

© Daniel Henry
c/o Sheldon Museum & Cultural Center
P.O. Box 269 Haines, AK 99827
1(907) 766-2366

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***Across the Shaman's River:
John Muir and the
Quest for the Tlingit Crown Jewels***

A Book Outline

2012

Daniel Lee Henry

Introduction *To Tell the Story*

A hundred and five years after Muir's pivotal encounter with the feared Chilkat-Chilkoot people, the author sits at a fire with descendants of headmen Daanaawaak and Koh'klux. For several summers in the 1980s Tlingit elders converged at their ancient village site on the Chilkoot River shore where they taught Tlingit traditions to Native and non-Native students. In the ensuing decade, Daniel Henry records life stories and speeches of twenty-one elders, one of whom survives in 2011.

Interwoven in Native identity is a sense of belonging to a rich and startling land, once the sole responsibility of forbears who expected subsequent generations to carry their works into eternity. To progeny yet unborn the elders entrusted their *aat.oow*—heirloom treasures like Chilkat blankets, regalia and carvings, even stream mouths, berry patches, mountains, stories, stars. If clan properties were revered by youngsters, elders believed old memories stayed alive.

"We call our children the future." Chief Austin Hammond's hands traced sparks shooting from the fire. "How can we guide them? I only know one way—tell the Story."

Over the next three decades, Henry dedicated himself to facilitating ways by which the Story is told—as oral history, writing, and broadcast. Sharing a community with assertive Native Americans offered new insights on intercultural

relations that inspired the author to create the Alaska Native Oratory Society. The University of Alaska professor worked with hundreds of students representing all indigenous corners of Alaska, but always returned to the Chilkat Valley where Tlingits are still in charge. The Haines mayor is a Tlingit woman; the state senator and representative are Tlingit men. Local Natives own businesses, teach school, drive snowplows. Some still remember the Story.

A Chilkat robe encases Hammond as he stands. He begins with the Great Flood.

Prologue *Becoming Deer*

After days of hand-to-hand battle between Chilkat and Chilkoot rivals, clan headmen declare the dispute's end. Six dead on each side. The debt is paid. Former adversaries paddle war canoes to Deer Rock on the Chilkoot River where they conduct an elaborate peace ceremony.

Chapter 1 *Glate Ankow*

Out of a midnight storm, John Muir clambers off a glacier into a knot of Tlingit guides around a campfire. They scold the naturalist for recklessness in an unforgiving landscape. Muir defends his risky behavior by insisting that good luck always follows him. A week of icy exploration in October 1879 convinces the Natives that the bearded zealot stands apart from other white men, deserving the name *Glate Ankow*—Ice Chief.

When the weather clears, Reverend S. Hall Young leads the crew in prayer. Glacier Bay exposed them to many perils, but their greatest challenge comes next. To the same God who gave luck to John Muir they pray for protection in Chilkat Country, one of the last bastions of hostile heathens on the continent.

While Muir's Alaskan exploits bring deeper authenticity to his insights about wild places, less is known about the transformative effects of his encounters

with the Tlingit of Southeast Alaska. The opening confrontation is the first among many in a book about the transition of the northern Tlingit from fierce monopolists to cultural and corporate stewards. Likewise, John Muir returned to California bearing fresh support for his glacial theories, and unexpected evidence of “majestic” Native Americans still thriving in their chosen land.

Ch. 2 *Salmon Cache*

The glaciers of the upper Lynn Canal began to retreat two thousand years ago to expose new land and sea. A millennium later, Tlingit immigrants settled in two fingers of the great fjord, keeping their fiefdoms apart, yet inseparable. Chilkat and Chilkoot people shared a rugged coastal region defined by steep mountains and salmon-rich river valleys. Each controlled a domain that included forests, ample food, and secret routes over mountain passes to a vast trading monopoly with Interior tribes. They quarreled, celebrated, and shared the bounty.

For twenty generations three-to-five thousand northern Tlingit maintained overlapping jurisdictions, resolving internecine conflicts with blood atonement and the ceremony of the Deer. The hydra-headed fjord rewarded residents with a defensible homeland accessed by a single ocean passage. Strategic superiority delayed Outside exploration and settlement, and generated a reputation for fierceness that extended far beyond the homeland.

