

Williams Tlingit storyteller for Alaska State Museum

Walter Babe Williams, Tlingit story-teller, strode back and forth before the enrapt onlookers, gesturing emphatically and delivering a dramatic monologue in both Tlingit and English.

Behind him, in a corner of the main lobby of the Alaska State Museum at Juneau, stood three totems and a tree on whose limbs sat several stuffed eagles. Visitors lined the railing of a spiral walkway which led up to the second floor and listened as Williams, the museum's chief tour guide for the summer, told them about totems.

"We have legendary ancestors going back beyond the range of memory," he told the group. "And we have legendary totem poles showing superhuman efforts, like folk tales, myths."

Williams pointed to the first totem.

"Here we have a Tlingit superman killing a giant octopus that had been destroying people hunting on the water, and another legendary pole over here showing another superhuman choking a monster that had been killing people."

He pointed to the third pole, which showed a superhuman tearing a sea lion in half.

"The one here is identified with a group south of us at Klawock on Prince of Wales Island. A maternal uncle was killed by a sea lion. The other brothers upon hearing what happened to their beloved uncle got together and decided that all of their nephews should be disciplined and trained. They wanted revenge.

"So they felt if they trained all their nephews, then one of them would be strong enough to complete the assignment of ripping a live sea lion in half to save face for them. If they made no attempt to save face for themselves, other later would make fun of their children.

"So they decided to train all of their nephews. In the winter time the maternal uncle would go through the house and say, 'get up, get up.' (Williams repeated this in loud, brusque Tlingit). Salt water bathing. They'd sit in the salt water and shiver. (Williams wraps his arms around himself and shivers). Others standing by with cedar and alder branches. One at a time they would be called ashore.

"You are a future spokesman, a leader in our house group. I am not going to be around all the time, a maternal uncle would say. Then they'd be whipped. Punishment? No. Discipline to keep the circulation going.

"Anytime anyone fell down, they didn't pick him up to take him to a nice warm fire. They threw him back in. All because his body's aching.

"All the time, one son belonged to the Raven Clan, sitting close to the fire all the time, his bronze skin started turning black, too close to the charcoal. They called him the dark-skinned one and made fun of him when he didn't get up in the morning. They ridiculed him. They threw fish at him.

"And at night when it was coldest in the winter, he would sneak out. He would hear the others groaning. He would sneak out and discipline himself with a lot of perseverance, patience, self-confidence, initiative. But no one knew about it. And before the raven made his sound in the morning he would return. All activities have to cease before the raven makes his sound. Otherwise, if you are

caught at the time the raven made the sound in the morning, bad luck for the rest of your life.

"He would sleep close to the fire and instead of going out for bodily elimination he would urinate close to the fire. Everybody would throw things at him and curse him. He would get up night after night and train.

"The day came. All of the canoes were lined up. All the young men were going with their favorite uncle. He said, 'Let me go,' but they said, 'We don't want you, stay behind.' No one knew what he went through during the night. Maybe one of the uncles did.

"Finally an older maternal uncle said, 'Come here, my beloved nephew. You are going in my canoe.'

"Everywhere they went they had chants to concentrate on what they were doing, to stay in tune, stay in time together. (Williams chanted and made a rowing motion with his arms). They traveled fast, came up to sea lion rock. Sea lions all over the place, all around them everywhere. They picked up the chanting to keep their mind on what they were doing.

"The assignment of the day has to be completed. Here comes the first nephew and grabs a sea lion, who flings him off. His skull cracks. Anybody look at him to see if he's alive? Too late. They don't look at him. They keep up the chant. Another nephew comes by and the sea lion flips him off.

"One of the older maternal uncles in the back lets out a wail while the chanting is going on. (Williams lets out a wail and says something in Tlingit). The youth (who has been ostracized) stands up, takes his jacket off and says, 'Here I am, my beloved uncle.' Instead of stepping over the seats, which are made of thick cedar in the canoe, he just walks right through. The seats make contact with his shins, breaking. (Williams stomps his feet loudly).

