

Heinmiller & Cultural Revival © Daniel Henry
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*Chilkoot Beachhead:
Carl Heinmiller and the Northern Tlingit Arts Revival*

DRAFT

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In the 1950s the Intertribal Ceremonies in Gallup, New Mexico was one of the biggest Native American gatherings in the country. Fifteen thousand Native Americans attended the annual event in 1959, which featured a rodeo, competitive dancing, and cultural demonstrations. That was the year two World War II veterans drove station wagons loaded with Boy Scouts from Haines, Alaska, to dance at the event. ¹

The group of Alaskans, a mix of Tlingit and white, had never seen such a spectacle. For some, the drive to New Mexico was their first trip out of the Chilkat Valley. With whoops and screams, Commanche dancers pounded out kaleidoscopic routines. Spinning Cherokee feather displays whipped up whirlwinds of dust in the hot air. The sheer number of people staggered the small-town Alaskans, but their jitters vanished when they stepped into the arena.

“It was a pretty powerful show,” says Tresham Gregg, an original non-Native member of the Chilkat Dancers. “We had it. More than just dance, it was theatrical but still Native. We sang loud, we had the motions, we really did it.”²

Festival organizers had never hosted Tlingit dancers in Gallup. Powerful drum rhythms pulsed through performers into their audience. Ornate masks and robes heightened the spectacle. Navajo and Apache women ran screaming from the stands provoked by a Haines teenager dressed in full brown bear hide and head. Aggressive, dazzling, playful—no one had ever seen dancing like this.

Neither had they seen such a grand display of Northwest Coast art: Chilkat blankets and tunics, ornately carved staffs, painted drums, and regal headpieces draped in

snowy ermine, sea lion whiskers bristling from the crowns. The audience roared its surprise and delight.

Conference approval resurged when officials awarded the Grand Prize to the Chilkat Dancers. Thousands of cheering Indians fueled artistic interest and self-esteem enough to transform a generation of young people. When the group returned to Haines, the community was stunned and proud. Grand Prize aside, few had actually seen Tlingit dancing, or such a display of regalia.

Three generations after Reverend and Mrs. Willard established a Presbyterian outpost at Deishu, many of the original residents of the community that became Haines were gone, much of their *at.oow* sold or hidden. Whole families disappeared in the Great Influenza of 1917-18. Young survivors attended schools and churches where they adopted new ways at the expense of the old. A territorial ban on *ku'eex* from 1897-1906 drove ceremonial elements of local Tlingit culture underground; steady pressure from museums and private collectors further depleted family treasures.

Twenty miles up the Chilkat River, the geographical isolation of the “Mother Village” slowed the cultural outflow. Klukwan people still conducted memorial *ku'eex* and other traditional ceremonies with blankets, masks, and other *at.oow*, but most regalia was very old and often fragile. Few new items were being created by a people once known for their exquisite work. In the mid-1950s, one elder carved canoe paddles for commercial sale. Three elderly women still wove Chilkat blankets. During the brief summer season a few Tlingit artists catered to the trickle of tourists, but most signs of a once-vibrant culture were shielded from non-Native eyes.³

Things changed when the dancers returned triumphant.

After arriving in the late Forties, scoutmaster Carl Heinmiller observed that young Tlingits were “ always very unhappy about bein’ Indian,” which he felt led to despair, drink, and indigence. Two years before Gallup, Heinmiller and school superintendent Karl Ward spearheaded Alaska Youth Incorporated, later called Alaska Indian Arts (AIA), which used Fort Seward facilities for scouting programs focused on creating and selling local art. Heinmiller’s early activities drew the attentions of Klukwan elders like Victor Hotch, Mildred Sparks, and Dan Katzeek, all hired as mentors. Most elders had given up on their young people, according to Heinmiller. From his perspective,

traditional tribal education had failed to salvage a faltering culture from the temptations of modernity, so Boy Scouts would legitimate old ways in a mainstream program.

What grew out of the Haines troop helped ignite a resurgence of Tlingit culture, and inspire other Natives to organize traditional arts groups.

“When they came home from Gallup,” Heinmiller recalled, “everybody was saying ‘I’m an Indian,’ you know. That activity actually caused a lot of competition ...from other villages who said ‘We don’t like the white man doin’ that.’”

As if roused from slumber, Native culture went public in Lynn Canal region and rippled throughout Southeast Alaska. Statehood ceremonies and a growing tourism industry in the late 1950s stimulated regional Native arts production—Heinmiller’s visions involved each. This paper is an attempt to describe the efforts and effects of a non-Native organization in promoting Native culture. Although a flawed, sometimes contradictory character, the World War II veteran played a significant role in promoting Tlingit culture. The rise of his organization paralleled Alaska from statehood to the millennium, shaping public perceptions of Tlingit culture for three decades. When viewed today, Heinmiller’s approach may appear outmoded, insensitive, even racist. Even at its height, Alaska Indian Arts, Inc. was criticized for exploiting cultural resources by marketing Tlingit images sanitized of their substance. The purpose here is not to deny or debate these issues, but to lay forth the details of a story that raises new questions and feelings about life in Alaskan communities.

Between live and televised events, the Chilkat Dancers exposed millions to Alaska Native culture. AIA injected new energy into Tlingit art production by producing prominent Alaskan artists like Nathan Jackson, Greg Horner, Johnny Avetok, Wayne Price, John Svenson, Jim Heaton, Jenny Lyn Smith, John Hagen, Clifford Thomas and Tresham Gregg. All are successful interpreters of Northwest Coast Native style today, survivors from a period when Tlingit art was in terminal decline.

