

People of the North / Native Lives & Traditions

CCC Totem Pole Restoration Program

By Tricia Brown

After his inauguration in 1933, President Franklin D. Roosevelt focused the first ninety days of his presidency on pushing through several pieces of important legislation to help unemployed Americans. One of them, the Emergency Conservation Work Act (ECW), was the law that directed the work of the Civilian Conservation Corps (CCC). Passed in March 1933, the act offered the dual purpose of putting young men to work as well as revitalizing the nation's public lands and properties. In the Lower 48, enrollees age 18 to 23 were housed, fed, and received \$1 a day, and \$25 per month was sent directly to their families. Across the nation, workers built trails and bridges, dams and roads. Architects, tradesmen, and craftsmen designed and built great lodges in national parks, and filled them with custom furniture, paintings, ironwork, and stained glass, all in the distinctive Art Deco style of the period.

In Alaska, the program took a different turn. The age requirements were dropped and while some undertakings were similar to work elsewhere in the country, most Alaska work projects were unique, including upgrades at the Annette Island Air Field, wolf trapping and predator control, graveyard rehabilitation in Nulato, construction of reindeer herders' shelters in Western Alaska and sled dog kennels at Mount McKinley National Park. By 1936 more than a thousand Alaskans were working in various CCC programs through Forest Service employment. Two years later, one of the most valuable, long-lasting contributions to Native Alaskan history and culture was launched in the specialized work of CCC-funded totem pole restoration and preservation.

Early in the 1900s, private citizens as well as politicians who saw the deterioration of aged totem poles began calling for assistance. Because many of the oldest poles could be found throughout the Forest Service jurisdiction, agency leaders felt responsible to preserve the valuable carvings. Headquartered in Juneau, Regional Forester B. Frank

Heintzleman undertook the CCC Alaska Region program to retrieve, restore, or replicate select totem poles beginning in 1938. (Later, during the mid-1950s, Heintzleman would serve as territorial governor of Alaska, following his appointment by President Eisenhower.)

Throughout the southern region of the Alaska Panhandle, crews were sent to Tlingit and Haida villages, some of which were no longer occupied, to catalog and/or collect the totems before they were no longer repairable. In some instances, if a pole was too far gone to move, carvers planned to replicate it. In Hydaburg, Ketchikan, and Saxman, workers restored clan houses and totem poles, creating totem pole parks. While the parks' poles were aesthetically and culturally authentic, their display—studding the grounds in an outdoor museum—would have been considered non-traditional a century earlier. In a typical village, they would have stood before a home, a clan house, or near a grave. When possible, workers also collected stories associated with the poles, and transcribed the Tlingit and Haida legends given to them. In all, the CCC crews completed work at Howkan, Hydaburg, Kake, Ketchikan, Klawock, Klinkwan, Mud Bight, Old Cape Fox Village, Old Tongass Village, Pennick Island, Saxman, Old Kasaan and Sitka National Monuments, Sukkwan, Old Tuxekan Village, Shakes Island, Village Island, and Wrangell.

One part of the plan involved building a model Native village, called Mud Bight Village, just outside Ketchikan, where visitors could learn more about the first people of Southeast. The proposed plans for a complete village were thwarted when World War II began, and it was scaled down into a totem pole park. Its name was changed to Totem Bight Park, and it featured a collection of fourteen totems, old and new, and a model clan house. Today it is known as Totem Bight Historical State Park.

At Mud Bight, some poles were restored while some were newly designed and carved. The carving crews were lead by Tlingit Charles Brown or Haida carver John Wallace. Wallace was then nearly eighty years old and was the sole craftsmen who had experience in carving totem poles. Brown was a boat-builder who proved to be an exquisite carver. His replica and original work also stands today in Saxman Totem Park, outside

Ketchikan, and as far away as Seattle's Pioneer Square. Both men were intent on seeing the carving tradition pass on to future generations. The lead carvers directed those who initially had no experience, effectively teaching the carving tradition with the benefit of a regular paycheck.

In 1989, anthropologist and author Aldona Jonaitis wrote about the effects of Roosevelt's New Deal plans on the art of southeastern Alaska when she was with the American Museum of Natural History: "In all, the CCC project employed about 250 Indian and restored 48 poles, copied 54 that were beyond salvage, and created 19 anew. Because of this project, Ketchikan now has the largest number of totem poles of any easily accessible Northwest Coast community."

To commemorate the CCC carvers and laborers, as well as the partnerships among the U.S. Forest Service and Native agencies and people, nearly sixty years after the project was launched, the USFS hired Tlingit carver Israel Shotridge to design and carve a special totem pole for installation the agency's "Hall of Tribal Nations" exhibit at its Washington, D.C., headquarters.