"He gets up the bow of the canoe, ready to kick himself off and underestimates the power of his legs. The bow cracks in half. The uncles see it and pick up the chant. (Williams chants louder). Moment of truth is getting near. He (the youth) looks around and a sea lion makes a pass at him. He doubles his fist and pow! Hits it on the side of the face and smashes it. He goes around looking for another one, finds one and kicks its face, picks that one up and the uncles keep up the chant. They can see he's concentrating. He's got his mind on what he's doing.

"He finally sees a sea lion he wants to tackle. Give it a try. He grabs it by the flippers and holds on. The sea lion tries to throw him off but he won't let go. The sea lion couldn't throw him off with its tail.

"Then he (the youth) says, 'I am the one who is going to complete the assignment for the



WALTER BABE WILLIAMS, noted Tlingit teacher and story-teller, is pictured above in action at the Alaska State Museum in Juneau. Williams is chief guide at the museum for the summer. He is telling the story of the totem which shows the superhuman tearing a sea lion in half. Williams' comprehensive, entertaining tours have been very popular at the museum.

—photo by CANDACE PYGOTT, Alaska Department of Education

day.' (Williams repeats the phrase in Tlingit). The youth rips the sea lion in half. (Williams makes a great ripping motion with his arms). The uncles are happy, chanting and filing back to their canoes. (Williams chants happily). No one is going to make fun. . . success, personal accomplishment, that's the moral of the pole."

The story ends, the tour concludes and the audience applauds Williams warmly. Many come up to chat with him before leaving the museum.

"You're a wonderful storyteller," says one admirer. Williams nods, smiles. During the tour through the museum he has told them enough about the past and present culture and history of Alaska and woven in enough stories to fill a small book.

Williams' story-telling ability is no secret in Alaska. He already has established a state-wide reputation for being a gifted story-teller and teacher. For the State Museum, Juneau School District and many other groups, he is a primary "resource person" on Indian culture, history, art and legend.

"I like this work meeting people here," he said of his museum duties. "Compared to the twelve-hour cab driving I used to do. I used to drive a cab in the summer after I got through teaching."

Williams, 57, was born on May 24, 1919, at Sitka and was raised in the Tlingit village of Hoonah some 70 miles south of Juneau on Chichagof Island. From 1936-39 he attended the Bureau of Indian Affairs (BIA) boarding school at Wrangell, then went south to study arc welding at another BIA school at Riverside, California. In 1942 he enlisted in the Navy and served in the Pacific before getting his discharge in 1946.

Once out of the service he returned to Alaska and engaged in commercial fishing. His father talked him into going back to school, and he earned some credits at Riverside College in California before transferring to Gonzaga University in Washington where he received his B.A. in Education in 1954.

After leaving college, Williams taught and coached athletics for five years at a Catholic boarding high school for Northern Cheyenne children in Montana. He then taught for three years at a BIA school at Salem, Oregon. He returned to Alaska to teach in 1962. He is currently a bi-cultural specialist in the Juneau School District, is a certified secondary teacher, and has been involved in many other education projects with the local district, the Alaska Department of Education and the University of Alaska, Southeast.

Williams has been asked to speak on many occasions

throughout Alaska to impart his considerable knowledge of Indian culture and legend.

He has nearly completed course work for a Master's Degree in Education from the University of Alaska, Southeast and has completed nine chapters of a book entitled, "The Tlingit Gent Above Suspicion."

"Morally right, never wrong, the maternal uncle," Williams said, describing the book. "The main purpose of my critique is to create a character sketch or image of a maternal uncle and simply describe the kind of training that he offered. Whatever he considered of value in the past, disciplines, values . . . I've got a legendary perspective on Tlingit education."

The master of a Tlingit house was the maternal uncle, not the father, Williams explained during the tour. There was no chief, as such. The maternal uncle was the spokesman, the leader.

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