Cultural resuscitation required more than a Scout troop and a struggling non-profit organization, so in the fall of 1967, Heinmiller convened an international assembly of arts and museum leaders who sat with local elders for two weeks to discuss strategies for their cultural survival. The published report, “Preserving Alaska Indian Arts,” underscored the urgency to train Native artists before their traditions “disintegrate and

disappear.” Given the opportunity, the inherent “ingenuity and survival instincts” of Alaska Natives showed great promise. Artistic talent neglected over two or three generations was not lost, just latent. “It is only a question of reawakening it.”⁴



Defending Fiji compelled Carl Heinmiller’s first efforts to organize indigenous people. The thirty-year-old Cleveland native shipped to New Zealand in 1942 where he trained with the New Zealand Expeditionary Forces before deploying to Fiji and Guadalcanal.

“They plunked him out in a remote village there and said rally some troops and get them ready as guerilla fighters.” The story is one of many etched into the memory of Heinmiller’s son, Lee. Housed with his family in the upper two floors of the former Fort Seward infirmary, Lee lives and breathes his father’s legacy. The high-ceilinged, thinly insulated rooms of the shambling four-story building are packed with treasures—Tlingit, military, family. Part art cooperative, part museum, part gallery, part workshop, Alaska Indian Arts stands as testament to a vision. In Carl Heinmiller’s case, monocular.⁵

With his distinctive eye patch and characteristic gruffness, Heinmiller exuded a sense of military authority. His Boy Scout background was vital to Fiji Commando successes, due in part to exchanging “woodcraft” tips for traditional knowledge. As he told it, Native knowledge helped him avert one disaster after another. When his first aid skills became evident, the Major earned allegiance from his commandos, grandsons of cannibals. Despite Heinmiller’s loss of an eye and two fingers unrelated to the battlefield, when the decorated officer returned to Washington, D.C. he looked all the part of a war hero. He worked in the Pentagon “turning around paper clips for the brass,” when he heard about former military properties on the market. He joined a group of a few dozen veterans who met weekly to “romance about goin’ to Alaska.” Among the regulars were Ted Gregg, recently a Navy cartographer in the Aleutians, and Steve Homer who dreamed about starting a ferry in Southeast Alaska. The veterans’ campaign to colonize Alaska gained notoriety among bureaucrats who noted Heinmiller’s iron-jawed determination. Their case was strong; they only lacked money.

“I made several landings in the war, “ said Carl, “and one thing that used to shock me most was the tremendous cost it was to bust a beachhead, and to establish a landing without...getting shot at. So when we were talking about going into the rugged parts of Alaska and establishing a community, I thought, boy, somebody must have a lot of money.”⁶

Everyone else in the group hoped the same thing. When Chilkoot Barracks—formerly Fort Seward—came up for sale in 1946, the Veterans Alaska Cooperative cobbled together a \$105,000 bid. Political pressures from other bidders delayed the veterans’ plans. Fiji Commando patch on his shoulder and a glint in his pale blue eye, Heinmiller cut a swath through the offices of key senators and generals, a lobbying effort that proved successful. The Department of the Interior conveyed Fort William Henry Seward to the Cooperative in April 1947. Two months later, fifty families drove in a convoy over the five-year-old Alaska Highway and the more primitive Haines Military Cut-Off Road to their new home overlooking Lynn Canal.

Once he occupied the Fort, the commanding officer marched again through the halls of Washington with the legal morass of fifty new owners until Congress signed a deed to Port Chilkoot Company in 1950 designating Heinmiller as chair. Considering Haines’ dismal economic condition, Heinmiller’s buy-out was enough reason for most of the original group members to give up, leaving five principal families—Heinmiller, Gregg, Homer, Gellotte, and Cordes—to fend for themselves.⁷

Since its commission in 1905, the Fort supplied a reliable source of income for Haines residents. Feeding four hundred soldiers stimulated business opportunities for fishers and farmers. A community of loggers, carpenters, machinists, maids, and seamstresses thrived in service of the U.S. Army. Scheduled barges arrived with mail, plywood, and fuel. More than jobs, the Fort brought people together for dances, plays, and basketball games. When Chilkoot Barracks closed in 1944, a third of the local population shipped out. Stay-putters grieved the loss; pain some hoped the Eastern colonists might assuage with imagined bankrolls.

Bent under the weight of their own debt, the new owners hoped to revitalize the Fort with federal grants designed to enhance tourism. As expert carvers, Heinmiller and Gregg saw the potential to attract visitors to the area. Regular appearances in Juneau and

Washington drew attention to their cause, coupled with the swelling Alaska statehood movement.

Loans and private donations allowed Port Chilkoot Company to upgrade the aging facility through the Fifties. Repair of an old water main once used by the Army supplied the Fort and eventually replaced Haines water source. Paved streets, a diesel powerhouse, and refurbished quarters proved the value of social connections and perseverance. For the long run, Port Chilkoot would rely on state and federal education and training programs to create a unique arts and culture community. For that they needed paying customers. And transportation.

Port Chilkoot proposed that tourists sail from Juneau on Steve Homer's MV *Chilkoot*—a ferry that presaged the Alaska Marine Highway—to disembark at Port Chilkoot dock six hours later. Creating inventory was Heinmiller's task, so he returned to lawmakers with a case for work skills training programs. Since Heinmiller and Ted Gregg were woodworking teachers, they focused on classic forms in wood: furniture, frames, lathed bowls, and sculpture: fish, bear, eagle.

