

The Hiyo

Editor's Note: The following is excerpted from the book "Nulato: An Indian Life on the Yukon": By Poldine Carlo ©1978.

To tell about the stickdance or hiyo, I will have to begin with what my grandmother told me, although it may differ from others, but there really isn't that much difference. She said once there was a family of seven boys, a man and his wife. They all got sick and died except the father. He cut up a lot of dried wood and burned them. This is what people did years back—they cremated the dead.

After the father got through with the cremation, he went back to his kishem. As he was crying, he started to sing. As he was singing he thought to himself, "Why don't I go out and get a stick at least to keep me company?" So he went out and cut a tree down, brought that in the kishem and started dancing and singing around it. When he went out much later the sun was up. He had danced all night till bright and early the next day.

That's the reason for the dance today lasting fourteen to sixteen hours. Also, the original songs that he sang at that time are the thirteen songs that are sung just before the stickdance. They aren't sung at any other time. If you listen closely you can tell the language differs from my language. It's more like the Innoko River language, which I guess is the Ingalic, though some people say it originated from a village about six miles below Kaltag, a village which was a big Indian village at one time. Some say it originated from the Innoko River Indians.

The stickdance is a very serious celebration that we the people of Nulato and Kaltag strongly believe in. It is, as I've said, a time to repay people for what they have done for you at a time of death. About six months to a year after the person has died the family of the dead person gives a dish of food and a cup of water to the person who dressed the body. This giving of food once a month until stickdance time means you are feeding the dead person you are going to give the potlatch for, so therefore you always put the best in the dish.

I remember years ago that when someone died in the family, Grandma used to put food in the stove every morning before she ate and also at night at suppertime. She'd do this for about six months, or until the person that died got used to the food of the dead people. The belief is that we go to a beautiful place beyond, a belief that existed long before the white man came to tell us there is a heaven and hell.

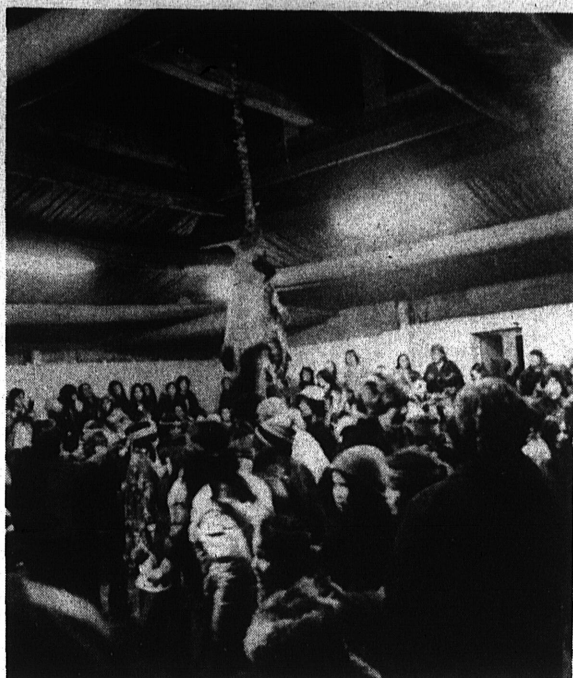
I never heard the Indians discuss a hell. There could be one, though, for they believed the naughty persons got punished for whatever wrong he or she had done.

Concerning the preparation for the potlatch: I can remember my grandma getting ready for the stickdance. One time she made clothing to dress eight people. She didn't do much fancy sewing. She did a lot of trapping, so she used to hire quite a few of the women to do the fancy sewing for her. I remember as a little girl whenever she was sewing things for the potlatch she wouldn't allow me around her. We were not allowed to touch any of the things that were being sewn because they were for the dead. Whenever I went in the cache, there were about

six different sacks of things. One sack was nothing but boots; one sack moccasins; one beaded mittens, another knitted socks, shirts, pants, and about sixteen to twenty blankets, plus beaver skins, wolf, and wolverine. I was always afraid of those clothes in the cache. The wolverine skins and wolves were always put on the stick. These were cut up into strips to be given to the individuals.

When the potlatch was being planned, it usually was a year ahead of the actual time. We'd start our preparation from then on, like during the summer the women folks would put away the best dried fish and dried meat. We'd pick a lot of berries and put them away alos. The men would go out hunting in the fall of the year and get ducks and bear. They also used to get mountain sheep and put all this away. They'd

See "The Hiyo" Page 15



The stick with the people dancing around it.

The Hiyo

Continued from Page 3

take the insides out of the ducks but not pluck the feathers. They would fill the insides with grass so the bugs wouldn't get at them. I remember we always used to have some of these for Thanksgiving. We had no refrigerators in those days. To this day I would much rather have these ducks any day rather than turkey.

