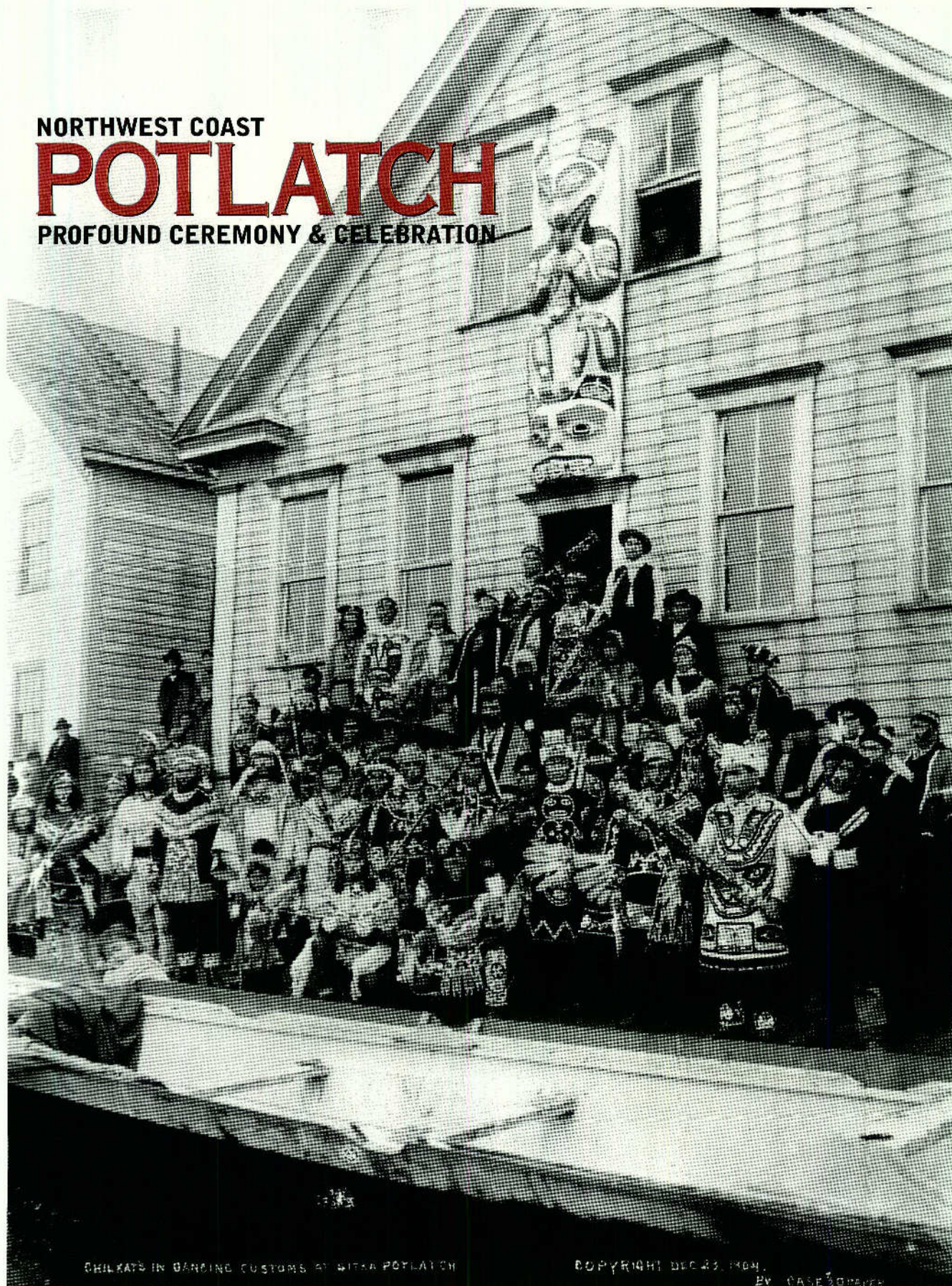


NORTHWEST COAST

POTLATCH

PROFOUND CEREMONY & CELEBRATION



CHILKATS IN DANCING COSTUMES AT WITKA POTLATCH

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BY CASEY BOWEN



BY RICHARD WALKER (MEXICAN/YAQUI)

When the food was gathered and prepared, when the baskets, blankets, jewelry and regalia were finished, the messengers were sent out to spread the invitation. Canoes arrived one by one, and were welcomed ashore in their ranking order. The people gathered in the longhouse, where fires broke the darkness and held back the chill. Dancers in elaborately carved cedar masks and robes of cedar and goat wool performed stories. All night long, family histories and historical events were recalled. Gifts were given: baskets and clothing made from cedar, blankets woven from mountain-goat wool, canoes carved from great trees. But most of all, there was this gift of gathering as a people, to serve as witnesses of the event and to verify and pass on accounts of what transpired. This was—and is—the potlatch.