As with the Fijians, the Major needed only to suture a few wounds and shepherd a newborn or two to begin earning the trust of local Tlingits. Lee remembers knocks on the door at all hours by men suffering axe and gunshot wounds. His home regained its unofficial status as the Fort infirmary. Payment to Heinmiller was negotiable—smoked salmon, firewood, dig a hole, worry later. Experience as a combat medic “earned him brownie points” among villagers who rarely warmed to white men. Following several meetings to discuss ways to involve elders with the new Boy Scout program, Dan Katzeek invited the white man to view the wealth of his ancestors.⁸

“Hidden away in some of those old buildings are some of the greatest art treasures to be found anywhere on the North American continent,” Carl Heinmiller told an Elderhostel audience in 1988. He was alarmed by the condition of the precious items, especially in the Whale House—dank, unheated, neglected—where cedar monuments carved by the Michelangelo of Northwest Coast art two centuries earlier quietly turned to dust.⁹

Trained by Haida masters, Kadjisdu.axtc was commissioned around 1800 by Klukwan headman, Xet-su-wu, to fill his clan house with works extolling the glory of the

Gaanaxteidi, founders of the village. By the close of the century, the Whale House carvings were legendary among anthropologists and museum collectors who scoured the Coast for treasure. Preserving the masterworks became a passion for Klukwan-born Louis Shotridge who, as a curator for University of Pennsylvania Museum, devoted over twenty years to acquiring the Whale House contents. Despite a considerable budget, family rank, and ties to Eastern power, Shotridge failed to convince his kinsmen to sell the clan treasures, called *at.ooow*. After Shotridge's mysterious death in 1937, Klukwan residents turned away from the Outside World, all but closing the village to strangers, especially art aficionados. Though marred by age, the exquisite forms remained—eight house posts, a rainscreen from which over a hundred ancestral faces peered, and a fourteen-foot feasting dish in the shape of a Woodworm. Shaken by the decaying bonds to a mythic past, the first white man in decades to view the Whale House offered a battle plan.¹⁰

Young people would dance and carve and weave their culture back to life.

A tape recording from a 1988 talk catches the rising passion in Carl's voice as he discusses the fate of the Whale House and other clan *at.ooow*, revered pieces he claims were wrapped in tarps inside houses with broken windows and leaking roofs. "They are the richest village corporation in Alaska and they have not put one dime into protecting their property!" Carl sucks in a long breath and murmurs that the prized objects "disappeared in the dark of the moon by the clan owners." At the time of his speech, the Whale House artifacts were locked in a Seattle warehouse awaiting legal judgment of ownership.¹¹

Within months of Heinmiller's first visit to the Whale House in 1952, Klukwan sent a group of elders to dance in Haines for the ANB convention.

"It was the first time they had done something publicly as opposed to culturally," says Lee Heinmiller of the performance. Not since the 1920s had Klukwan last danced for a mixed Haines audience, and rarely before then. Out of concern for the safety of their remaining *at.ooow* some village old-timers opposed the Major's efforts to start an arts school. Non-Native intervention too often resulted in loss of health, spirituality, art, language, land. Heinmiller sensed his diplomatic limitations, so sent as reinforcements several Native teenagers from the Presbyterian mission in Haines.¹²

Before heading to Klukwan, the young dancers stopped at the Sparks home on Main Street in Haines where Mildred welcomed them into her warm kitchen. In a steady, quiet voice the Klukwan matriarch often told a few stories from the old days. Tlingit dancing was not the heathen ritual of savages, she maintained, but an opportunity to display the fabulous art of their ancestors, worth thousands of dollars. ““You’re different from any other Indians’,” Carl Heinmiller recalled Mildred saying, like members of a royal family. She told them who they were, and how they should talk with elders. She and her husband sometimes accompanied the boys to the village, speaking Tlingit so the old ones understood what the young ones were asking.¹³

Staunch Republican, Presbyterian elder, and meritorious officer of the Alaska Native Sisterhood, Sparks was immersed in local politics, but somehow above it all. Regardless of party affiliation, governors and U.S. senators came to Mildred’s kitchen where they sipped mugs of coffee while she articulated the Chilkat Position.¹⁴

After a generation of silence in the Mother Village, residents edged closer toward passing Old Ways to a general audience, propelled by an offer they couldn’t refuse. If elders granted permission for AIA to use traditional designs and dances, Carl promised to employ them to teach Tlingit arts to young people. They gave their blessing.

“Art was dead,” says Tresham Gregg about life before AIA. He was fourteen and bored when the elders started teaching his scout troop; through their instruction he discovered a new way of seeing, and out of that, a life’s passion.

Art supplied meaning for a teenager in remote Alaska. “I was at Alaska Indian Arts every day making costumes, learning to carve, making staffs and headdresses,” says Gregg. Master artists like carver Bill Holm flew in for workshops; on weekends the troop sat with Dan Katzeek in Klukwan. An apt student, Tresham’s personal muse seeped into Tlingit designs that sometimes clashed with the orthodoxy of his carving peers. A split eagle headdress with two leaping bears drew jibes from Native AIA artists until, Tresham says, Tommy Jimmy Sr. picked it up from a table, scrutinized it, and said, “I know this one. This is a good one. This is a really good one.” The slender, goateed artist laughs. AIA carvers never again teased him about his style.¹⁵

Prospects of attending the 1957 Boy Scout jamboree at Valley Forge, Pennsylvania, motivated the Port Chilkoot troop beyond carving neckerchief slides to

masks and regalia. That year, Heinmiller and superintendent Karl Ward drew up papers for what would become Alaska Indian Arts, Inc., which paid Chilkat and Chilkoot elders to teach a new generation of artists. The training sessions were profound for a white teenager seeking meaning in a backwater town. Tresham Gregg remembers the thunder of Klukwan Dancers on the oak floors of a barracks building, and how its power moved through him. They taught anyone who wanted to learn, and Tresham wanted to learn more than anything.

