



RAVEN RHAPSODY

The end of an era

By DANIEL Z. JACOBS
Reporter

A perennial local attraction and landmark is sadly coming to the end of its outdoor life. The Jasper Totem Pole, or Raven Pole, will be taken down for good in early April.

Currently erected in its third location on the Jasper Townsite, the totem pole has been part of this town's heritage since Nov. 1915, when the Grand Trunk Pacific Railway Company brought the pole eastward from the Queen Charlotte Islands in British Columbia.

In 1915, Jasper was little more than simply a stop along the recently completed rail line to Prince Rupert. According to the recently retired Parks Canada historian, Jim Taylor, "there was very few people living out there [in Jasper], so to make it pay, they [Grand Trunk Pacific] were trying to open it up and advertise it as a tourist thing."

The Raven Pole soon became synonymous with Jasper, much like the rugged landscape, abundance of wildlife and the thunderous Athabasca River. Throughout the decades, tourists from across the globe have taken pictures of the 40-foot tall Haida carving. The Prince of Wales was even presented a picture of the Raven Pole by the Deputy Minister of the Department of the Interior, as a token of his tour to Jasper during October 1924.

Carved sometime during the 1870s, the pole was already a "real artifact" when it was loaded on a train and shipped to Jasper, said Taylor. Early pictures of the totem pole reveal that in addition to changes in location, there have been some physical alterations made to the carving over the past 94 years.

"The bottom figure is a human face, but it has been cut off at about the nose, so you can't see the mouth," said Taylor. It's likely that the pole was initially set right into concrete after it arrived in Jasper, causing the wood at the bottom to rot. In 1954, the totem was relocated and the bottom portion was simply removed to prevent any additional rot.

"The really neat thing is how CN later looked after it," said Taylor. "There's a copper sheeting on the back," he said, and when the pole was removed from the concrete base, instead of just sticking it directly back into the ground, which would cause more rot, workers bolted it to a telephone pole and "then they stuck the telephone pole in the concrete."

Where did it come from?

The totem pole traveled aboard ship and train from a Haida village called Masset, located on the north end of Graham Island in Haida Gwaii, which areas known as the Queen Charlotte Islands. Simply getting the totem pole from Masset to Prince Rupert in 1915 must have been a vast and herculean endeavour, given that crossing from Haida Gwaii to the mainland is approximately 93 nautical miles and today takes about eight hours in favourable weather conditions.

"You can imagine there was hundreds of poles on our island," said Christian White, who is a Haida carver living in the Masset area. "What happened a hundred years ago though is people came here and missionaries were encouraging the Haida to cut the poles down, so some of the chiefs thought we may as well make a few dollars out of it," he said. "People wanted to buy these poles and they were shipped away to museums in Chicago and New York," added White.

Concerns surrounding whether or not Jasper's pole was stolen are also assuaged by Parks historian Taylor, who said that "by the early twentieth century, these places were solidly Christian... and in Skidegate [another Haida village on Haida Gwaii]... they just burned them on the beach. The Masset

people tended to get rid of them to museums and places," he said.

Echoing the sentiments of Taylor, George MacDonald, president of the Bill Reid Foundation and author of Haida Monumental Art, said "it's a very sophisticated carving and for that reason I think was removed while there was still a lot of choice in the village as to which ones could be removed before they all disappeared. So this was considered a choice piece by the railway," he said.

It is also likely, according to MacDonald, that the missionary [Reverend Charles Harrison] at the time on Haida Gwaii, would have acted as interlocutor, negotiating the deal between Grand Trunk Pacific and the Haida family. "The family as far as I'm aware was compensated in what was considered a fair way," said MacDonald, reinforcing that, "it was a legitimate removal," as indicated.

Who did it belong to?

The house the Raven Pole stood in front of was called Point House, according to MacDonald, because it stood farther forward than other homes on the beach in Masset. Marius Barbeau, a Canadian anthropologist working in the early 1900s, called the house Nakwindjus, said MacDonald, based on Barbeau's notes that are included in the Canadian Museum of Civilization's archives.

Point House or Nakwindjus stood one house away from Monster House, which belonged to the village chief, Wiah. It is thought that chief and artist Stiltla lived in Point House, said White.

MacDonald has given the name of the chief as "telling (people) to sit down" (at a potlatch) and believes that Stiltla in fact lived in Eagle House next door - named for the eagle hung above his door from the stern board of the Susan Sturgis, which was captured by Wiah in 1852. Nevertheless, there is a small plaque above the door in a photo of the Point House with the Raven Pole that reads "John," the Christian name of whomever the occupant happened to be.

Style and Design

Originally, the totem pole would have had another section on the top about 10 feet in length. Though not exquisitely carved, this upper portion would have had rings or "skils" as MacDonald calls them, carved around the circumference signaling the number of potlatches a chief had given. This upper section was removed prior to the journey from Haida Gwaii. These rings are "quite an important symbol for our people," said White.

MacDonald also said he believes the Jasper Raven Pole was carved, at least in part, by Albert Edward Edenshaw, "known as one of the super-chiefs of the north coast" and uncle to famed Haida carver Charles Edenshaw. "It is a very sophisticated pole in terms of carving style," said MacDonald, and "it's one of the few that's actually attributed to him" [Albert Edward Edenshaw].

The tools used by Edenshaw et al, are similar to tools plied nowadays, "except for the chainsaw," joked White. "They would use adzes, axes, wedges, like a sledgehammer, chisels, knives, a whole range of hand tools," he said.