News of white men drifted into the northern stronghold as Spanish ships explored the Northwest Coast in the early 18th century. Russian, French, and British vessels soon followed. Some, like Captain George Vancouver, ventured into Chilkat Country only to be repelled by Tlingit bluster or force.

In addition to protecting traditional language and lifeways, Chilkat fortress mentality kept out the earliest epidemics. From San Francisco northward, some tribes were nearing extinction by the time smallpox breached Klukwan's defense in 1838.

Ch. 3 *True Believer*

In the same year disease came to Chilkat, John Muir was born in Dunbar, Scotland. His father's religious zealotry uprooted the family and replanted them in a Campbellite cooperative on the central Wisconsin frontier. As Daniel Muir's eldest son, John bent to a withering Gospel that demanded light in Satan's dark woods. On all but Sunday, daylight required the back-breaking task of leveling the "glorious Wisconsin wilderness," leaving little time to read. Muir remedied the problem by whittling a device that lifted his bed to an upright position hours before chores began at five a.m. An array of ingenious inventions won the awkward young man a university scholarship, but after two years in Madison he cut loose for the country as a transient sawyer and handyman.

Nearly losing his eyesight in a factory accident shifted Muir's sense of purpose from industrial to the serene. With his ten-year-old sidekick, Merrill, Muir set off on a thousand-mile ramble to the Gulf of Mexico. His next exploration took him to San Francisco and an epiphanic walk into the Sierra Nevadas, "a divine mountainscape" that sustained his passions for a lifetime.

Muir's perception of Native Americans was less glowing. Not long after he arrived in Yosemite, Muir described the local tribe as "dirty," "deadly," and "lazy." Until his first Alaska voyage at age 41, Muir thought of Indians as "children of the wild" whose contact with whites begat "tamed eagles in barnyard corners, with blunt talons, blunt bills, and clipped wings." Rather than improve their existence, Muir declared, missionaries and soldiers brought "disease, crime, debauch, demoralization, and death."

The November 1879 meeting changed his mind.

Ch. 4 *Spirited Exchanges*

For centuries Tlingit shamans stitched the seam between physical and spiritual worlds. They were tricksters who, like Raven, possessed uncanny powers. Northern shamans were forceful performers whose influences touched every corner of the *kwaan*. This chapter weaves several accounts of local shamans

conveyed in oral histories or gleaned from printed record. For example, a Chilkat shaman sensed the approach of Vancouver's men. With his brothers the shaman paddled to a place in the inlet where he dove to the seafloor. He resurfaced an hour later with news of three ships on the incoming tide. The next day three British yawls sailed into Chilkat Inlet.

Though generally feared and respected, shamans proved powerless to deter the rising wave of whites and their diseases. By 1835 Hudson's Bay ships were trading for luxurious furs hauled out of the Yukon Interior by trains of Tlingit packers. In the same year Chilkat headman Xet-su-wu commissioned a master carver to create artwork fit for the "White House" of the Tlingits. Hailed as the "crown jewels" of Northwest Coast art, the Whale House artifacts became the center of intense passions for seven generations of conflict, deceit, theft, and murder.

Increased commerce with ships brought more wealth to Chilkat traders who applied pressure on their trading partners to the north. When Hudson Bay established Fort Selkirk on the Yukon River in 1852, Chilkats were incensed by the outside competition. Chief Koh'klux led a war party including a fearsome shaman named Scundoo'o four hundred miles from Klukwan to the fort that they burned to the ground. Shaken by the act, Hudson Bay withdrew from the Yukon for eighty-two years. Natives on both sides of the border still celebrate the brazen ambush.

Ch. 5 *Stars and Cirques*

Two rising scientific authorities from California in the late 19th century became embroiled in separate debates, each leading to the Chilkat Valley.