For centuries, the potlatch of the Northwest Coast Native peoples has been a means of distributing wealth and settling debts, addressing grievances, and maintaining and expanding social relationships, as well as serving religious, political and legal functions. Governed by strict protocols, it is a means of formalizing, through the witness of those in attendance, the bestowing of inherited privileges or names, the honoring of a deceased relative, and other social processes. It is a time of gathering, maintaining spiritual balance, affirming ties with ancestors, and a celebration of gifts bestowed by the spiritual forces.

For about 70 years, the potlatch was legally banned in Canada, Alaska, Oregon and Washington State, and was suppressed by missionaries and civil authorities. Regalia was seized and, in some cases, burned in front of families to whom they belonged. Some potlatch participants were tried and sent to prison. But the potlatch survived. Today, many seized items are being returned under the Native American Graves and Repatriation Act, and the potlatch continues to be central to the life of Northwest Coast Native peoples. It is where core teachings of honor, love, respect and sharing are exemplified, where traditions that hold the fabric of a culture together are reinforced. The potlatch is “the glue that has kept the culture alive,” says Bill James, retired coordinator of the Lummi language program at Northwest Indian College in Bellingham, Washington.

ABOVE: ‘Yalis, (Alert Bay, BC), postcard shows goods to be distributed at Bob Harris’ potlatch, photographer: E.C. Stevens, ca. 1910. Although the giving of gifts is a part of the potlatch tradition, the Eurocentric portrayal of potlatches tended to oversimplify the traditions by focusing on giving. Actually, the potlatch is “imbued with significant spiritual dimensions, maintaining social and spiritual balance, affirming ties with ancestors. They are governed by strict protocols and function simultaneously as a religious, social, political and legal institution,” says Rosita Worl, Ph.D., president of Sealaska Heritage Institute. FACING PAGE: Chilkat dancers at a 1904 potlatch in Sitka, Alaska.

HISTORY OF THE POTLATCH

In January 1954, anthropologist Dr. Wayne Suttles wrote about the origin of the potlatch in "Post-Contact Culture Change Among the Lummi Indians" for the *British Columbia Historical Quarterly*, based on interviews with informants born in the mid-1800s. "It was the mark of a great man that he had plenty and that he was liberal with it," Suttles wrote. "Material wealth itself was an indication that a man had non-material possessions. It was the non-material things that brought him wealth. How could he better demonstrate his ownership of non-material things than by liberality with their products? By giving away material wealth he established good relations with others for his family and household, while at the same time he was able thereby to preserve and cherish those non-material possessions that caused him to be wealthy."

Non-material possessions were of three sorts, Suttles wrote: First, rights inherited from ancestors, such as names, rights to fishing locations, and rights to certain songs, dances and other performances. Second, private knowledge that one obtained, possibly from an older member of the family. Third, supernatural power acquired by bathing, fasting and seeking the power in nature.

