



Plate 2. William Wells in Ceremonial Costume.

A POTLATCH FEAST AT SITKA, ALASKA

By

Esther Billman

Introduction

The accompanying manuscript is one of the earliest descriptions of a potlatch, unpublished and written by William Wells, whose Tlingit name was Kah'dsuhti. It tells of the potlatch which William Wells attended in 1877, as a small boy of eight or nine years. He was one of the early students of what is now Sheldon Jackson College, the school having started as a day school for native children. He probably wrote this article as an exercise in "English", as we know that later students wrote stories which were occasionally published in the school paper, at that time called "The North Star", now the "Verstovian". It has been published almost continuously since 1888. In an old folder this article was found in the old style handwriting of its author. William was an apt student of English, and after he finished the few years of schooling that was offered at the time, he was employed as the second interpreter for the Presbyterian Church, translating the service from English into Tlingit. He held this position for many years, and he is still remembered and honored by the older people of Sitka.

The story tells that William Wells, as the nephew of the chief of the Loknauxudi Clan, which meant in this matrilineal society that he was slated to become the next chief, was sent from Sitka to Kake to invite the people there to a potlatch in Sitka. In 1877, Alaska had been under the jurisdiction of the United States for ten years, long enough for the Russians to have departed, but still no government had been given to the people of Sitka. During these "years of neglect" the highest governmental authority was the Customs Collector, so that no

one interfered with the old native customs. In fact, the next year an uprising was planned among the Indians, to drive the white people out, since the American government apparently did not care about its citizens. The uprising might have succeeded but for the loyalty of a few Indians, and the arrival of a gunboat from Victoria.

In that same year Dr. Sheldon Jackson arrived as a representative of the Presbyterian Church to survey the situation. As a result of his survey the need for a school was recognized and in 1878 a day school was started, which soon became a boarding school, and William Wells attended to get an education that would fit him into the American culture.

The story gives a good explanation of the customs of the Tlingit, as near to the aboriginal ways as we are able to find today, and expressed in the language of one of them. The distance from Sitka to Kake by water goes around to the far side of a large island, but it is not so far that it should have taken thirty days by canoe. Apparently the weather was very bad and probably they fished and hunted along the way to have something to take with them.

The manner of greeting of the Sitka chief seems difficult to understand. Mr. A. P. Johnson, a Tlingit of Sitka, explained it briefly: "The diplomatic relation of the two must be understood before action could take place. The invitation could be a dedication of a new clan house, or to a memorial feast of a great man . . ." "There will be no more disagreement, but peace from now on." The greetings were often given in a dramatic form, in concepts recognized only by the members, in terms of the clan histories and traditions.

The picture shows William Wells, as an older man, wearing his clan emblem, the Coho, his painted skin blanket, wooden hat and abalone shell earrings, backed possibly with native copper. The earrings are now in the Sheldon Jackson Museum in Sitka on the college campus.

A POTLATCH FEAST IN SITKA

As Told by William Wells, a Tlingit, in about 1885

When I was quite a small boy, about eight or nine years old, my uncle invited the Kakes to come to our home in Sitka to attend a potlatch feast. When the invitation was given

I represented my uncle and went with the messengers over to Kake. There were six of us in the canoe.

As we started I was seated in full costume, emblem shirt, ear bobs, and headdress, near the stern. We moved a short distance out from the beach and waited for the Chief, my uncle, to make his speech which we were to deliver as his invitation. There were many people gathered on the beach to see us off and to hear the speech. When my uncle finished we started away.

The trip was made in the cold winter and took nearly thirty days. Sometimes as we traveled we were caught in storms and we often suffered from the snow and exposure. But my uncle and all the family knew we would have to suffer before we got there and no one minded it. Hardships and trials must be endured patiently to satisfy our family which had been in mourning for a year. This invitation meant that we were to forget all sorrow. We intended now to let it pass and cheer up.