University of California astronomy professor George Davidson wanted to know more about solar eclipses. The scant literature of the time promulgated a range of phenomenological theories, none of which had been measured with the newest equipment. Bailey's Beads and colored stars were among the "great amount of rubbish" that Davidson intended to dispel. According to his

calculations made on a surveying trip in 1867, a total eclipse two years' hence could best be viewed from Klukwan, Alaska. He made plans to bring science to the village.

A decade of tramping in Yosemite, a smattering of articles, and meetings with powerful people established the credibility John Muir needed to launch his eco-evangelism. As he refined his rough-hewn oratory, the bearded mountaineer drew larger, moneyed audiences, Davidson among them.

Publicist Muir's keen observations hefted his theories into the company of respected scientists, some of whom clashed publicly with him. Among the most controversial was Muir's belief that the Sierra Nevadas were carved by glaciers. State geologist Clarence King argued that wind, rain, and earthquakes shaped the Range. Muir claimed proof in the cirques. Scientists chose sides.

Davidson held council with the Chilkats in summer 1869, Muir ten years later. Both returned with evidence supporting their theories, but even more, they were deeply affected by their encounters.

Ch. 6 *Heart Full of Eagles*

The northern Tlingits' regal reputation attracted the attentions of soldiers, preachers and diplomats, including Lincoln's Secretary of State, William Henry Seward. The architect of Emancipation visited Klukwan in 1869 and exchanged gifts with Koh'klux, an unrepentant slaveholder until 1886.

That Seward and George Davidson appeared in Klukwan to measure a total solar eclipse added to Tlingit perceptions of their powers. At the darkest moment of the eclipse a Klukwan shaman admitted defeat, and exhorted Davidson to bring back the sun. Convinced of Davidson's prowess, Koh'klux returned the gesture with proof of his own regency. He held a pencil for the first time in his life and with his two wives drew a map of the secret trade route into the Yukon Interior. Considered one of the great works of indigenous cartography, the Koh'klux map is kept in the University of California's Bancroft Library.

Rising Presbyterian influence in the 1870s precipitated the fall of shamanism in the Chilkat-Chilkoot *kwaan*, but not without open protest. Scundoo'o, the powerful Yandeistakye shaman, teamed with Sitka Jack's marauders to unseat missionaries throughout Southeast Alaska. His primary target was Reverend S. Hall Young of Wrangell Mission. From the moment of Young's arrival in 1878, shamans were considered spawn of Satan, a campaign that attracted retaliation from Scundoo'o. Young vowed to crush the shaman's fearful reign.

Ch. 7 *To'watte's Canoe*

When the steamer *Dakota* left John Muir on the beach in Wrangell in July 1879 he turned to gape at the “most repulsive of all wildcat frontier towns I had ever seen.” He sought out Reverend Young with whom he became fast friends. In the three months that Muir waited in Wrangell, he often schemed with the young missionary about a canoe voyage north to look at glaciers and convert heathens.

Young delayed the journey until October when he persuaded the eighty-year-old Stikine headman To'watte to donate his canoe to bring the Good Word to the Chilkats. Three other Tlingit men joined their old captain—guide Sitka Charley, translator Stikine John, and young Kadachan, the exiled son of Koh'klux.

Ten weeks of cold rain and wind did not deter the paddlers from any of their planned five hundred mile route. Young held revival meetings at villages supported with prayers and hymns from To'watte and Kadachan. Although known for rapturous oratory, Muir contributed little to the events. Only at Yandeistakye did he speak, and then each of four nights.

Ch. 8 *Same Side of the River*

A hail of bullets greeted John Muir and his companions as they paddled upriver toward Yandeistakye. Kadachan assured the white men that the shots were

a good sign. In the following four days Muir grew to respect the “warlike” Chilkats like no other Native Americans he encountered.

In the first week of November 1879 northern Tlingits were forever changed by a short speech from environmental icon, John Muir. They liked his acknowledgment of “their fine, foodful land,” but were swayed by Glate Ankow’s declarations of universal brotherhood.