In 1958 grants financed construction of a tribal house in the center of the Port Chilkoot parade grounds. By 1960, the first phase of Fort Seward Tribal Village was complete, for forty-five years the backdrop of one the most recognizable performing groups in Alaska. Two fourteen-foot poles framed the house entrance, one carved by Bill Holm at the crest of a humbling career, one by Tresham Gregg just before he left Haines for Stanford University. Although rotting floorboards made the Tribal House unusable in 2008, the poles still stand with other weathered relics of a stirring return.

To watch their children and grandchildren dance old-style brought up strong feelings among elders. Once banned by missionaries, Tlingit dancing is a solemn testament to one's heritage; seeing the Chilkat Dancers in the Tribal House infused the ritual with life. The "first string stars" at the Valley Forge debut were Walter Porter, Chuck Goodwin, and John Thompson, Native performers who "understood the dynamics of dance" as a way to hook an audience. Brandishing ornate staffs, spears, and daggers, the brawny Native youth might seem menacing if not for their big, American smiles. When they hooked an invitation to the Intertribal Ceremonies in Gallup in 1959, the Boy Scout troop morphed into an Explorer post to accommodate the young women watching on the sidelines, strong dancers like Irene Sparks and Benji Stuart.

Back home, the dancers were suddenly the "darlings" of cultural arts groups promoted by the Alaska governor's office. Regular appearances at statehood celebrations prompted a flurry of television and film appearances; tourism ads and brochures featured images of the regalia-clad ambassadors.

Some hold that the non-Native war hero's dance group may have spurred jealousy from traditional groups in the region passed over by promoters attracted by the heightened drama and new *at.oow* of Chilkat Dancers. Even in recent years, some still

comment on Heinmiller’s brash, “patriarchal” nature and his “appropriation” of Tlingit design. To add further insult, some dancers were white kids.¹⁶

None of that mattered to the Chilkat-Chilkoot leadership of the time, who trusted their Scoutmaster to do what they could not. Mrs. Spark’s keen interest in AIA allowed Heinmiller full access to a rich cultural life. To honor his contributions, the Sparks family adopted Carl Heinmiller in an official Klukwan ceremony, naming him Guwich’kau after a venerated warrior.¹⁷

Also called Guwich’kau, teenager Bill Thomas was a Chilkat Dancer through most of the Sixties until an Army hitch that took him to Vietnam in 1968. His relationship with Carl Heinmiller was not unlike young Tlingit men—Carl was his scoutmaster, tended to Bill’s tubercular mother, popped a disjointed knee into place, and paid him to clean the AIA shop on Saturdays. “When people can cure you, you always hold them at a different standard,” former state representative Thomas said from his office on Main Street in Haines. With only a bedridden mother to raise him, Thomas called grandmother Mildred Sparks his primary parent. In the Tlingit tradition, his uncles guided Thomas through his coming of age, but Carl was the closest he ever had to a dad.¹⁸



Three years of high-profile appearances made the Chilkat Dancers regional celebrities, but not until their performance at the 1960 Anchorage Fur Rendezvous did Heinmiller’s quest to revive Native art gain statewide credence. As a festive prelude to the Iditarod sled dog race, the Rony infects Alaska’s biggest city with Mardi Gras madness. Artists work in shops, art fairs, street corners. Heinmiller was eager to show off his dancers to the rest of Alaska—thousands of villagers converging in Anchorage for the party. Inupiaq and Yup’ik dancers especially impressed the Haines scoutmaster and his charges, but he noticed that “all the dancers were old people.” In typical manner, Heinmiller encouraged group leaders to involve youth by developing programs that could be supported by government and private funds. The next year, communities like Gambel, Nome, and Bethel sent young dancers who sometimes performed without costumes but

exuded a new, infectious energy. Masks and *kuspuks* came later as initiates learned to make them.¹⁹

Relations with Alaska villagers attracted a select cadre of Aleut, Athabaskan, and Inupiaq interns willing to carve and dance Tlingit-style, but local participation was key to AIA's existence. Despite thirty-two percent unemployment in Haines at the time, local Native and non-Native youth could always find a job with Carl. In a frontier backwater perpetually suspended between boom and bust, it was hard to pass up employment among peers in warm, well-lit rooms redolent with cedar.

Heinmiller lined up enough support in 1960 for a five-year program to revive Native traditions through skills training and employment. The Indian Arts and Crafts Board of the U.S. Interior Department and the Alaska Rural Development Agency contracted with Alaska Indian Arts to "produce skilled artisans and craftsmen" sufficient to sustain a local industry. Wood carvers benefited from state grants to train artists and produce a few totem poles. Dancing and carving at the 1962 Seattle World's Fair drew further attention to AIA, including pole orders from corporate firms.²⁰

The carvers' first pole commission came from Standard Oil in 1963 to be installed at its new (and Alaska's sole) oil refinery in Nikiski. A Kenai Peninsula port village overlooking Cook Inlet, Nikiski expanded over a thousand percent in the years around the Pipeline boom in the late Seventies. Construction of the Nikiski refinery was a grand pronouncement of Alaska's boomer spirit, still banking on a Big One despite six years of dry wells.

