

House of Shakes Opened Near Wrangell

He faced the crowd in a brown suit covered by a Chilkat blanket hand woven in blue, green, yellow, black and cream mountain goat wool. On his head was a dancing hat of abalone shell fringed with Sea Lion whiskers and ermine skin. In his hand was a baton of authority, its top piece carved in the form of a leaping Killer Whale, the insignia of his house.

"Thank you, my friends, for coming to this occasion in response to my invitation. It is as though a great light had burst through the darkness to see you here. Thank you, towards me you have come."

With these traditional words of welcome, Kudanake, about to be installed as Shakes VII, opened the new community house of Shakes, on Shakes Island in Wrangell harbor.

"How picturesque!" the tourists said while snapping their pictures.

It was an unforgettable scene of barbaric splendor. To the Indian, it brought back nostalgia; to the white visitors it brought a stirring of the imagination accompanied by a distinct sense of surprise that the purveyors of moccasins and totem poles on the docks could become animated personalities by the simple device of donning button blankets and moving to the beat of the totem tom.

The year was 1940. The occasion, the first Wrangell Potlatch. The old Tlingit community house was rebuilt on Shakes Island as a CCC project under the supervision of the Forest Service. The design was done by Tom Ukas, master carver and historian of the Tlingit people and chief of

the Kiksadi.

Representing the Forest Service was Mr. Wycoff and Mr. Chipperfield who met at Mr. Ukas home and looked at the plans Mr. Ukas had drawn up from the old prints of the House of Shakes.

Roy Doverman, supervisor of the CCC, had 20 to 30 men working on the project using the old Indian tools of axes and adzes. Cedar logs used in the building, logged by James Bradley and a crew of three, were towed to Shakes Island by the boat Margie Ann.

After completion, the Forest Service asked that a potlatch be given at the dedication. Five representatives were sent from Washington, D.C. and dignitaries from Alaska, the lower 48 and Canada well attended, including dancers from throughout Alaska for a total of 500 people.

To most people a community house suggests a social center for meetings but this squat building of hand adzed timbers, was no white man's community center. Built of huge red cedar logs, the House is morticed and tenoned together without a nail in the whole structure.

It bore on its front elevation an enormous carved and painted grizzly bear and on the inside its depressed fire floor was surrounded by ascending giant like steps.

This unique building was the successor to Hit Klan (great house) of the Nan-ya-ah-ye tribe of the Tlingit nation that inhabited Southeast Alaska.

It was before this building that Charles Jones, then 76 years old, was named Kudanake Shakes VII. He assumed the hereditary

title of his tribe. In his 76 years he spanned the transition of the Tlingit from the so-called savage state of an independent, self-reliant people, who had an organized culture well suited to their habitat, to that of citizenship in the most progressive government in the world.

Born in the age when chiefs were still dictators, the chief sat around the central fire while instructing his clan in the wisdom and historical lore of their people. When the United States took possession of his country, Kudanake Shakes VII became equally obedient to the new rules, fantastic though they seemed to him. He no longer was Kudanake, but Charley Jones.

He moved out of the community house with his family and built a separate home, his children attended boarding schools just like the white man. He made his money, paid school taxes, subscribed to the Red Cross. He refused to take the name of SHAKES Shakes VII because it was old custom and he was striving to be a typical American.

Now in his old age and the tribe down to less than a dozen members, Charley Jones had become Shakes VII in a borrowed blanket and crest hat. The new order of government men wanted him to revert to his ancient pattern, because it was picturesque and unique to the tourist trade.

The change for Charley Jones is clearly illustrated in two brushes with the law, one in defense of the old ways and the other in striving for the new. After defending his property against white men who were intent on

building a dock on his property, he spent 10 days in jail for assault and battery realizing he had been divested of all his inheritance by a law he never understood.

The second time he was arrested for voting at a time and a place where he had no right to vote. Testifying in his own defense he said, "I buy Red Cross for every one in my family, even my dog." At the trial in United States District Court the jury found Charley Jones not guilty and this established the citizenship of the Indian Tribesman Shakes VII.