Following the conservationist’s talk, the oldest shaman declared that “for the first time, the Tlingit and the white man are on the same side of the river, eye to eye, heart to heart.” Generally considered ruthless barbarians, Chilkat-Chilkoot residents were so moved by the Ice Chief that they asked him to be their preacher. By sealing the Chilkat-Chilkoot conversion, Muir advanced the taming of the nation’s last heathen Indians and profoundly altered his views on race, religion, and the wild.

Ch. 9 *Trampling the Shaman*

Six months after John Muir’s speech at Yandeistackye, a white man built a home in the *kwaan*. George Dickinson managed the Northwest Trading Company post with his wife, Sarah, a Tongass Tlingit, trained by Reverend Young to be the area’s first Christian teacher. A year later, Reverend Eugene Willard and his wife, Carrie founded a Presbyterian mission school called Haines House after an East Coast donor.

To certify his commitment to the New Way, Koh’klux invited Willard to witness the last shaman initiation in Klukwan. Presbyterian superintendent Sheldon Jackson printed a map that christened the village Willard, but the name never stuck.

No one heeded the name change, but the heightened Presbyterian presence goaded Scundoo’o to more frenzied displays. For more than a decade the red-headed shaman had bedeviled missionaries and evaded Native policemen. Now he felt cornered.

The torture and death of a young woman in 1895, however, led tribal members to reveal his whereabouts to a U.S. Navy patrol. The gunboat sailed without lights into Dyea harbor. Scundoo'o was captured and served a three-year sentence at San Quentin. The defrocked shaman returned to Haines sans dreadlocks, tin star on his chest, beating a drum for the Salvation Army. For the right price, Scundoo'o would pose for photos in old shaman's regalia.

Ch. 10 *Routes to Riches*

For centuries wealth funneled to the Chilkats and Chilkoots through control of overland routes through narrow passes notched in glacier-draped mountains. Fierce protection of their secret trails regulated a trade monopoly with the Athabaskans of today's Yukon Territory. The earliest white men to cross the passes received stern warnings against any contact with their trading partners, the "Gunana." Gold and great rivers drew more white men, all of whom trudged the Tlingit tollway.

Competition from Sitka rivals sparked the "Packer War," one of the last acts of intertribal violence on America's shrinking frontier. The uprising sent worrisome signals to post-Custer America, leading President Theodore Roosevelt to commission the first Army fort in Alaska to suppress its "most troublesome" Natives.

Business peaked during the Klondike Goldrush of 1898 when trains of Native packers carried thousands of tons to the summit of Chilkoot Pass. John Muir and Jack London sent first-hand reports to millions of readers. Most 98ers returned empty-handed; packers moved back to Haines and Klukwan where they threw ostentatious potlatches.

Ch. 11 *New Indians*

The 1885 birth of Stuwu'kaa, grandson of Chief Koh'klux, instilled hope among villagers against an uncertain future. Following establishment of Haines

Mission came streets, houses, businesses, six canneries, and steamships with tourists clamoring for authentic Tlingit art. As the only son of George Shotridge, Louis would likely succeed his father as tribal leader.

The booming economy attracted more military visits by Naval Lieutenant George Emmons, a career officer with a keen interest in Tlingit culture. Emmons supplemented his government wages by becoming the first art collector in the Chilkat Valley. Newly converted Natives told the lieutenant of secret shaman graves from which he removed hundreds of items that are housed today in the American Museum of Natural History in New York City. A photo from 1888 shows Koh'klux' grandson on Emmons' knee, an heir-apparent destined to carry off esteemed Tlingit treasures to an Eastern museum.

In 1902 Louis Shotridge married the daughter of the shaman, Scundoo'o. After the territorial governor selected Florence to demonstrate Chilkat weaving at the 1905 Lewis and Clark Exposition, the couple's ambitions and traditional knowledge exposed them to a rarified view of American culture.

Ch. 12 *The Chief and His Princess*

In Portland, Los Angeles, and New York, Louis and Florence were touted as the Alaska Chief and his "Indian Princess." She wove while he worked the crowd. Between exhibitions in 1910, the couple signed on with a Grand Indian Opera tour that included a disastrous performance in Berlin for Kaiser Wilhelm and Theodore Roosevelt. In later photos the attractive couple wore Blackfoot costumes from the opera.