A plaque on the base of the 36-foot pole described "the story of modern oil development in the 49th state" in terms equal to the shining industrial complex rising from vast wilderness. At the top, it declared, perched "Raven, all-powerful, who put the oil in the ground. He stands on the sun, which he brought to earth. Next is a sea monster which holds a tineh (copper crest)...as a symbol of the resources needed to explore and drill for oil. The power to wrest oil from under the land and sea is represented by a legendary strongman who shows his strength by tearing a sea lion in two. The base figure is the beaver, familiar symbol of perseverance, industry, and tenacity."

A few weeks after the dedication ceremony in spring of 1964, an exploratory team made the first strike on the Kenai since the 1957 discovery.²¹

For seventeen years, the pole welcomed workers to the plant until Standard Oil sold it to University of Alaska Fairbanks where it was a campus fixture for a decade. In the mid-Nineties, the pole was transferred to Juneau where it stands today on the UA-Southeast grounds.

With the oil pole completed, AIA artists turned their attentions to the New York World's Fair. In April, roughed-out cedar logs were loaded onto ships bound for the East Coast via Panama; a carving crew with Leo Jacobs, Peter C. Johnson, Sr. Tommy Jimmie, Sr. and Wesley Willard worked on the poles through the summer. Today, a pole or two from the Fair remains in New York; others were sold and transported, sometimes several times.²²

A dozen carvers stayed home to finish artwork for an outdoor dance pavilion at the "Totem Village" in the center of Fort Seward parade grounds. The platform, full wall paintings, house posts, gift shop, and war canoe gradually materialized, along with more poles. Set against ice-draped mountains that rise from a frothing coastline, the scene completed a memorable backdrop to dance performances.

Two from that crew still work at AIA, fishermen who hunch over cedar most winters in the drafty carving studio of the old infirmary. Clifford Thomas is Bill's younger brother. John Hagen is an Athabaskan-Inupiaq man whose parents moved to Haines while he was a teenager. They reminisce in March 2010 while their hand tools throw chips from a twenty-six foot cedar log commissioned by someone in New York. Together and separately they created dozens of poles erected in Asia, Europe, and North America.

"It was a lost art," declares Thomas, his round face prone to smiling even when angry. Carl Heinmiller was his scoutmaster, boss, nemesis, and, like brother Bill, the closest he had to a dad. "Military kinda guy. A lot of people didn't like him, but he'd give a guy a job." When he was sixteen, Thomas created mischief enough for the state to threaten reform school, but Heinmiller and school superintendent Karl Ward intervened by sending him to a two-year Native arts program in Santa Fe. When he returned to Haines, Cliff answered to AIA stalwarts like uncle Wes Willard and Heinmiller. Now sixty, he still hears Carl's common quip about "a lot of talent in the Native kids" as he transforms logs to masterpieces.

Normally taciturn, John stops, looks up. “He was always in love with the art. We’d come over and work on weekends and, well, the more you do it the more you develop.”²³

More than forty years later, Hagen and Thomas still pursue a passion for wood. Back when they were looking over elders’ shoulders, totem pole art ran about a hundred dollars a foot, and another hundred for the log. In 2010 AIA sells a pole for as much as three thousand dollars a foot, starting with five grand for the uncarved cedar log.²⁴

Acclaimed totem poles, performances at World’s Fairs, an international tour, dozens of conferences and festivals, and film and TV appearances throughout the Sixties earned the dancers the right to call themselves “world famous.”²⁵



At the height of Chilkat Dancers’ fame, the money ran out.

Federal Manpower funds ended in 1965 and, despite steady pressure from Heinmiller, the State Economic Development Administration denied his requests for start-up capital, citing a need for a full-time manager to promote AIA “while overseeing production and product-design functions.” According to Lee, some believed the arts center had become too successful, producing Native art in quantities sufficient to depress the market value, and stifling cultural art production elsewhere. It needed professional guidance, not just the attentions of a Scoutmaster.²⁶

The 58-year-old former Boy Scout expels a wry chuckle and wraps the tips of his foot-long white beard around a forefinger. Competition with “so many people churning out such cheap stuff,” may have daunted some artists, Lee says but the overall effect was more art made with higher standards. Four-dollar soapstone seals were a ubiquitous gift-shop item, but the market allowed for high-end items, especially in a state flush with oil money. Political paybacks for AIA’s funding relationships diverted some items to government officials who “high-graded the masks, put them in their offices, and the rest of the stuff in a warehouse.” Lee figures about forty Manpower-era pieces decorate the Juneau Federal Building today.²⁷

The demise of AIA might have gone unnoticed but for a alarming article by Katherine Kuh in the October 1966 *Saturday Review*. “Alaska’s Vanishing Artwork” took aim at Alaskans for standing aside while a rich, cultural heritage crumbled. Alaska, Kuh charged, had “an indifference to its past,” a myopia that threatened to destroy irreplaceable evidence of indigenous mastery. Generations of Tlingit artwork, including the Whale House artifacts, were fast dissolving into memory.²⁸

Not long after Kuh’s article, master sculptor John Svenson invited the world-famous Chilkat Dancers to perform and carve at the Los Angeles County Fair. Comprised of nearly all Natives, the troupe “freaked out” Svenson’s seventeen-year-old son, John Jr., whose image of Indians was limited to Hollywood image-makers Charles Bronson and Chuck Connors. Never had he seen a team of muscular, brown carvers rend a log into artwork, nor Native dancers churn with such pomp and power.