The potlatch usually lasted for a week. The first night we would have a big potlatch at the community hall and then the mourning songs were sung, the new songs first for the ones the potlatch was being given for and then the old, old songs that we have been singing for a long, long time. The women would stand in line all across the hall and dance. We'd call this the washtub dance. As the new songs were sung, I remember some of the women crying because the words put into the songs are very sad. The next night the people were served just coffee and something light, and then there was more singing and dancing. Each night there was a potlatch someone would burn some of the food for the dead.

The night of the stickdance we'd start our mourning songs and dancing about 8:00 p.m. For this special dancing we'd dress up in our megahoolauna with head feathers. At this time the thirteen special songs were sung. Then we'd start singing our hiyo song. Then the stick was brought in and the stickdance would begin at about 10:00 p.m. It would last until about 2:00 p.m. the next day.

Once the stick was taken down and carried all around the hall, it was taken all over the village and then back into the hall and put back up. The next time it was taken down and was taken all over the village, it was then broken up and thrown over the riverbank.

During the time the stick was up we'd bring in all the things we were to give away, dance around the stick and then hang it up on the wall till the next day when the things were to be given away. The wolf and wolverine skins were hung up on the stick that was all decorated with ribbons and feathers. During the night someone would come in with down feathers and sprinkle them all around the stick and onto the people who were dancing. This was for good luck.

Usually the visitors from each village would get together and buy a bolt of material. They would all come in with this material and dance all around the stick. At the time of giving the cloth away, they'd tear it up into about three-yard pieces and give it to their friends.

After the stickdance was over, they'd clean up the hall and have a big potlatch.

person sitting in front of them to get the clothes out of the bag and start dressing the person. Years ago the old people said the people getting dressed wouldn't have a curtain across the kishem and they would strip right down. People didn't think anything of this. It was a serious and sad thing. Now we don't do that. After everyone was through getting all dressed in the new clothes the dresser would pick up all the old

clothes and put them in the sack. As the people all lined up and were going out of the hall, they'd bring their sack of old clothes along as they were filing out.

They are not supposed to look around or turn around. This they are very superstitious about. The saying is that if you look back, because you represent the dead person it means you are looking for someone to take with you, especially the one that dressed

you or a relative of theirs so the last thing this person is told as he gets ready to go out is, "Do not turn around or look around as you are going out. This going out is supposed to be the dead person leaving the village for good." A lot of the people at this time would cry, thinking of their loved ones that are to be leaving them forever.

The Hiyo

Continued from Page 15

The people would come back in a little while with their sacks. They'd stay through giving away of the stuff and then when they'd leave the hall and go home, they'd take all their new clothes off, put on their old clothes again, put the new clothes in the sack and put this out in the cache for the night. The dead are supposed to pick up the new clothes and go on their way for good.

Now, during the stick-dance time from beginning to end, the villagers wouldn't leave the children alone at home. They believed that the dead people had returned to the village for the potlatch, and to keep the dead from getting the spirit of the children, they'd have a sitter, an older person, taking care of them. Also, the young children's clothes would not be left out on the line at night because it was believed that the dead would do something to the clothes to make the children so sick that some would even die.

We believed that during the potlatych the dead for whom it was given would all be happy and be participating with us. We believed that we shouldn't sing the stick-dance song at any time but just at the time of the stick-

dance, because if we'd sing it at any other time the dead people would hear it beyond, and if they got fooled the'd wish up bad luck and something would happen to us or our families.

Indian people have such pride in this celebration that in no way would we put this on for nothing. Even our washtub dancing isn't put on for show for people to be taking pictures. In fact, we don't want people taking pictures.

I remember years ago when people used to come by dog team even at night by moonlight from Galena, Koyukuk, and Kaltag. It is such a beautiful picture to remember. Anyway after coming such a long distance they would dance all night. How they used to enjoy that! It would really get to you. You'd get a certain feeling and just want to dance, dance, dance.

The women dressing for their dead husbands were usually dressed in old clothes. Years ago when a man died the wife would cut her pretty long hair and even cut her thighs to show her love for her husband. Now she doesn't start thinking of going out with a man or even think of getting married till she has given a potlatch at the stick-dance for her husband.

That also goes for the man when he made a potlatch for his wife. He'd hire women from the village to do the sewing for him. While

they wre doing that, he'd have all the meat and furs and everything else for the potlatch. He also wasn't supposed

to go with a woman before he'd given a potlatch for his wife.

After you'd do all this

for the memory of a relative of yours, you'd feel so good, paying a debt you feel you owe.