A SYSTEM OF EXCHANGE

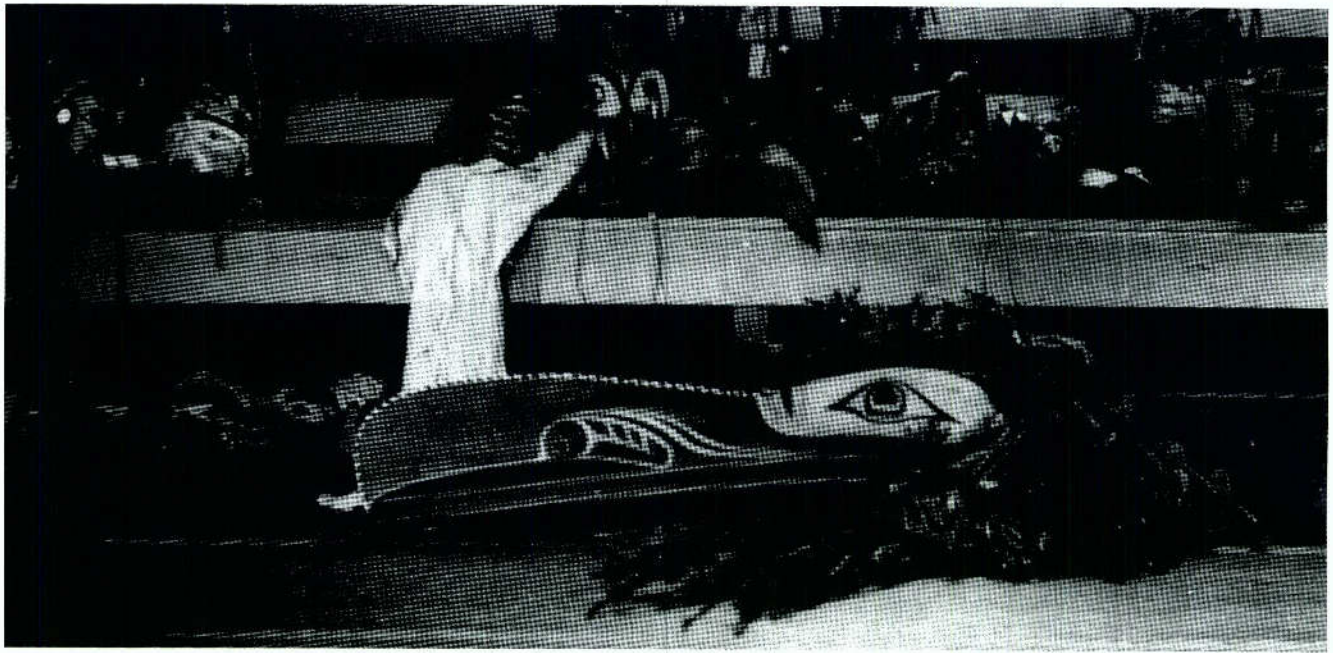
As a system of economic, political and social exchange, the potlatch helped ensure that all had access to the rich resources of the coastal Pacific Northwest: food harvested from the bounty of land, river and sea, and clothing, art and functional items made from the cedar forests nourished by the moist climate.

Potlatches were important gatherings, but they could be exciting and fun as well. In "John Fornsby: The Personal Document of a Coast Salish Indian," an interview with June McCormick Collins published in *Indians of the Urban Northwest* by Columbia University Press in 1949, John Fornsby (Skagit) described a potlatch given at Swinomish by a man named Joseph, whose daughter married a man from a First Nation in Victoria, British Columbia. Lower Skagit, Upper Skagit and Lummi people were invited.

Blanket being thrown off platform at Quamichan potlatch among the Coast Salish people of British Columbia. Photo by Reverend Tate, ca. 1913.



IMAGE AA-00214 COURTESY OF ROYAL BC MUSEUM, BC ARCHIVES



Confiscated potlatch paraphernalia given up by people who attended Dan Cranmer potlatch in 1921; photo was taken in the parish hall by Reverend V.S. Lord.

A contest between the Lummi and Skagit ensued upon arrival. "The men ran right into the house. The Lummi wanted to (contest) with the Skagit," Fornsby told Collins. "They had a big pole across the house...a pretty good-sized pole, so they couldn't get over it. The Lummi were on one side, the Skagit on the other. Each side tried to get over the pole." The Skagit sang a spirit-power song—a warrior power song—that belonged to them, he said.

The arrival and offloading of canoes from Victoria, and feasting, followed. The next morning, the potlatch began. "They piled blankets on top of the house," Fornsby reported. "All the chiefs were on top of the house. Chief Joe was up on top of the house, the chief who gave the potlatch. He was the first to give blankets... Pretty nearly all the people got blankets."

Then the groom's father gave gifts. "They made a raft on two canoes... (The) wife of the Victoria chief got on the raft and sat on the planks between the canoes. They piled up blankets, caps, and shirts all around her so that you could just see her head sticking out. They shoved the canoe out about 20 feet from shore. They hollered, 'Come on, everybody, get a pole.' Her husband took things from there and threw them."

Fornsby said people used poles to catch items thrown from the canoe. This occasion marked the introduction of unfamiliar items to Swinomish. "They threw caps first. That was the first cap that came in. Indians had never seen caps before. My father got one," Fornsby told Collins. "Finally they got guns and threw them up too. They threw a flintlock gun.... It was the first gun my father got."

Fornsby indicates that the reciprocal giving symbolized the union of the two families. "The Victoria chief threw those things away because he was married to the Swinomish people. He helped them as the Swinomish helped the Victorias when they went down there," Fornsby said. "The Swinomish went back to Victoria and (threw gifts away) there. They paid them back. They packed blankets up to the house there."

