Museum and assisted by Dennis Demmert, the project team included Indian organizations and elders, historians and scientists. People from the Indian villages were the more valuable members of the team, according to Mr. Demmert, for they knew where the old totems were and knew something about their history.

"One gratifying aspect of the project," wrote Dennis Demmert in the January 1973 issue of Historic Preservation "was that the museum and the Ketchikan Alaska Native Brotherhood agreed to preserve the totems not simply for preserving works of art. We realized that the

remaining original poles were of importance both for their aesthetic quality and for their historical importance. We wanted to preserve them in a way that would be acceptable to both the older, traditionally oriented Indians and to the younger people."

The City of Ketchikan,

in recognition of its Native Heritage, owns and operates the facility and offers classes, workshops, films, exhibitions and most recently carving apprenticeship (sponsored by the Alaska State Council on the Arts) in the arts and crafts of the Northwest Coast Indians.

The majority of the in-

structors are local and teach the arts handed down to them through generations, such as tool making, beading and button blanket making. Each year a few instructors are brought in from other Native cultures in response to the growing interest in cultural identity.

Some artists who have

taught at the Heritage Center include: Tlingit carvers Nathan Jackson, Wayne Price and Dempsey Bob; Haida weavers Selina Peratrovich and Delores Churchill; Tsimshian carver Jack Hudson; Haida carver Freda Diesing and Tsimshian weaver Flora Mather.

(Continued on Page 21)



Wayne Price, a Tlingit carver, shows a student how to get a good edge on an adze in a 1980

toolmaking class at the Totem Heritage Center

Photo by J.K. Marsh



Selina Paratrovich splitting cedar bark for a class at the Center

Photo by R. A. Adams

(Continued from Page Twelve) with others, participants
 Now in its fifth year of gain new respect for each
 operation, the Heritage Cen- other through Native art
 ter exemplifies the intents and heritage. Some of the
 of the original project Native students supplement
 leaders. There is a new their incomes with skills
 awareness of the art form, learned at the Center.
 inspired by the presence Perhaps the ideas behind
 and quality of design and the programs and their
 carving on the old poles and continued success? best
 by the integrity of the expressed by Freda Diesing,
 teachers. Haida artist, in her own
 The activities are open to words.
 the general public and en- "Whenever I can, I teach
 rollment averages about people to learn to appreci-
 50% Native people. By ate it (the art). You have to
 learning from a Native trad- learn to understand the art
 ition and working closely in order to be critical of it."