About half an hour before arriving at Kake I had to be in full dress. So, as at the beginning of that day, I put on my emblem shirt, ear bobs, and headdress. This was time when high caste showed in manner of dress which spoke for itself. Such an appearance meant that great respect must be shown the guest. So we were highly received and welcomed.

But before we landed one of the men in the canoe delivered the speech of our chief. This had to be done before the messenger gave the invitation to the Kake chief. He was called by his honorable name. "You are honorably invited by the Chief to come to Sitka". And so every man was called by his honorable name. One by one every man was called and answered "here!" This was the custom. If there were fifty or a hundred or more in number all were called by name and each one answered.

When we got through naming all of the guests, the chief man on shore gave his welcome address. As soon as he finished speaking we were asked to come ashore and were received in the chief's house. Then according to our custom, we washed our hands as a sign of respect. While we were eating every man who was invited was in the room singing and dancing. This was the style and custom of the Indians.

And this was the way they entertained the messengers. Of course we were well treated as was always the case while waiting for the guests to get ready and while we waited for good weather to start back to Sitka. Every evening while we were eating as soon as we were served the invited guests started to sing and we got used to their songs. The people at home were also practicing singing and dancing until we returned.

When good weather came, ten or more canoes started on the way. After they moved out a little way they started to sing a song according to their custom. Everyone waited until the song was finished. Then, at a signal given by one canoe, they all started together. All kept time together by calling "Whoo-hoo, Whoo-hoo, Whoo-hoo!" In one day's journey the canoes crossed back over Frederick Sound. The messengers, my party, traveled ahead to select a suitable camp site and to build one big fire for the whole fleet. Before starting on the next morning the messengers called attention to the fleet telling all the canoes not to pass White Water Bay village where they planned to feed the guests. When they reached that place in the evening they had a chance to practice the songs and dances. But during that hour one of the canoes drifted away. This was serious trouble. All that night the messengers were out on the water hunting for the canoe. At last without success we turned back to the village and my father arranged for another canoe.

Good weather favored us the next morning and the fleet started across Chatham Strait with the messengers traveling ahead as usual. Just as we were coming close to the beach near a sandy shore we sighted the lost canoe. It was lying unhurt where the tide had left it up on the beach. This was very lucky. We stopped and put the canoe up in the woods where it stayed safely until it was picked up by the Kakes on the return trip. After this we kept going until the day was nearly over. Then the messengers looked up a camping place and stopped to make a fire.

The next day the guests asked us not to travel ahead. This meant that we were near our home, Sitka. The guests were going to surprise the people at home. One big war canoe loaded with all the men she could carry came quietly out in

front of the Sitka village. All at once they broke out in a big noise, all shouting together. This was unexpected and caused quite an excitement in Sitka. Soon drums were beating and answering shouts were heard. This was kept up for some time until the war canoe, having accomplished the purpose of announcing arrival, returned, according to custom, and all the guests spent the night in camp. The messengers came on to their homes in Sitka.

The next morning my family went over to build a fire and feed the guests from Kake. As soon as we finished this we returned home. When we were sighted about twenty canoes came out to meet the Kakes. The people were singing and dancing in the canoes. This is the way they treated the outside party. They they returned home.

Soon the Kakes came in singing and dancing. They came to the front of the chief's house just where they were to be received. There they waited until the home party gave a return dance. There were really four dances: first, the Kake's dance, imitating the Tsimshian; then, three Sitka dances, the Stick dance, an Aleut dance and another dance called "Men Without Clothes" dance. This last was an imitation of a Filipino dance.

After the dance the Chief invited the Kakes who were to be received as guests now. Instead of making a speech he did it with acting like a play. Taking a bow and arrow in his hands he drew it like he was going to shoot someone. Then he ran down to the canoes. Some one in the crowd back of him called "Stook quatch! Stook quatch!" This was as much as to say "Keep coming, kill it!". Then he broke the bow, threw it on the ground, turned back and answered the crowd: "You think Stook is as foolish as that, to kill big game?" Now perhaps the guest party understood the meaning but some did not. Then they called the fleet to land.

