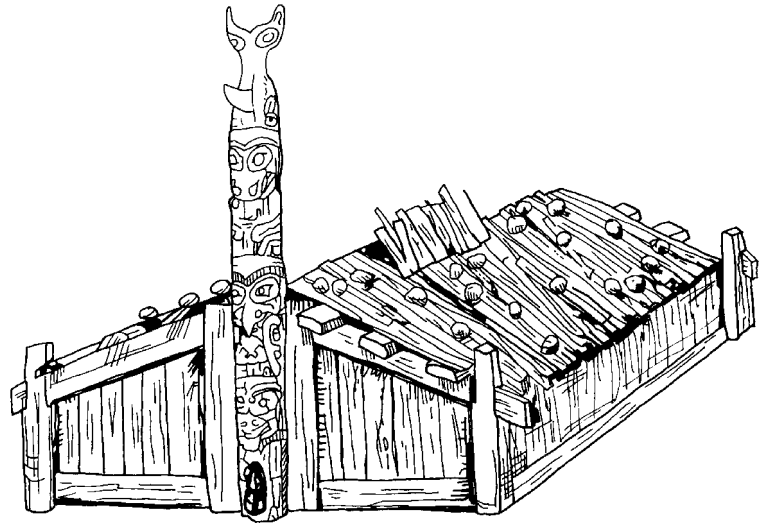


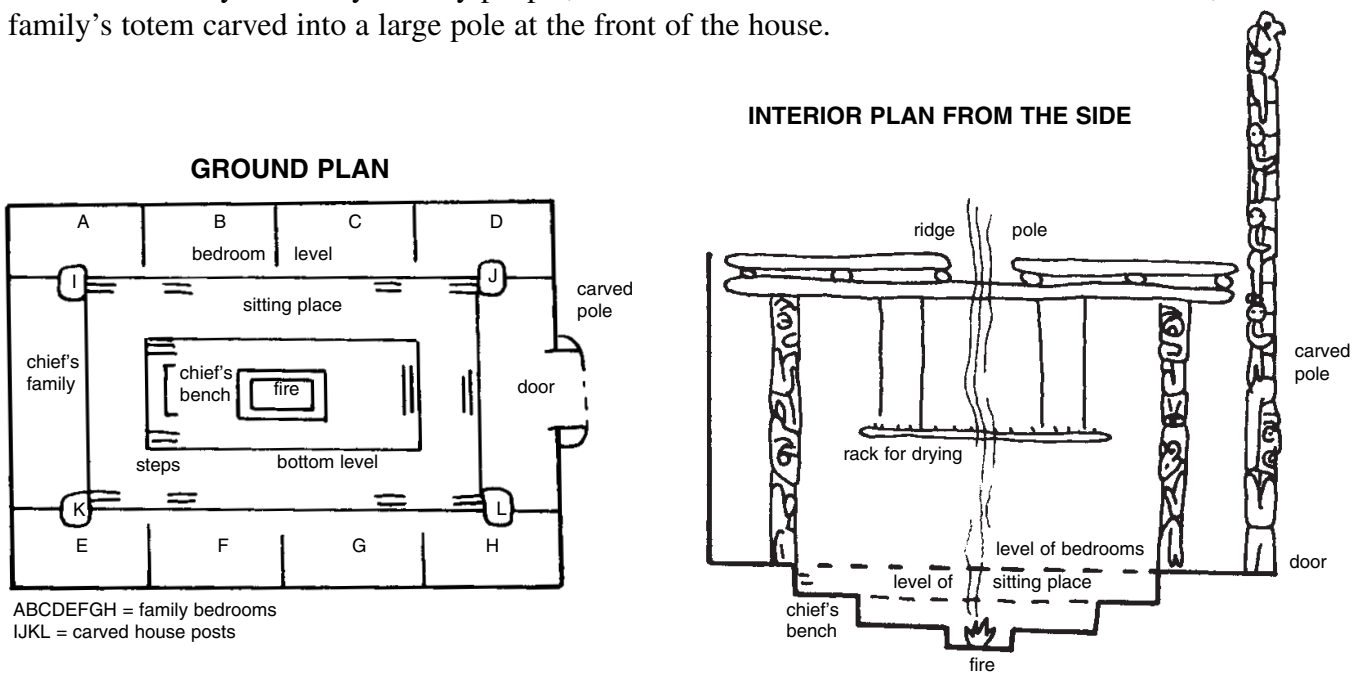
Longhouses, Canoes, and Totem Poles

What the buffalo was to the Indians of the Great Plains, the cedar tree was to the Indians of the Northwest Coast, except as a source of food. The Northwesterners were masters of wood working, and the cedar tree was used for houses, canoes, clothing, and dishes, and it was done without metal tools or nails. Their totem poles are a cause of wonder all over the world, but the way in which they built their houses, canoes, and even wooden dishes is no less incredible.



The cedar longhouses were massive, plank-covered buildings which could withstand heavy storms. In order to get the planks from the giant cedar tree, the carver first girdled the tree by stripping off the bark all around at the height at which he wanted to cut it. This killed the tree and allowed it to dry out while it still stood. A cut was then made into the tree, and a wedge was inserted and hit with stone hammers until a slab came away cleanly. The planks were then trimmed to the right size and smoothed with adzes. Huge supporting posts and beams were erected, and the planks were then placed against them to form the sides of the house.

To make the roof, heavy planks were anchored with heavy poles and stones and then covered with bark. Inside, the supporting beams were elaborately carved and decorated. There were no windows and only one door at one end of the house. A firepit was in the center of the house, and a smoke hole opened in the roof to allow smoke to escape. The interior was tiered and covered with planks to provide sleeping room for as many as twenty to forty people, all related to each other. Each house was named, and the family's totem carved into a large pole at the front of the house.



Longhouses, Canoes, and Totem Poles (cont.)