The Shotridges caught the attention of University of Pennsylvania Museum director, George Gordon, who brought them to Philadelphia. In the next two decades, Louis attended Wharton School of Business, wrote 16 monographs, prepared a Tlingit grammar with Franz Boas, cataloged exhibits, and led museum tours. He also acquired 500 of the finest Northwest Coast art pieces found anywhere. Through academic training and fieldwork, Shotridge became one of America's pre-eminent indigenous ethnographers.

For all their civic pride in Louis' work, Philadelphians adored Florence, whom the newspapers anointed their "Minnehaha." A natural beauty, the shaman's daughter was loved by thousands of school children visiting the museum.

Ch. 13 *Go-Between Man*

The Shotridges returned to Alaska in 1915 on assignment from the University Museum to collect the "oldest and best" specimens from Klukwan, the last cultural stronghold of the Tlingits. Louis collected recordings of Tlingit stories and songs, but Museum director George Gordon was unambiguous about his real purpose: retrieve the Whale House collection.

Cutthroat competition from other museums and private collectors spurred a rush for the last, best treasures of the Northwest Coast. Acquiring the Whale House would be "a very great achievement," Gordon assured Shotridge, even better if he could acquire the house itself, to be reassembled in Philadelphia.

Disease hastened cultural upheaval as elders and shamans succumbed to the Great Influenza of 1917-18. The virus killed half of the Chilkoot population; perhaps a third in Klukwan. Among the victims was Florence Shotridge whose obituary appeared in several East Coast newspapers. She was buried in the family plot at Chilkoot, obscured today by bramble and neglect.

Overwrought, Louis fled his grief by launching collecting trips throughout the Alexander Archipelago and south into British Columbia, in effect widening a circle of generational resentment.

Ch. 14 *Desperate Measures*

For the next decade, Louis motored throughout Southeast Alaska in the 24-foot *Penn*, buying the finest remaining examples of antiquity. Voyages through Tlingit, Haida, and Tsimpsian realms reaped important acquisitions for

the Museum, but Shotridge always returned to Klukwan hoping to take the artifacts his grandfather had guarded with his life.

Repeated attempts by Koh'klux' grandson to secure the Whale House treasures enflamed local passions that spilled into a public referendum in 1923. The vote condemned Shotridge's activities in Haines and Klukwan. During his final attempt to take the art pieces, the collector dodged a rifle bullet. While his courage was applauded in the East, Northwest Coast Natives held Shotridge in contempt.

Despite local sentiments opposing him, Shotridge continued a campaign to acquire artifacts, even after the University Museum fired him in 1932. Even today, Chief Joe Hotch maintains that "we still feel deep wounds from his acts." Many Tlingits still consider Shotridge a traitor who "stole" his own culture and view his mysterious death in 1937 as cosmic retribution.

Ch. 15 *Money To Kill*

One year after Louis Shotridge's death, Millie Shotridge de Haven threw a party to celebrate construction of the new Whale House, complete with a concrete floor. Over several days, the *koo'eex* featured speeches, singing, and dance, and a culminating process called "killing the money" in which the participant says the names of ancestors as money is placed in a bowl intended for the host. Banned by territorial law for 40 years, the potlatch revival that came with statehood brought back old traditions.

In addition to seating the celebrated artifacts in a sturdy house, *koo'eex* sponsors intended to assuage community pain, but villagers remained traumatized by loss. So much was gone in the sixty years since John Muir's speech—language, land, elders, *aat.oow*. As they had for generations, the Chilkat guarded their flanks.

For years, villagers openly discouraged whites from entering Klukwan. In 1950 a one-eyed war hero named Carl Heinmiller approached headman Dan Katzeek with a plan to pay elders to teach Tlingit arts. Katzeek agreed. Not since

the 1923 Shotridge peace ceremony had Haines and Klukwan residents converged as they did in a public celebration that led to a trade school, Alaska Indian Arts, and the world-famous Chilkat Dancers.

