

# Columnist gets 'paid back' at potlatch

by Vern Metcalfe

for the Tundra Times

*"It may be more blessed to give than receive, but this is one blessed receiver." — Vern Metcalfe, Haines, Sept. 26, 1987.*

For those unacquainted with an event that goes back eons in the history of many Native Americans and known in the Tlingit Nation as "Potlatch," let it be known that Minnie Albecker knows exactly how to conduct such a party.

This particular renewal took place at the Haines Alaska Native Brotherhood hall and honored the late Robert (Jeff) David who passed away a little over a year ago. Minnie was Jeff's "auntie," and I might note here that this particular celebration of the life of the departed is also known as a "payback party" for reasons you will soon understand.

First, however, let us recite the fact that Jeff David was a bonafide hero to many Southeast Alaskans and a close friend for some 38 or so years. We first met around 1949 when I was the local sportscaster and he was the star player for the Metlakatla Vets, a team sponsored by the Metlakatla VFW. When they first appeared upon the Gold Medal basketball tourney I was, coincidentally, the post commander of the Juneau VFW.

Thereby hangs a tale. Taku Post 5559 had experienced near fiscal disaster operating a bar which had been named the "Jeep Club" by Army NCOs during World War II. When I inherited this particular mess I enlisted a fellow member, an accountant, to figure out a way out of this financial thicket. We succeeded mainly due to the rehiring of one William (Doc) Jackson, a black World War I veteran who gained great fame among imbibers by mixing a variety of extremely potent remedies, thus the nomenclature "Doctor Jackson."

We had approximately \$60 in the till when the Metlakatla entourage arrived on the scene in three seine boats complete with spouses. Having been entranced by this team's last break which had rendered me breathless if not speechless, I determined that they should be honored with a party come the last night of the six-day roundball extravaganza.

The party that followed at the venerable Jeep Club became a legendary happening and was followed by more of the same during my tenure. Since I received no monetary benefit out of the management post (Jackson refused to continue unless I occupied the job) my wishes were a command. Besides the good doctor had bailed us out along with a bevy of slot machines.

One of the lasting blessings of these particular parties were the friendships made. Most particularly with Jeff David who won more awards during his lengthy participation in the oldest continuous such sporting event in Alaska than any other player, past or present. This past tourney, the 41st annual Juneau Lion's Club Gold Medal Tourney was dedicated to the memory of Jeff David.

Jeff's home town was Haines, but he had married a Metlakatla girl, Cecilia, who he had met at Sheldon Jackson School.

He fished out of Metlakatla for some years following a stint in the Army and then moved back to Haines. He was to later reside in Sitka before moving to Juneau. He also played for (and coached) a Haines team that experienced the dream of all "dark-horse" squads when he led them to the finals of the GM tourney where, alas, they lost.

Be that as it may, the tributes were certainly capped by the Potlatch of Sept. 26. On hand were friends, relatives and admirers from as far away as Seattle, Metlakatla, Sitka, Juneau and waypoints.

I was fortunate to be seated (by Minnie Albecker's command) next to Evans Willard, a lifelong friend of David's and also a Raven. He kept me informed as to each happening. I was also seated next to Minnie's hubby, Leo, who along with four sons had squeezed out some 30 gallons of

"ooligan grease." This latter Tlingit delicacy (and condiment) is highly prized and my half-gallon would go for at least \$100 (if it weren't a subsistence item).

There also was a host of other goodies which came first in baskets and then in a delightful Tlingit game wherein a large bowl is filled with fruit and veggies and hoisted in the air. Neighbors to the hoister grab for the goodies. Much laughter here.

Then they passed out cases of salmon, dry and wet, more food items

and then money. Suffice to say my take paid my ferry fare for me and my Mercury and my hotel.

The goods received filled the trunk of my car.

It is ironic that Jeff David presided over my adoption here in Juneau some seven years or so ago. And that I was called upon to present the plaque presented to his family at the 41st GM tourney and to the Haines ANB where it will hang in their hall. I trust Jeff is proud of me in all of this. Somehow or other I know he truly is. So am I.