The Indians of the northwest have long been excellent fishermen and sailors. The boats which they have traditionally built vary from small, one-man crafts to boats large enough to carry fifty to sixty passengers.

Different styles of boats were made for different purposes: hunting, fishing, trading, or warring. Some of them had beautifully decorated bows rising up out of the water, and after the natives had contact with Europeans, the boats sometimes included sails. Whatever the style or size of a boat, it was made in one piece from the cedar tree.

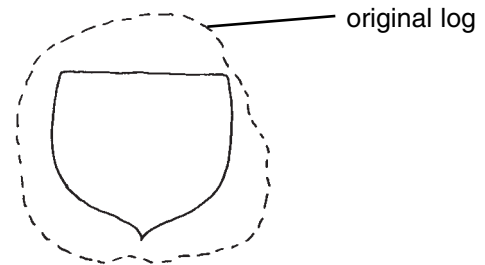
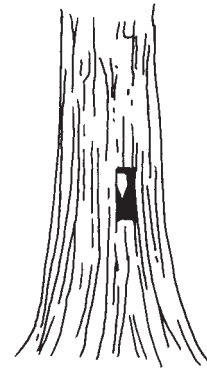
First a straight-grained tree, free of knots, was found, usually deep in the forest but close to a river so it could be floated back to the village. To determine whether or not a tree was suitable, test holes were driven into the interior to make sure it had no rot in its core.

The tree was then felled and roughly shaped before it was floated back to the village. The wood was kept wet to prevent it from splitting.

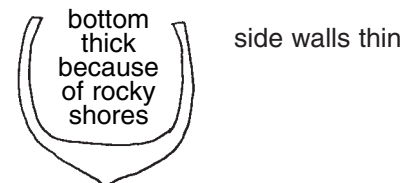
The tree was hollowed out with stone adzes. Fire was used as well because charred wood was easier to scrape out than fresh wood. The side walls were made thin, but the bottom was thicker because it often had to be dragged over rocky shores.

Next, the hull was filled with water and hot rocks which had been heated in fires. The rocks soon caused the water to begin boiling and steaming. This allowed the boat builders to insert cross pieces to stretch the sides until the desired width was reached.

Finally, the canoe was smoothed and sanded with the aid of shark's skin, and it was carved and decorated with the images of animals or birds made into crests. Each image had a special meaning, just as the images on a totem pole did.