The pole's namesake, the raven, is very important to Haida culture and heritage. "All of our people called him our grandfather," said White. "He had several different names. He was known as the trickster, the transformer... and several others that shouldn't be spoken in public," he quipped. "When he [the raven] discovered our people," said White, "the story goes that he found them in a clam shell and enticed them to come out. He thought of them as his children I guess."

The style of carving is quite unique and the Jasper Raven Pole is a notably superb example of the Haida's carving traditions. Functionally, the totem poles lining the beach of Masset were carved to be seen and recognized from a distance. Canoes heading into the village would be able to see the totem poles and recognize their relatives' homes almost instantly, said White, reducing the possibility of conflict between houses and different lineages.

The style is quite "monumental," said White, due to the exaggerated features and proportions of the of the carvings on the totem poles. Even though the style is sort of larger-than-life and each artist develops an idiosyncratic approach and aesthetic, totem poles, such as the one in Jasper, is "made to be carved at any scale really without a great loss of the form lines," said White, while adding that he could actually take the design from Jasper's pole and carve a model of it smaller than the width of his hand.

The current paint scheme of the Raven Pole is incorrect by historical and cultural standards. Primarily, the Haida used red and black in their colour schemes and did not paint the entire carved surface of a pole. "The eyes and eyebrows would be black and then the lips and nostrils would be red," said White. "Sometimes around the eyes were painted a greenish-blue colour," he added.

What about the wood?

One aspect of the carving process that cannot be overlooked is the choice of timber. Western red cedar was found in great abundance on Haida Gwaii and was used for everything from homes, canoes, storage boxes and cooking boxes, said White.

Not only was the red cedar plentiful, the properties of the wood also made it ideal for use outside, one of the many reasons why the Raven Pole has lasted this long in Jasper's climate. "The red cedar is quite an oily wood," said White. "It has a natural weather resistance and it was the longest lasting of the woods on our islands... other types of woods deteriorate really quickly," he said.

In addition to the bark being used for hats, baskets, clothing and mats, the women would weave the bark into ropes which would be used to raise the totem poles ceremoniously. Given the cultural significance the red cedar has to the Haida, it is

unfortunate that "it's getting more and more difficult to find the large timbers," said White, but thankfully, "the Council of Haida Nation and the Ministry of Forests have been working to preserve the stands of timber for future generations," he said.

Why is it coming down?

Despite the weather resistance of the red cedar and multiple layers of wood-filler and paint, after 130 years of exposure to the elements the Jasper Raven Pole has become a potential hazard to pedestrians.

James Hay, senior conservator at the Canadian Conservation Institute constructed a lengthy report detailing the condition of the Raven Pole for Parks Canada last summer. Based on the results of Resistograph tests - an instrument that detects timber decay - the report states that "the totem pole is not so much standing, as hanging on the Douglas fir support post," and that "the problem of repairing this pole so that it can continue to stand upright in the weather is as futile as trying to make a rusty car more serviceable by repainting it, or trying to use nails to fasten slices of bread back into a loaf."

Based on this report and the "importance of this magnificent carving to the Haida community," Parks Canada is resolved to remove the pole for safety reasons, said a letter from Park Superintendent, Greg Fenton, to employees of Parks Canada.

What will happen to it?

Recognizing the historical and cultural value of the Raven Pole, MacDonald said he believes it is definitely a "national treasure." Mayor Richard Ireland and Superintendent Fenton, both of whom grew up with the pole, said they are "sad" to see it go. "The focus is on getting it down safely," said Fenton, "and then finding a suitable resting place and then working with the community to commemorate its importance... we want to do what is appropriate and what is in the desires of the Haida Nation."

Parks has had preliminary discussions with the Council of the Haida Nation about the fate of the Raven Pole, but nothing concrete has been decided. Additionally, there have been some discussions between Parks and the local aboriginal community. Sherrill Meropolis, Aboriginal Liaison with Parks, said internal discussions have taken place amongst the local aboriginal population and although no formal position has been taken as of yet, they would like to be part of the broader dialogue regarding future developments at the Raven Pole site.

The Jasper Yellowhead Museum may still be "considered a possibility," even temporarily, said Karen Byers, Manager at the museum, until Parks figures out what to do with it. Parks is also looking at the possibility of the pole going to the Museum of Civilization if the Haida don't want it, said Fenton. Mayor Ireland thinks "there's something that we could maybe do to catch the eye and still be symbol for the town," adding that he "would like to see any plans for the vacated site "come from sort of an arts-culture perspective rather than a municipal perspective."

Haida carver Christian White pondered the unfortunate fact that the Haida people, especially young people, never really get to museums to explore their own heritage up close. White is currently teaching a class in which students view their heritage mediated by computer screens, but he hopes that Masset will eventually build a heritage center.

Although residents on Haida Gwaii may have to look at the majority of their artwork from afar, White thinks that "in a way by having the pole in Jasper is quite a good thing... Our culture was totem pole culture and probably well over 50 per cent of our visitors to Haida Gwaii are from Alberta." So, possibly the Raven Pole peaked people's interest in aboriginal culture and as a result were prompted to visit Haida Gwaii, he said.

The Jasper Raven Pole will be taken down on April 3, but the site around the pole will be closed a week before the removal, so take advantage of your last chance to take photos.

Parks Canada is taking suggestions regarding the fate of the totem pole and prospects for the site. Email suggestions to jnp.infohub@pc.gc.ca

Calls to the Council of the Haida Nation were not returned.

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