PRACTICES BANNED, BUT CONTINUE

Non-Native observers saw the giving away of material goods as wasteful, clashing with Victorian mores. Canada banned potlatching, spirit dancing and winter ceremonies in 1876; it would be illegal to potlatch in Canada until 1951, and in the United States until 1934.

Anti-potlatch laws were racist; at the same time that Native people were told they couldn't gather, worship, celebrate traditions or speak their ancestral languages, non-Native people's rights to do so were constitutionally guaranteed. The suppression of the potlatch, with its familial, communal and cultural importance, was designed to force assimilation.

Potlatches continued despite threats of arrest. In the book *How Can One Sell the Air? The World of Chief Seattle*, Warren Jefferson quotes an 1893 description of potlatches held at Old

Potlatch Etiquette

An invitation to attend a potlatch is rare; it is a generous, intimate gesture, an open door to witness an event of great ceremonial, cultural and spiritual significance. Should you be granted such an honor, here are some tips to keep in mind:

- Don't leave until the end. Kwagwalth artist Richard Hunt says his family's potlatches in Alert Bay, British Columbia used to be open to visitors. "But then tourists would come in off their tour buses, come running in for an hour or so with their cameras, then leave. If you're coming in, you're supposed to stay for the whole thing. They're not a joke, they're serious."
- Dress comfortably and casually, but respectfully.
- Ask permission to take photographs. Some ceremonies and dances cannot be photographed.
- When in doubt, follow the behavior of people around you. It is customary to stand during some ceremonies and dances.
- You are not expected to bring a gift. "The gift you receive symbolizes that you were a witness of the event," Chief Frank Nelson says. "You have a responsibility to tell others how well you were hosted."

Man House, historical home of Chief Sealth, the Duwamish/Suquamish leader for whom the City of Seattle is named. Old Man House "was a famous gathering place for the Natives from all over (Puget) Sound, and some of the potlatches held there have been attended by as many as 8,000 Indians. I saw one there at which there was fully 1,500 present."

The First People of Kingcome Inlet, British Columbia, had two natural buffers between them and the authorities—the weather and a very remote location—that enabled their winter ceremonies to continue. "The area would freeze over in winter, so authorities couldn't get in," says Frank Nelson, hereditary chief of the Musgamagw Tsawataineuk. "We didn't lose our culture, our protocol, our songs, our positions."

Enforcement of the law could be selective; officials sometimes looked the other way when it came to memorial potlatches, as they were widely reported in the press. The Songhees, of what is now Victoria, British Columbia, held a potlatch to mourn the death of Squameyuqs, their leader from 1864 to 1892. According to the book *Songhees Pictorial: A History of the Songhees People as Seen by Outsiders, 1790–1912* by Grant Keddie, 150 pairs of blankets were distributed. "At a memorial potlatch a year later, the Songhees gave away 3,000 more blankets and a considerable sum of money," Keddie wrote.

The *Island County Times* on Whidbey Island, Washington, reported in its April 22, 1904 edition, "About 300 Indians attended the Potlatch given across the cove last Friday and Saturday by Chief Billie Barlow. Billie gave away \$630 and 330 blankets to the Indians who assisted (him)." The newspaper referred to the ceremonies as "odd," indicative of the sentiment of the time. "The affair was more in the nature of a memorial than a potlatch. A building 50 x 100 feet was constructed for the occasion."

Ultimately, the potlatch survived laws designed to suppress it. And today, the potlatch is carefully safeguarded and continues in much in the same ways as in pre-contact times.

CURRENT PRACTICES

Tlingit artist Clarissa Hudson provides a glimpse into the contemporary Tlingit potlatch, which the Tlingit refer to as *koo.eex* (or *ku.eex*—pronounced "koo-eeex"), which means "to call" or "to invite." Hudson explains that most old regalia in fragile condition are no longer worn; each piece is considered sacred because the ancestors' fingerprints are on it. Such regalia, called *at.oow* (or *at.oog*), are sometimes presented at certain potlatches, to remember the people associated with them and to recount historical events.

"Those regalia pieces are historical documents, pieces that people paid a price for in trade, with money or their life," she says. "They are dedicated in every potlatch. Each piece is like a historical document; it is like our written language. There will be a time when (the clan) will bring it out, when they hold up each piece and tell the story of the piece and also talk about various people who wore it in the past. They will talk about the design on it. Someone will remember what the person said."

