

Mr. Crosby arrived among the Skidegate Haida in his boat in 1884 and threatened them with jail if they raised totems. He even put a number of converted Indians into police uniforms to convey the message.

In fact, the totems, some of the finest aboriginal art in the world, were never idolized but were raised to honor the dead, or, very occasionally, to mock the living.

They were painted scantily, but with remarkable ingenuity, the artists using red ochre, ground green rock, crushed bear dung set in the oil of salmon roe, the charcoal of alder and red cedar bark.

A very small percentage of the totems, primarily among the Kwakiutl, were ridicule posts and other tribes might have an occasional section for ridicule. One Indian chief, jailed for breaking a white man's law, had the faces of his sentencing judge and clerk of court carved, unflatteringly, one on each pole, and raised in front of his home so that his friends could help mock them as they went by.

Ninety per cent of the totems were mortuary poles, used as markers at the gravesites. It generally took about a year for the massive tree to be chosen, slightly hollowed, transported and carved.

The carver had to be chosen from the opposite phratry or family within the tribe. If there was

no qualified carver in that family, the person chosen could appoint someone else to do the job and stand over him ceremoniously from time to time and, incidentally, take the credit.

The carver was paid in the currency of the day, the vividly handsome Hudson's Bay blankets, earning ten blankets per section and generally making a five-section pole.*

To the Northwest Indians, wealth had only one purpose—its distribution. The ultimate gesture was to hold a "potlatch" or celebration at which blankets would be given to the guests by the thousands, and many more would be tossed on the fire in the cavalier manner of the man in the nightclub who lights his cigars with hundred-dollar bills.

The potlatch was a great way to celebrate not only death, but marriage and peacemaking, and was often followed by trading.

Three years ago the Haidas of Queen Charlotte Island renewed the potlatch custom, not for the tourists but for themselves. Although tourists are permitted to watch, the potlatch of today is very much a tribal affair.

*Hudson's Bay Company still sells them. For an illustrated pamphlet or for a brochure on the history of the blankets, write:

Hudson's Bay Company
Shopping Service
Portage Avenue
Winnipeg, Manitoba, Canada