This was only the beginning of many happy times during the Potlatch which lasted about four weeks. Every day was a busy one. Every day was a feasting day. There were about fifteen hundred people in attendance. During a potlatch there were always many ceremonial dances, much feasting, and at the end many costly presents were given away.

At first the guests had only breakfast in the morning. The

rest of the day was spent in dancing. All four parties for the four different dances met in the Chief's house because he had invited them. This was the custom the first day. The next day was a feast day. The Kakes were the leading party on this important day. Since they were outside guests they received many honors. When the messengers went from house to house inviting the guests they announced first the name of the head man of the house. Then the messengers called in order of rank the names of all men of honor and stated "You are all invited to the feast!" When the invited guest came to the house where the feast was to be held his name was announced in a loud voice as he came through the doorway. This was done to show him honor and respect. Following this announcement the Chief would reply "Let him be seated in his honorable place!" The places of honor were in the middle of the room or on the sides. To be seated in a corner was taken for an insult. When a guest arrived and was not announced he was expected to take his seat quietly in a corner, which he did unless he had lost his self respect. Then a big question arose in his mind: "Why am I seated in a corner?" Soon he discovered for himself that he had done some wrong. Then he knew that he had to bear his shame quietly. And so he learned his lesson while sitting in the corner. If the host saw a change in him he was placed again in his honorable seat.

The next night the four parties of dancers came in groups to the feast. As each group arrived its members sang and danced before sitting down. When all four parties had come in and all had sung and danced the Chief gave a talk or address. In his response the guest chief announced his new name, Koo-gllh. This was always the case, and this way the Chief gained honor and respect from his guests. So Alm-ka-dugh-steen became Koo-gllh. This made everyone happy and one party gave another dance. Then each of the other parties gave a dance, too. Everything was equal between these groups of dancers. This was a sign of respect and honor to each other. If one group tried to add one more dance than another that meant they were trying to make trouble. Then the chief and his helpers tried to keep things peaceable. They placed emblems on display or on their heads. When the guests saw these they became peaceable and respected the emblem. After this the

Chief appointed one of his helpers to make a peaceful speech telling all to show every respect during the feast.

The next day everything was quiet. The guests were resting. Some visited with friends and others walked about talking sociably among themselves. On this day the Chief hung out a wooden box drum and had some one beat on it so that its sound was heard all the rest of the day. This had a meaning that debts were to be paid. Sometimes back maybe a year ago, a sister had given her brother's wife a very valuable gift. Now the brother was to pay his brother-in-law back adding a large percent. When a debt was paid everyone asked each other how much had been given. Pride came in here. When a man paid big everyone said "Cla-coh-gee!", which was an expression of surprise. It was quite a sight to see the display of goods turned over all day in discharge of debts.

The next day was Wa-dee-hon which means "Stand Up". The chief and his helpers, according to custom, stood on their feet all day. Only women danced on this day. They filled in three squares in the large room and men filled in the fourth to manage the singing. The first four songs were ceremonial songs of the Chief's tribe. After these four songs a man appointed by the Chief called out names one by one. When he called one and said "Kosh-wa-ah!", that is, "Have courage, do the very best you are able!", this man would tell of his family and his descendants. Then according to his birth, he chose a song. Following his announcement he started to sing his song. The men, under a director, helped him while the women danced. In like manner everyone belonging to the Chief's tribe was called on for a song. This took from early morning until the next morning. For a whole day and all night the guests had to bear patiently the things as they came. This meant that they were well pleased with the affair. The next day was another resting day.

On the following morning the messenger went from house to house inviting all to come to the feast, from each house in a body. Then as the groups arrived they each went in and gave a dance. As one group finished another came in. Everyone came in his best dress, as there was an occasion to show the best dancing. It was really a big contest. The house had one big open place in the center. Spectators even

crowded on the roof. Everybody wanted to see the sight. The dancers watched very carefully on the opposite side to see if any mistake was made in movement. If there was one mistake the people made remarks and that meant that the side making the mistake lost praise. All was for the glorification of the dancers. The spectators spoke of the winner and this was his reward. A star dancer gained a famous name. Even when the feasting was all over he was talked about. The story would be told for years to come if he was of noble family.

