

Southeast potlatches celebrate salmon return, pay-off of regalia



Daisy Phillips (right) and her daughter, Flora Beirely, prepare the family potlatch bowls which are used to distribute food gifts to people who have been selected for their help prior to the gatherings. The custom is that the person's name is called and a bowl of food is taken to where they are seated. Everyone seated with that person helps empty the bowl and when the bowl is raised a noise is made that represents the clan as a way of thanking for the gift.

Photos by Judd Cranston



Cecelia Kunz and Lillian Hammond of the Raven clan, listen as Richard King explains the importance of Deer Rock.

The Gun Ach Ka Dee Clan gathered in Haines recently to commemorate the returning of the salmon to the area around Deer Rock on the Chilkoot River and to celebrate and make known to other clans that the Gun Ach Ka Dee dance regalia has been paid for and is now owned by the Gun Ach Ka Dee Clan.

The first day of the gathering took place at Deer Rock on the Chilkoot River where Austin Hammond told of the troubles that salmon had trying to return to their spawning grounds due to the tampering of the river by Alaska Fish and Game Managers.

George Davis told the story of how the brown bear and the dog salmon became friends on the river near Deer Rock.

The rock took its name from the forest deer which is considered by the Tlingit to be

the most peaceful animal in the forest. Thus, the "peace rock" became known as the Deer Rock.

According to legend, the dog salmon was swimming up the Chilkoot River and was the last of his family to come up the river.

All the other dog salmon of his family had been eaten by the brown bears and the last salmon was afraid to come any further after seeing so many of the bears in the river.

He held back waiting near Deer Rock.

The leader of the grizzly bears ordered the other bears surround the fish, catch him and bring the last fish to him.

The last dog salmon held back but was aware that the bears knew what he was thinking - that he must continue his journey. Finally he swam into the circle of bears and they

caught him. The big brownie told the other bears to "hold him so the light falls on him just so." Part of the salmon was in the light of the setting sun and part in the darkness of the evening.

At the point where the light fell on the dog salmon stripes and coloration appeared.

The big brown bear then realized this was the last dog salmon and if the bears and fish were to help one another live, a peace must be made between the fish and the brown bears.

He told the other bears to let the dog salmon continue his journey up river, but before they let go, to do the spirit dance repeating eight times 00 00 00 00 00 00 00 00.

The stripes and coloration are proof of the encounter with the brown bears.

After the telling of the legends, Austin Hammond told the group of the importance of Deer Rock to the Tlingit people. He was told of its importance as a child by his uncle, Jack David who told him of the stories more than 50 years ago.

At the time, the government was building a road along the bank of the river and the construction crews used dynamite to blast their way through.

Not many knew of the significance of Deer Rock or that it is the place where the first peace ceremony was performed.

Deer Rock is the place where people learned that it is possible to live without killing one another, said Hammond.

It is called "Deer Rock" after what the people consider to be the most peaceful of God's creatures - the deer.

The site was being destroyed - desecrated - but thanks to the hard work and dedication of men like Jack David, George Davis and Austin Hammond, the site is now being protected.

The government has returned the land around the site and it will stand as a monument to the first peaceful people of the world.

The peace ceremony, which is performed at Deer Rock is now held whenever there is trouble. It is fashioned after the way the Brown Bear and the Dog Salmon made peace near the Deer Rock.

In a circle, the Spirit Dance is done repeating eight times 00.

The first potlatch held recently demonstrated the importance of the site to the people of the area and the second potlatch held at the Alaska Native Brotherhood in Haines, was sponsored by the Gun Ach Ka Dee (Eagle) Clan as a "pay off" party.

The clan celebrated the creation of some commissioned dance regalia and showed all in attendance that the regalia was now in the rightful clan ownership and that the artists had been paid in full.

At the Gun Ach Ka Dee potlatch, which was hosted by Daisy Phillips, Ann Keener and Agnes Bellinger, daughter of clan leader Jenny Thanaught, the traditional admiral's cap was formally transferred from Mrs. Thanaught to Daisy Phillips.

Mrs. Bellinger told the group that although her mother was transferring the cap, "she isn't giving up." Mrs. Phillips will not wear the cap for a long time out of respect to Mrs. Thanaught.

The Eagle Clan women wear sailor outfits as a throwback to the days when Native regalia and customs were being suppressed and the wearing of eagle feathers was against the law.

To get around this, the Gun Ach Ka Dee Clan women showed unity by adopting the sailor outfits as traditional clan wear.



Agnes Bellinger wears a traditional bear-claw headdress. She was one of the potlatch sponsors.



George Dalton, a Hoonah elder of the Kaag Waan Taan Eagle Clan speaks at the potlatch.



Austin Hammond translates portions of the Tlingit language ceremony for Arron Greenburg who attended the two-week traditional event.