

An interview with totem carver, Tommie Jimmy

Tommie Jimmy, Tlingit totem carver from Juneau, is currently working at the Southeast Alaska Indian Cultural Center. He is recarving two of the older, decayed poles in the Sitka National Historical Park. He was interviewed in early December by Andrew Hope of the Cultural Center staff.

A.H. What's your family and working background?

T.J. I was born in Shakan, Alaska. My mother is from Yakutat. She is a L'uknax.adi (Coho salmon) lady. The L'uknax.adi originally came from Dry Bay (referred to as Aalseix by the Tlingit) and I lived there off and on in my youth. I never carved till I moved back down south to Petersburg. I started on my own as a hobby, copying poles from books and as I got better I went to Haines. I wanted to work with Carl Heinmiller, but he ignored me at first. I decided to carve a pole because I was short of money and when he saw my work he decided to hire me. I worked up there quite a while. I went to the New York World's Fair in 1964 with three other carvers. We were there for about 5½ months. We carved two poles while there, a 32 foot pole and a 36 foot pole, one of which I designed. We could have finished the poles within a couple of months, but we were demon-

strating so we took our time. After that things began to happen. When I came back Carl sent me and a guy by the name of John Hagen to Nome for six months to learn ivory carving and lapidary. This was in 1965. Then Carl talked me into coming back to Haines to work as his assistant silversmith instructor. I didn't get paid for it though—up until today I haven't been paid. He paid us by the hour. It wasn't much. It kept us going all winter, gave us something to do.

A.H. Where did Heinmiller get his money?

T.J. He was getting grants from somewhere. He'd get the boys to work and he'd sell the things they made and use the money to pay them. He had a bunch of school kids working for him. He accumulated quite a collection of artwork from these kids, and he's still doing this now. I left there a few years back—1966 I think, because of a misunderstanding over my pay. We couldn't see eye to eye. Carl was kind of a hard man to get along with. He still is. But he's done a lot for our people. Any time it came to designs, we wouldn't agree. I went back off and on and every time I came back there he'd put me to work. Like the largest pole in the world project that we did for Kake. I spent two

weeks on that project.

I've never really kept up on woodcarving. Last summer I broke the ice by designing and carving two poles in Juneau with the help of three other guys. Now I'm on this job. I'll probably be doing this from now on if I can get the work. I do silverwork too. As a matter of fact, when I was down in Ketchikan that's all I did. I couldn't keep up with the orders. I don't do any woodwork unless I have an order because there isn't that much pay in it. I do silver.

A.H. What else did you do with Heinmiller?

T.J. While I was with Carl, the Chilkat Dancers, which I belonged to, did a lot of traveling. We went to Whitehorse, Juneau and Washington, D.C. Eight boys went to D.C. in April of 1965 and we put on quite a few shows. There were Indians from all over and I believe Westinghouse did a movie of us performing.

A.H. Who did the music?

T.J. We sang our own, what we were taught. It wasn't completely Tlingit, but we made it sound as much as we could like Tlingit songs. The tune was the same. No one knew the difference except our own people. I have my own gear and I use it off and on.

A.H. Did you make your own outfit?

T.J. My mother made mine. I designed a headpiece of my own. I had my brother's wife finish it. All I did was carve the design and she finished it. That's the way it's supposed

to be; you're supposed to have the opposite moiety do the work and she was paid by our moiety, so the work was original. That's the way it was done and we still do it that way.

A.H. Did Carl dance with you guys too?

T.J. Most of the time he was on drums. When we went to D.C. they wouldn't let him perform because he was a white man and the funny part of it was he was mad because of this. We had to break in a new drummer. We tried Nathan Jackson. Him and I used to perform in the bars. We had a little band—rock and roll was the thing back then. Nathan had that certain beat, that rock and roll feel and Carl didn't go for it, so he tried me and I managed to please the man and became drummer.

A.H. So ever since you left Heinmiller you've been working construction and other than the project last summer in Juneau you haven't had many carving commissions?

T.H. No. We had just finished that project and apparently Ellen Lang (superintendent of Sitka National Historical Park) saw my picture in the paper and decided to call me. It fell right into place. I was working when she called. A few days later I was laid off. They put me on call.

A.H. Will you be returning to Juneau?

T.J. Yes. We lived in Ketchikan for eight years, but we sold our home and bought a new one in Juneau.

A.H. Are there many other pole carvers you know of?

T.J. Well, there's a lot of carvers, but I hate to say it, there are some I wouldn't recommend because of their style of carving. Even a lot of our own people don't understand our designs and why they are made like they are. Naturally they do it the way they think is best and it kind of throws things off and it doesn't look right. The eyes are too small, the Tlingit part of it is gone. If a person is going to learn how to carve I think he should learn how to draw. The eyes, the lips—I know a couple of carvers who put beady eyes on their carvings. It doesn't look right. But the guy that does it has all the stories, the culture, but his designs ruin it. I hate to see our culture change like that.

A.H. You mentioned Dry Bay...

T.J. Yes. We used to trap, fish and hunt up there when I

was a teenager, when my father was alive. We used to travel back and forth by canoe from Yakutat down to Italio' River. No motor, a couple of dogs... It was fun. I'll never forget that. It's all ocean out there. You have to go out on the flats to get to certain rivers. I haven't been there for a long time. I understand there's roads all though that area now. I'd like to go up there again one of these days.

A.H. What about the project you're working on now?

T.J. I'm working on two poles. One of them is a Raven pole. It had me stumped for a while, how a Raven, Shark, Fox and Bear were on the same pole. Ordinarily you have the emblems of only one moiety on a pole. Apparently this pole came from a Haida story about Raven trying to marry a Shark. The other two figures are witnesses.

A.H. Do you think it came from Tuxekan?

T.J. That I couldn't tell you. It's a Haida story and pole. Same as the other pole, that's Haida too.

A.H. Yes, that's from Old Kasaan. It belonged to the Yaadaas clan, who are Haida Eagles

T.J. That's what I figured. The Yaadaas pole is more elaborately designed and will take longer to carve than the Raven pole.

A.H. It goes with that pole at the entrance of the park and the one like it farther down the trail. Romaine Hardcastle gave them the name "Twins" because they look alike. It's kind of silly. I call them Yaadaas crest poles.

T.J. The ones I carved in Juneau were designed like the people wanted. One is an Eagle Story and one a Raven. Both are Tlingit. If I had it my way that's what I would have done here. The Raven pole is the story of the flood. Raven was hanging on a cloud in the sky, but he got tired and fell down on a patch of kelp. The Eagle pole is the story of how the Eagle moiety was created.