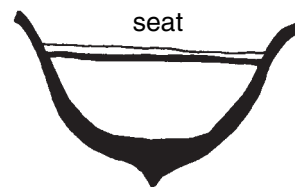
Shaping the Outside



Shaping the Inside



Steaming and Spreading



Finished Shape

Longhouses, Canoes, and Totem Poles *(cont.)*

The art of carving totem poles is alive and well. Woodcarvers use traditional designs but modern metal chisels and adzes instead of the old stone ones. It is fascinating to watch a carver at work when in front of one's eyes an elaborate design of two to five figures of animals and symbolic crests slowly emerges from the large, round log. The crests on a totem pole are family crests which are passed down from one generation to the next, in much the same way a European coat of arms would be passed down.

There are four basic types of totem poles. *Frontal poles* were built at the front of a longhouse with a large opening at the bottom which formed the entrance to the house. *House posts* supported the main beams of the house. *Memorial poles* were carved and raised in honor of someone who died. The heirs raised the poles and gave a memorial potlatch in order to gain their rights as heirs. *Mortuary poles* had a hollowed-out box at the top to contain the body of the deceased. A carved plaque covered the box.

The totem pole served several purposes. Commissioned from the woodcarver for specific occasions, a pole signified a person's upward move in rank, commemorated a highly significant event, and indicated the rank and status of the villagers to strangers. A totem pole also told others to which clan the residents belonged so that when people from other villages came to visit, they would know in which house they could stay.

A famous woodcarver would claim a high fee for a pole he carved. The poles were always raised at a potlatch to ensure there were public witnesses. When a pole was raised, stories were told about the crests on it. Each of the figures represented some element of the family history.

Just as a poem suggests more than it blatantly tells, the totem pole hints at more than is there. The figures carved on it represent sky, river, forest, sea, and mountain beings from the mythology of the family, and they tell family legends of how ancestors had taken these beings as their family crests. The poles last up to a hundred years, even in the humid, rainy climate of the sea. When an old totem pole falls, it is allowed to rest where it has fallen and a new pole is carved.



FRONTAL POLE



HOUSE POST



MEMORIAL POLE

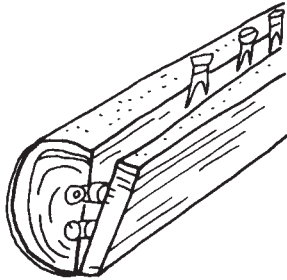


MORTUARY POLE

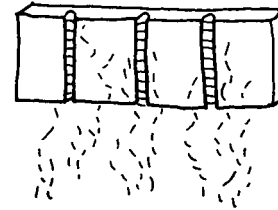
Longhouses, Canoes, and Totem Poles *(cont.)*

Another ingenious way the Indians of the Northwest Coast used cedar was for bentwood boxes. This is how they did it.

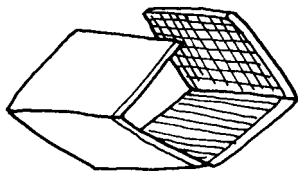
1. A plank is cut from a tree.



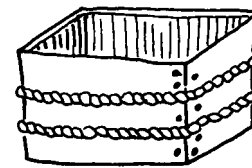
2. The plank is planed and polished to the correct thickness. Grooves are cut to form corners. Then, it is soaked in hot water or steamed.



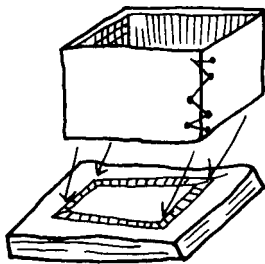
3. The softened wood is bent at three corners to form the sides of the box.



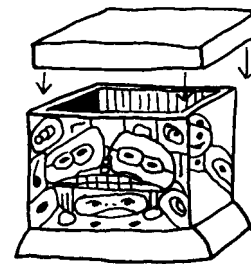
4. The ends are fastened tightly together. The box is wrapped with bark rope to keep its shape while drying.



5. The box is set into the tightly fitting, grooved slab. The lid is made to fit.



6. The box is carved or painted on all sides.



Activities

1. Make a “bentwood box” of your own using heavy pasteboard or cardboard instead of wood. Draw and paint designs of your “family totem” on the sides.
2. Make a model longhouse with your choice of materials using the illustrations as a guide.
3. Design your own totem and write an explanation of the meaning of each animal or crest on your totem. Share your design with the class, telling what each symbol represents.