Along with the revival of culture came economic opportunities for the northern Tlingit. The Alaska Native Claims Settlement Act (ANCSA) of 1971 reshaped Chilkat destiny with Klukwan Inc., a corporation that selected old-growth timber lands belonging to their former slaves, the Haidas, for a clearcut seen from space. In the late 1980s the corporation nudged into Fortune's Top 500 but behind closed doors, Klukwan Inc. board members squabbled while funds evaporated. For the first time on record, four former and current Klukwan Inc. CEOs offer their own versions of the rise and fall—and rebirth—of the corporation.

As the youngest CEO of Klukwan Inc., Bill Thomas, quickly gained a national reputation as a shrewd Native business leader. On an April midnight in 1983, Thomas' renowned can-do attitude lead him and two others to remove the four house posts and rainscreen from the Whale House.

Ch. 15 *Objects of Great Weight*

A familiar Winter and Pond photo from the turn of the century depicts Tlingit men in full ceremonial attire standing in a tribal house with their *aat.oow*: a 14-foot feasting trough carved to resemble a powerful woodworm, four ornately carved house-posts, and a large wooden head, all backed by a rainscreen thirty feet wide and fourteen feet high. From the fantastic backdrop peer the faces of more than a hundred ancestors.

Since their creation in 1835, the Whale House artifacts of Klukwan secured a reputation as the finest traditional works in Tlingit culture. The four house posts, rainscreen, and feasting trough were commissioned by an aging chief to commemorate the stories of his clan, the Ganax.teidi. Unparalleled work flowed from the carver, Kadjisdu.axtc, also near the end of his life, assisted by family members. Versions of the Whale House crumbled and were replaced, but

the artifacts remained, protected in clan homes, masterpiece works that *Gourmet* magazine declared “transcends what we term beauty.”

Coveted by art collectors for a hundred years, the Whale House pieces were stolen by clan members in 1983 when art dealer Michael Johnson struck a deal with house leader Clarence Hotch. For nine years village factions feuded until a federal court remanded the case to a tribal court, a first in Alaska history. The village of Klukwan argued a case for the artifacts as collective property. Leading the defense was one of the burglars, Bill Thomas, who later became a Klukwan Inc. board chair and three-term state legislator. He currently serves in the Alaska legislature as a ranking GOP leader.

The author attended the 1993 Klukwan trials, interviewed participants, and produced the 1200-page transcription for the Klukwan village council. Details of the Klukwan Artifacts Trial appear here for the first time in any book.

Ch. 19 *Ceremony at Deer Rock*

In 1971, a state highway crew bulldozed a one-mile road along Chilkoot River to its head at Chilkoot Lake. The road cut through two cemeteries, including one belong to the family of Florence Shotridge, and required blasting of a house-sized boulder that elders called Deer Rock. Native outrage over exposed human remains in the cutbanks grew into a movement as the weight of Deer Rock's destruction sunk in. The state ordered the crew to cement the rock together and later conducted a ceremony in which several Native leaders were conspicuously absent.

A month later, Chilkoot headman Austin Hammond/ Daanaawaak led his people in a traditional peace ceremony at the reconstituted Deer Rock. A crowd of Tlingit and whites observed ancient rituals performed for the first time in memory. Borrowing Muir's language, elders called for brotherhood among Chilkat Valley residents, Native and Anglo.

The author moved to Haines a few months later in search of a compelling story.

Following the dramatic Klukwan Artifacts Trial, twelve women—three white and nine Native—collaborated for a year to weave a Klukwan Peace Blanket. A few years later, work began on the *Jil'kaat Kwaan* Cultural Center, a blueprint for a traditional longhouse, carving sheds, and a hospitality house, all completed by 2010. The last phase is an exhibition hall overlooking the Chilkat River, a secure, climate-controlled home for the famed Whale House collection.

At a 2009 repatriation ceremony in the longhouse, elder Smitty Katzeek welcomed a hairpiece carved by his grandmother. In his speech he traced a pathway through the ages: “Our ancestors made a trail for us. We’re followin’ that trail. And we’re leavin’ a trail behind us for our young people.”