Bill James, the retired Lummi language program coordinator, says potlatches are held frequently at Lummi but are not open to the public because they include spiritual ceremonies easily misinterpreted by outsiders. However, at the conclusion of the 2007 Intertribal Canoe Journey at Lummi Indian Nation, held July 30 to Aug. 5, thousands of people had a rare opportunity to witness the largest Lummi potlatch in 70 years.

One by one, canoe families from more than 40 Northwest Coast First Nations shared songs and dances, and leaders told stories associated with the songs and dances. Gifts were given to honor hereditary chiefs, elders and veterans. Individuals were honored for their generosity and their work. For example, the Gobin family of the Tulalip Tribes presented a hand-carved rattle to Chief Frank Nelson of the Musgamagw Tsawataineuk to honor him for a song he gave the Gobin family during a previous Canoe Journey. The rattle, carved by an uncle, was a keepsake of value to the family.

Women and girls wore dresses and robes of red and black, made of silk or felt and adorned with abalone-shell buttons and fringed with small wooden paddles that clicked when they danced. One teen girl wore a black silk dress embroidered with a red hummingbird and gold-trimmed paddles, and a red silk cape embroidered with black-trimmed gold canoes and paddles. The cape was fringed with gold, which shimmered when she danced. On her head she wore a cedar headband adorned with blue beads and gold buttons.



Men wore cedar or goat-wool capes and cedar hats or headbands; the backs of capes were decorated with clan totems, such as killer whales, eagles and ravens, embroidered in gold or silver. The hats were conically shaped and adorned with eagle feathers.

In addition, there were talking circles and *slahal* tournaments, the latter an ancient game accompanied by song and played with pieces made of bone. On the final day, the Lummi gave away hundreds of blankets, as well as cedar hats, cedar headbands, commemorative posters, dolls, drums, earrings, key chains, necklaces, paddle covers and red cloth headbands with Coast Salish designs. Everyone received a gift.

The historical significance of the modern potlatch is powerful; the potlatch history of a First Nation is as much a part of its identity as genealogy is to the individual. In *Indians of Skagit County*, published by the Skagit County Historical Society in 1978, Martin J. Sampson (Skagit) wrote: "The Samish were especially noted for holding great potlatches given as memorial services to the departed chieftains. A great deal of responsibility rested on the host tribe in keeping order, housing and feeding the guests, and policing the different games, canoe races, foot races, bone games (*slahal*), mock battles between tribes, and intertribal marriages. Then there was the most serious business of the host tribe, the 'coming out party' for their young men and women who, taking the names of their noted ancestors, were expected to carry out the best traditions of the tribe."

A SAMISH POTLATCH

Samish potlatch history was not lost on those attending the June 24, 2006 celebration of the 10th anniversary of the Samish federal re-recognition. While the event was held at the Samish-owned Fidalgo Bay Resort Convention Center, elements would have been familiar to the ancestors: A repatriated house post, from the longhouse in which a great potlatch was held on Guemes Island, Washington, 100 years earlier, stood guard near the entrance. Dances were danced and songs were sung. Guests were given gifts of beaded bracelets, blankets, candies, coffee mugs, handmade cedar earrings and tea. There was a traditional feast of clams, mussels, salmon and other food. Witnesses were called and speeches were made.

Today, the potlatch perpetuates core teachings that are common threads in Northwest Coast Native culture. "We maintain our honor and integrity and understand what that means," Chief Frank Nelson says. "It helps us sustain the tribes for the upcoming year. It's done to honor everything the Creator has given us. Some people can be just into the pomp and circumstance, but what we're really teaching is humility. It's central to our way of life." —

Richard Walker (Mexican/Yaqui) is editor of the San Juan Journal and a freelance writer living on San Juan Island, Washington. He last wrote for Native Peoples about a Vancouver collection of Inuit carvings (March/April 2006).

ABOVE, LEFT: Young Lummi boy helps unload blankets for the Lummi's largest potlatch in 70 years, Aug. 5, 2007 at Lummi Indian Nation. Lummi gave away hundreds of blankets, as well as cedar hats, cedar headbands, commemorative posters, dolls, drums, earrings, key chains, necklaces, paddle covers and red cloth headbands with Coast Salish designs. ABOVE, RIGHT: Volunteers lower a story pole from its place on the shores of Lummi Indian Nation, to carry it to Lummi's potlatch. The pole, carved by Lummi master carver Jewell James, was presented to the Cowichan Nation, host of the 2008 Intertribal Canoe Journey.



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