“It was intense. All the action was there,” says Svenson from his workshop at the Mud Bay home he built with his wife, Sharon. His dad noted Johnny’s enthusiasm, so sent the teenager to Haines for “summer camp.” The L.A. kid was assigned a bunk in the Chilkoot Inn, the center of Officer’s Row, which housed carving rooms and living quarters for a dozen men. As the youngest and only non-Native dancer, John Svenson’s awe for his mentors approached “epic proportions.” He had never imagined wearing regalia valued at tens of thousands of dollars. Working shoulder to shoulder with up-and-coming masters, the kid from L.A. celebrated his unexpected transformation.

“I was proud,” says Svenson, arm extended to plant a flag on an imagined summit. A thin white pony tail curls down his back. “And I was definitely white.” His Scandinavian heritage was hidden in the bear costume he wore with the Dancers. On days off, Svenson strolled around town in “furs and a leather jerkin” or watercolored from mountaintops. He logged hours in the Raven House painting Austin Hammond draped in the Sockeye Robe, the cherished weaving that serves as the deed to traditional lands. Nothing John knew in Los Angeles prepared him for Haines. “I was in this wild place. It wasn’t tamed. The place was insane.”

Even though his hair didn’t touch his ears in 1968, locals considered Svenson their first California hippie. Already-raised eyebrows registered alarm when he married a hometown girl and built a love shack in the woods. John was too absorbed in his passions

to care about public opinion. Climbing in Yosemite and Lynn Canal prepared him for a career as a world-class mountain guide with an extraordinary talent for translating the raw beauty of his world into art. Now a forty-two year resident, Svenson laughs about old-timers who discover that his Mud Bay art gallery is more than a “voodoo hippie temple where we ripped the heads off chickens.”²⁹

While young Svenson swooned, Heinmiller hustled. For nearly ten years the Major had sustained Tlingit arts in the upper Lynn Canal, but survival into a second decade required more than one commando’s personal mission. Government grants ran out in 1965, income continued to keep AIA afloat until bills surpassed receipts in 1967. Following the Dancers’ L.A. performances, John Svenson Sr. agreed to help. That fall, the Alaska State Council on the Arts, of which Heinmiller was a board member, twice hosted an assembly of professionals and cultural leaders at Fort Seward to discuss the future of Alaska Indian Arts. Among the notables, two Tlingit leaders proved invaluable: ANB Grand Camp President Walter Soboleff and former Alaska Sisterhood President, Mildred Sparks.

Early into the October sessions, Soboleff became emphatic. The respected elder stood before the full group around the table in the Commander’s Room of the Halsingland Hotel. “In all this kind of planning,” he said, “I’m afraid that the old story will repeat itself: The psychology and interests of the Indian people will not be considered carefully enough, and they will be offended and alienated over and over. We MUST know what we are doing, and do it right.”³⁰

Some villagers questioned being “rescued” by more well-meaning white people. Those who already harbored suspicions about Heinmiller were the most stubborn, wielding a Tlingit silence that discouraged discussion. But endorsements from Soboleff and Sparks convinced most villagers that it was time to tend to their *at.oow*. Permitting these white people to view clan artwork meant funds and expertise toward abating the objects’ disintegration.

On Wednesday afternoon of the third day, conference members drove upriver to Klukwan for a tour of the “treasure houses” from which most non-Natives were barred for a quarter-century. Only on rare occasions were whites allowed in the Killer Whale Fin House, one of nine clan houses. On this day, six houses were opened.

Seventeen-year-old Jenny Lyn Smith had never been to Klukwan, and asked to tag along. New to town, the petite California transplant was an AIA apprentice, and inspired by everything. Prior to describing the scene to me, she sighs and clasps a hand to her chest, moved by memories. Although the houses “didn’t look like nothing” on the outside, she said, “it was wonderful” to witness “what now would be million-dollar artifacts.” Until she was called away, Jenny Lyn stared at the Whale House pieces, memorizing the intricate design and flawless form. She saw them only once, but their images stayed.

From that day, Jenny Lyn says, she acquired a profound respect for traditional Tlingit design. Teachers Nathan Jackson and John Hagen confirmed for her that a portion of the power in the art comes from “honoring the people who did it before.” Forty-three years of carving silver guides her blade, she says, to reveal new depth in old designs. “It’s amazing,” she says, slowly shaking her head. “You can’t improve on this art.”³¹

While white people stared at *at.oow*, ANB President Walter Soboleff circulated among villagers, smiling, talking, shaking hands. Everyone knew Dr. Soboleff, who at age 68, was a beloved cultural leader. At hundred-and-one years young in 2010, he still speaks. Even non-church-goers admitted to listening to Soboleff’s sermons on Juneau radio. He was that good an orator. As he parlayed in Klukwan, the slight man’s inquisitive eyes looked into the faces of a people just learning how to trust outsiders. If the culture is to survive, Soboleff reiterated, local Natives must rely on the support of non-Natives. Even Klukwan could die without the help of outsiders. Discussion continued that evening as Soboleff chaired a meeting of the Alaska Native Brotherhood.