From the start of the totem restoration program in July 1938 to its end in June 1942, CCC spending equaled about \$170,000. For participating Tlingit, Haida, and Tsimpshian carvers, the benefits were immeasurable, as the intent study of the old poles and their original locations, along with hands-on training, helped to boost a cultural resurgence that was already blooming among the people.

LINKS:

Totem Bight State Historical Park, State of Alaska, Department of Natural Resources/Division of Outdoor Parks & Recreation:

<http://www.dnr.state.ak.us/parks/units/totembgh.htm>

Edward L. Keithann's *Monuments in Cedar*, available online:

<http://www.alaskool.org/projects/traditionalife/MonumentsInCedar/MIC.html>

Tongass National Forest, CCC history:

<http://www.fs.fed.us/r10/tongass/districts/admiralty/heritage/ccc.shtml>

VISIT THE LIBRARY FOR MORE INFORMATION:

Alaska's libraries include audio, visual, and written material about the totem poles of Southeast and the Tlingit, Haida, and Tsimshian people. Visit your local library or go online to see what's available in holdings all over the state. Take these simple steps:

1. Access **SLED** (State Library Electronic Doorway) at <http://sled.alaska.edu/library.html>.
2. Click on the listing for **ALNCat** (the Alaska Library Network Catalog) to view the Basic Search window. Go to the Keyword field, and type in **ALASKA TOTEMS**.

MORE READING:

Balcom, Mary Gilmore. *Ketchikan, Alaska's Totemland* Chicago, Adams Press, 1961.

Clark, Ella E. *Indian Legends of the Pacific Northwest*. University of California Press, 1958.

Garfield, Viola E. and Linn A. Forest. *The Wolf and the Raven: Totem Poles of Southeastern Alaska*. Revised edition. Seattle: University of Washington Press, 1961. Original hardcover, 1948

Jonaitis, Aldona. "Totem Poles and the Indian New Deal," *The Canadian Journal of Native Studies*, IX 2, (1989):237-252.

Keithann, Edward L. *Monuments in Cedar*. Second edition. Seattle, Wash.: Superior Publishing Co., 1963. Originally published 1945.

Knapp, Marilyn, Mary P. Meyer, and Susan F. Edelstein. *Carved History: A Totem Guide to Sitka National Historical Park*. Anchorage, Alaska: Alaska Natural History Association, 1995.

Langdon, Steve J. *The Native People of Alaska*. 4th edition. Homer, Alaska: Wizard Works, 2002.

Lewis, James G. *The Forest Service and the Greatest Good: A Centennial History* The companion book to the documentary *The Greatest Good*. Published by Forest History Society, 2006.

Stewart, Hilary. *Looking at Totem Poles*. Seattle: University of Washington Press, 1993.

Wright, Robin K. *Northern Haida Master Carvers*. Seattle: University of Washington Press, 2001.

ARCHIVAL MATERIALS:

U.S. Forest Service, Civilian Conservation Corps Projects, Southeast Alaska Communities, Glaciers, White Pass & Yukon Route Railroad. John H Brillhart, Photographer, 1939-1951. Alaska State Library. Images include 228 black-and-white photoprints, some color, depicting U.S. Forest Service and Civilian Conservation Corps activities and projects in Southeast Alaska from 1939 through 1951.

Post Cards, Sheri Trask, 1900-1945. University of Alaska Anchorage. The collection contains historic Alaskan postcards collected by Sheri Trask, as well as a copy of the collection. The postcards depict Alaska Natives, totems, ships and boats, buildings, scenery, and towns.

Julia W. Weber Collection, 1890-1910. University of Alaska Anchorage. The collection consists of a transcript of Myrtle Ryan's diary and an album, given to Julia Weber by Dorothy Boche, containing 109 photographs and postcards. The diary (1900-1901) relates Myrtle Ryan's travel to Alaska, her Klondike trip, and her daily life in Nome. The photographs (ca. 1890-1910) depict villages in southeast Alaska, totems, boats, and various people.

DVD:

Dunsky, Steven and David Steinke. *The Greatest Good*. Seattle: KCTS Television, 2006. Two DVD set, approximately 2 hours. In 1905, 63 million acres of public lands were transferred from the Department of the Interior to the control of the Department of Agriculture and Gifford Pinchot. During a time of well-documented land fraud and poor management by the U.S. government, Pinchot spent years battling, campaigning and persuading, to achieve his goal of responsible forestry and conservation. *The Greatest Good* shows the history of the U.S. Forest Service and its myriad conflicts, tragedies and triumphs. From the publication of *A Primer of Forestry* by Pinchot in 1899, through the 100-year history and many incarnations of the Forest Service, this program tells a story that is complex, compelling, and uniquely American.