

Haida people name chief

Story and photographs courtesy of River Times

By CURT MADISON

In early November, Vicki Burgess, then FNA Youth Center Director and a Native of Hydaburg, and I traveled to Masset, B.C. to record the Haida ceremony of naming a chief. The Haida Indian people live on Prince of Wales Island in Alaska and on the Queen Charlotte Islands in British Columbia, Canada.

The ceremony lasted two days, with feasts, speeches, and dances on both days. More than 600 people attended from Alaska and all over Canada. They came to greet friends and relatives, eat Native foods of Southeast, and celebrate Oliver Adams taking his ceremonial name, Ga'ala. By the end of the second night the entire hall was filled with people in the traditional red and blue button robes for the final Invitational Dance.

An inauguration ceremony had not been performed on such a large scale for over a hundred years. No living person had ever seen it done. Chief Mathews, the new chief's uncle and predecessor, was named in a kitchen in Masset with just a few people

as witnesses. In the more than thirty years since then, Haidas tradition has seen a resurgence of power in the identity of Haida people. It exists in the eloquence of statesmen like Godfrey Kelly, arguing for Canadian Haida Land Claims, and the craftsmanship of carvers like Bill Reid, Robert Davidson, and Sharon Hitchcock. This resurgence has been openly inspired, in part, by the Alaska Native Land Claims of 1971.

Chief Ga'ala gave his first speech in both Haida and English. The Haida portion traced his hereditary qualifications to be chief of the Masset Band of the Eagle Clan and thanked all the people who helped in the ceremony. In English, he stressed the importance of bicultural education for the Haida people. "We are proud of our nation. We say, 'I am Haida.' It is a great name. It was a great Nation. But hear me, my dear people, our forefathers earned that respect. We are taking credit for the accomplishments of our forebearers. I think we're entering a new era.

We, this present generation and the generation succeeding, will have to earn it also."

He joked, "If you see some strange faces here tonight that you do not recognize, treat them with kindness, for they are some of the Department of Indian Affairs staff enjoying the potlatch tradition they outlawed some years ago." He ended after again stressing education for the children. "We need lawyers. We need businessmen. We need every trade in the land, until eventually the Haida Nation is self-sufficient."

The speeches, songs, and photographs we collected in Masset are still being put together. We are working now to finish a slide/tape show and a 3/4 inch video cassette with sound tracks both in Haida and English. When they are finished, which could be anywhere from two weeks to two months, anyone wishing further information can write Curt Madison, % Project Now, 102 Lacey St., Fairbanks, Alaska 99701. The materials will be available for use in Alaskan schools.



GA'ALA'S INAUGURATION—Selina Peratovich places the headdress on her son Oliver Adams at the ceremony naming him "Chief of the Haida people". The ceremony was held in Masset, B.C. in Canada. The headdress was made by Robert Davidson.



CHILDREN IN MASSET, B.C. look on as Curt Madison photographs them.



CEREMONIAL POTLATCH held in honor of Oliver Adams' inauguration as "Chief of the Masset Band of the Eagle Clan." Five hundred people from Canada and Alaska attended the potlatch to name the chief.



AT CEREMONIAL BANQUET—Godfrey Kelly, President of the Haida Nation, and Vicki Kelly, daughter of Chief Edensaw, a well known Haida chief, enjoy the potlatch in honor of Oliver Adams' inauguration. (All photos by Curt Madison)



HYDABURG FISHING FLEET—Fishing boats in Hydaburg in Southeastern Alaska dock at the village. Shown are purse seiners and trollers to the very right. Fishing is the main industry of the Native people in Hydaburg.