

# THE INDIANS OF ALERT BAY

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PHOTOGRAPHS BY EDITH S. WATSON



ALTHOUGH situated directly on the Alaskan coastal highway, with a constant stream of large freight and passenger steamers calling at the cannery pier or dropping anchor in its fine harbour, Alert Bay is a spot haunted by the spirit of the untamed, full of those powerful undercurrents that thrive on the edge of the wilderness. It is altogether mysterious and bizarre.

Part of this spirit is due to the wildness of nature hereabouts, to the high-reaching mountains, to the low-hanging, encircling mists, to the dark woods, and, in the rainy season, to the general atmospheric wetness clinging to the nearer distances; but specifically it is due to other things, things which the natural setting helps to accentuate and for which it forms a splendidly effective stage. Merely to mention Alert Bay is to think of Indians. For this little trading-post, now grown to prime importance as a Pacific coast port-of-call, has filled a high place in coastal Indian life from time immemorial.

Just how long the Indians have had homes or congregated at Alert Bay no one knows, not even they themselves. But as far back as their traditions go this particular spot on the coast has been a gathering-place focusing all the events of tribal life in peace and war.

Time, therefore, has vested Alert

Bay with all the importance of a capital and hallowed it to the red men all up and down the coast. Far within the Arctic Circle, away off on the shores of Queen Charlotte Islands, the aboriginals look to Alert for guidance in many things and in ways that are a mystery to us.

Building on established foundations, Alert Bay is now an Indian reservation, with an "Indian" agent and government school. For upward of a score of years a Church of England, established here with a resident rector, has maintained two boarding-schools—one for Indian boys and the other for Indian girls. But despite all these civilizing influences, there still obtains in the village the mysterious philosophy of life embodied in the community-house without windows, the open wood-fire in the middle of the floor and the hole in the roof for escaping smoke. There still remains the picturesque dugout or *kayak*, totem poles, big and little; tree burials, potlatches, including wild men orgies, and a host of other curious customs that lend colour and weave a motive of weirdness into all the life hereabouts.

A curving beach, a boardwalk above the swishing waves following the bend of the beach forms what might elsewhere be termed "The Avenue of the Totem". These totems, or "family trees," the chief attraction of visitors to Alert Bay are curiosities indeed! British Columbia giant