He reported back to the assembly that villagers appreciated the “respect and admiration” for artwork shown by conference members. Some voiced concerns about “paternalistic” programs that perpetuated the stereotype of Alaska Natives as unreliable, unproductive, or over-dependent on white largesse. Who will teach traditional skills to youth, Soboleff returned. Like a *nakaani*—a brother-in-law from one’s opposite moiety—Heinmiller could say and do things that others might not. If non-Native efforts paid Native elders to revitalize Tlingit culture, Soboleff asked, what is the harm?³²

As special assistant to ANB president Louis Shotridge in 1930, young Walter Soboleff probably heard his boss say the same message in the organization’s meetings.

Anthropologist and Doctor of Divinity, Soboleff brought to the table his lifelong commitment to bridging cultures, a passion shared by his colleagues. Among representatives of Smithsonian Institute, Department of Interior, Bureau of Indian Affairs, Scripps Colleges, and three airlines was Portland-area TV host, Doris Kyber-Gruber. Growing up in Germany exposed her to Tlingit culture, which fed a passion for Chilkat blanket weaving. Her fascination led to studying blanket designs displayed in Europe and the U.S., including the Portland Art Museum, which keeps a pattern board once owned by Yeilxaak, a Gaanax.teidi clan leader who once denied Louis Shotridge entrance to the Whale House.³³

By the time she and her husband Clint Gruber came to Haines in 1967, Doris Kyber-Gruber had woven several blankets and was considered one of the finest practitioners of a dying art. A few months before the conference Kyber-Gruber conducted Klukwan workshops where she gained the trust of Jenny Marks, an elder who had woven a blanket a few years earlier. Two other Chilkat women—Jennie Warren and Laura Hotch—had enough weaving experience to teach. Both indicated an interest, but only when they were “assured that the purpose is to keep the art alive among their OWN people.” About ten younger women wanted training, so workshops continued.

The attractive TV star’s weaving prowess posed difficult questions.

Before Louis Shotridge was forced out of Haines in the late 1920s, two generations of collectors and grave robbers had already sailed out of Lynn Canal laden with local artwork. As a result, Klukwan put up its guard, huddled like musk oxen against wolves. Villagers trusted few whites, no strangers. Should they allow a European woman to teach them their own “lost” art? Should they sanction outsiders to produce old designs owned by non-artist inheritors? Who got paid for what?

Despite her Old World charm and a beauty-queen smile, Kyber-Gruber provoked an uneasy feeling that Chilkat trade secrets were in the open. She gave “refresher courses” in the village, but promised not teach elsewhere without permission. Out of her talks with weavers and elders, Jenny Marks (Thlunaut) was designated as the lead teacher for Chilkat women exclusively. In her report to the state arts council, Kyber-Gruber called the tribe’s “controlling influence... reasonable and understandable.”

“To keep the art alive,” she wrote, AIA students could produce small woven tourist items, but the master weavers stayed in Klukwan. Faced with the impending death of their cultural trademark, reluctant Chilkats embraced Kyber-Gruber.

In one of the last meetings at the Halsingland, the TV celebrity became adamant: “Only now are we awakening to what we are on the verge of losing.” Cultural and artistic values were incalculable, more so by the shame of its impending loss. “The Klukwan area is one of the most uniquely historic areas in the world that needs support for historic preservation.”³⁴

Conference members agreed about the “immediate need” for action, launching discussions on how best to protect the Klukwan artifacts. Painful memories of clan property sold to collectors united villagers against museums. Some leaders vowed that treasures would never again leave the clan houses. If *at.oow* rotted, it rotted at home. Members concurred that a village-run cultural center was best. It would take time, Heinmiller warned. Unconstrained by white-man timelines, only delicate diplomacy could satisfy filial obligations. To be housed in a tribal center, he asserted, items must remain in total clan control, facilitated by separate rooms with keys and agreements about who handles what under which circumstances.

Strong cross-cultural ties made the project sustainable. As the cultural center took form, AIA would continue to train artists and create new work. Members acknowledged the state economist’s findings that a minimum of three to five years of state funding was needed to make the Native arts program self-sustaining. Dr. Soboleff assured the room that the Alaska Native Brotherhood stood firmly behind AIA, especially Tlingit and Haida. Dr. David Scott of the Smithsonian’s Collection of Fine Arts suggested that building a strong ‘image’ was key to long-term success. Throughout America, he observed, timely historic preservation “produced results far beyond what they could achieve if they waited.”³⁵

The assembly could wait no longer.

Bound by common urgency, members set about establishing non-profit status for AIA. In a few months, a board of trustees was installed to oversee the small staff headed by Carl Heinmiller to develop training programs and seek funding. Sales revenue for that

year neared \$30,000; a 10-year projection called for substantial growth in tourism from which AIA's income would climb ten-fold.³⁶

The board proved its commitment to training over the next two years by hiring master carvers like John Svenson, Sr., Bill Holm, and Bill Reid to instruct Carl's crew. Author James Houston brought his talent to the table for a stint as a director. Interest in weaving spread among Chilkoot women in summer 1968 when Doris Kyber-Gruber led a groundbreaking workshop in the Lukak.adi Raven House of Haines. Involving Raven House meant more visits to the AIA carving room from headman Austin Hammond, whose friendship with Heinmiller deepened. The Chilkoot leader publicly endorsed the program with its training and supervised employment, all under Heinmiller's watchful eye.³⁷

The crusty veteran promoted his cause with soldierly zeal; a seat on the Alaska State Council on the Arts supplied his bully pulpit and access to funding. State and federal interest in acquisition and restoration of totem poles fueled the Council's Totem Pole Committee, of which Heinmiller was a founding member. Other members of the committee included George Federov of U.S. Interior's Indian Arts and Crafts division and University of Washington professor Erna Gunther. Together, members awarded grants to Alaska artists.