However, the ceremonial dances were the most important. They had to be performed with careful attention in order to have everything correct. If they made mistakes they would have bad luck in the near future. And if you did not live a pure life your years would be shortened. Many more things were connected with this according to tradition. The ceremony was the most important part of this affair. It alone took eight days. Our Chief and his helpers, the hosts, attended strictly and honestly. The Chief gave this his entire attention during that time. He was also fasting so that everything would go well. All of the houses had names. The name of our Chief's house was Kar-gash-ka-hitthe, meaning a house on a platform. This was the first Indian house built on posts and it took two years to build it. Other Indian houses were built on the ground. The inside of these houses was dug out into the ground. Some were dug four feet deep and had one floor. Others were dug eight feet deep and had two floors. For protection all four sides were timbered-up with timber six to eight inches thick, to about four feet above the ground. Inside these houses people could sit peacefully around the fire.

On the eighth and last day of the ceremonies the Chief ordered out a copper plate, three or four feet high on end and hammered out smooth. This was obtained from the Copper River Indians, in trade, and was valued at one slave. Then the Chief called for his descendants, including all of his immediate family and all near relatives to come forward to the front of the large room. The guests were all to witness what was to take place at this important time. It was an event to which all had been looking forward during the entire feast. First the Chief gave a talk in behalf of his grandsons and

granddaughters who were to be advanced in tribal honor. They were also to receive new names. This was the sign used to show it. Two men took up the copper plate and started rubbing it on the foreheads of those receiving the honor. Altogether there were twenty of them standing in a row. All rubbed their foreheads on the copper plate. Then the chief ordered it dropped into the deep sea. so, following his order, the two men took it out in the canoe and dropped it in the channel. This was a sign of great respect and high honor. Some people are yet living who witnessed this memorable event. Mrs. Harriet Anderson is one. In fact the potlatch really was called to honor her father, Chief Koo-gllh, a famous chief who had died about three years before. As I have related my uncle now became the new chief. Mrs. Morris White, the Chief's daughter, and myself, are the others.

The next day, which was the day before the end, all movements were performed quietly and reverently. The guests invited Chief Koo-gllh and all his tribe to a feast. This was a welcome rest and we were all well entertained. The food was the best obtainable and not the least part of the entertainment were the stories told by the Kakes. They were carefully selected and excellently related with many gestures and much acting.

The last day was a farewell party, or Cla-to-os-dake, which meant to us that every dance expressed goodbye. Before each dance one of the visitors made a speech expressing appreciation and thanks. This was in the first round of dances among the four parties, and each party distributed gifts of goods and money to Chief Koo-gllh and to his tribe. After this was finished the dance began again and lasted until late that night. There were no harsh words or ill feelings. The guests felt that they had received good treatment during the entire visit.

The last dance of the potlatch was the Yake dance or Spirit dance, and was used to welcome and entertain strangers and as a farewell portion. This was the final ceremony. So the dances ended but rich memories always remained.

After the potlatch the Kakes stayed on in Sitka for nearly two weeks. Since they were in no hurry to leave this was taken as an additional sign that they were well satisfied. If they had been displeased, their departure would have taken

place the next day after the final ceremonies. During this time the guests gave us the Hydah dance as a parting tribute. In this dance the dancers used headgear well filled with white feathers. When they shook their heads the air was filled with the white feathers so that it looked like a snow storm. Those who shook out the most feathers were considered the best dancers. The feathers were harmless and if any were thrown so they landed on the Chief he received this with a grateful heart. There were a few other small entertainments and similar dances while the guests were waiting and taking their time getting ready to make the trip back home.

Not for Resale