A brouhaha erupted in May 1968 when statewide press ran Heinmiller's accusations of committee-mates "going power-mad" by advocating modern styles over traditional. Members argued that "traditional art stifles creativity," fumed Heinmiller, better to let it die than forever produce copies. "They're so hot on this avante garde stuff they think there's no room for the old things." Before the *Saturday Review* article no one cared about Tlingit art, Heinmiller imputed. Now, author-lecturer Gunther fancied herself the "Joan of Arc of totem poles," he raged, prepared to stake her reputation on funding revisionist art.

It is unclear which offended Heinmiller more—the committee's aesthetic preferences or the lost jobs for his world-famous carvers. Either way, he resigned from the board. The Major railed against colleagues who claimed that art should be made by the "selective few," rather than nurturing a troupe of "children, handicapped, or drunks." Far from obsolete, Alaska Indian Arts survived *because* of its adherence to tradition, he

argued. Dancers still thundered in the tribal house while elders mentored Native and non-Native students. Although Heinmiller mistrusted professional arts leaders to uphold Tlingit tradition, he had faith in his crew.³⁸

For the next thirty years, Carl Heinmiller's dedication to AIA and the Chilkat Dancers bolstered his role in the myth-making of Alaska. Carving the planet's largest totem pole for the 1970 World's Fair in Osaka, Japan, established Pacific Rim friendships worth every inch of the 132-foot art piece. Annual promotion by the State of Alaska made the Chilkat Dancers synonymous with the "Last Frontier" theme, a status sustained by frequent appearances at fairs, conventions, and administrative events, as well as film and television. Heinmiller's operation took on a celebrity sheen from the embrace of Chuck Connors, James Earl Jones, Vincent Price, Clarence Thomas and others.³⁹

Private donations and rising income kept the Chilkat Dancers afloat through the close of the century. Cruise ships in the 1990s brought record numbers of tourists to Haines, many lured off the gangplank by images seen in *Sunset* or on *Good Morning America*. Likely they remembered the big medicine man, Charlie Jimmie, Sr., whose cannibal scowl and prominent septum ring drew middle-class Americans to high shamanic shtick.

Heinmiller added the shaman's scene to the dance program in the late Sixties, and within a decade Charlie's savage smile was embedded in popular imagination. In 1998, nearly ten thousand customers watched Charlie Jimmie "heal" a patient with his trademark vaudevillian bluster. *America's Funniest Home Videos* played a clip in the late Nineties showing Charlie in full regalia as he leaned over a patient on the floor: his dreadlocked-framed face lifts to the audience, creased with concentration. He drops feathers around the prone figure. A drum beats. Rattles shake a somber rhythm. Charlie's low moans build to syncopated roars as he cavorts from stage to audience. Following a shrieking climax the shaman collapses on the patient. Beat. As Charlie rises, spectators see dentures in his hand. "Oh dear," he gums. "Gotta quit skimpin' on my Polydent."⁴⁰

The audience roars, as they did three times a day.

On the verge of the biggest tourist season in Haines history, Lee Heinmiller closed the show in 2000. Charlie Jimmie's retirement that year forced Lee to confront the realities of running a dance group without its star shaman. Formation of a Klukwan dance

group competing for cruise passengers convinced the younger Heinmiller to transfer the dance staff to the villagers. It was the view of his father, who died in 1992, Lee said, that “the hand-off would always be the goal.”⁴¹

Today the village of Klukwan continues to maintain a group of dancers that has evolved into a vibrant, local troupe at the biennial Tlingit Celebration, state fairs and other occasions. Beyond civic events, the dancers are preparing to make history in their village with the opening of the Jilkaat Kwaan Cultural Heritage Center, now in its final stage. In addition to dance performances in the traditional long house, a museum currently under construction will house Whale House *at.oow* and other Klukwan treasures. After two centuries hidden away in clan houses, some of the most valuable indigenous art on the continent will at last be properly preserved and displayed for public viewing.⁴²

Whatever role Carl Heinmiller played in the process of educating the public about Tlingit culture, few doubt the sincerity of his mission. In contemporary discussions, however, the Major’s gruff, military manner and rough-shod methods raise new questions about old assumptions, including problems with cultural appropriation, paternalism, and hucksterism. Among specific criticisms: in the final decade of the Chilkat Dancers, half or more of the performers were non-Natives; Heinmiller delivered stories fired in Gatling-gun shot patterns, at times without proper clan attribution; and some say the shaman act showed disrespect.

In recent times, however, Natives and non-Natives in Haines and Klukwan have stepped closer to an understanding about their intertwined past. As the day nears for completion of the Jilkaat Kwaan culture center, local Tlingits and Anglos share a sense of pride in the realization of a project endowed with immeasurable cultural value. With a perseverance characteristic of their forbears, Klukwan leaders sustained a vision that will preserve not only the “crown jewels” of their ancestors, but will continue to inspire young people to carry on the old ways in dance, art, language, and ceremony.

As the people of Jilkaat Kwaan culture center today celebrate a rich heritage, the example of Carl Heinmiller and Alaska Indian Arts, Inc. demonstrates the capacity for non-Natives to contribute to a cultural reawakening, and for Tlingit people to foster meaningful cross-cultural partnerships.

Notes

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