



THE UNIVERSITY OF ALASKA TOTEM POLE

The forty-nine foot totem pole standing on the campus was carved in 1963 by Amos Wallace, a Tlingit Indian from Juneau. It was commissioned by the Alumni Association of the University of Alaska. As the site was not ready, the pole was stored until 1967 when it was erected as part of the University's Golden Anniversary celebration. The project was suggested by Dr. William R. Wood, then President of the University, as a symbol of the role of southeastern Alaska in the development of the University. It was made possible by the cooperation and contributions of many individuals and social and business organizations.

The pole is based on a model carved between 1850 and 1900--the peak of the totem pole carving period. The pole combines eight figures. From top to bottom, the figures are: Raven, Frog, the giant cannibal, Frog, Mosquito, Frog, Bear, and Wolf.

The introduction of steel tools and accumulated wealth due to trade together with well-established carving traditions and ability culminated in the mid and late 19th century in what is called the "Golden Age" of totem pole carving. Most of the poles seen today date from the late 19th century or later. Some are recent copies of poles that were slowly being destroyed by the elements.

The figures on totem poles are comparable to heraldic devices--they are not gods or devils and were never worshipped. Most poles commemorated the dead although some were erected to ridicule enemies or to celebrate some great event.

A Tlingit legend has been associated with the pole:

"A long time ago there was a fierce cannibal giant that used to prey on the people.

From time to time, he would come in, grab some of the people, carry them off, and eat them.

The people tried to kill him. They thrust spears into him. They shot arrows into him. He just kept coming back.

They ripped open his chest where his heart was supposed to be so they could cut it out—but there was no heart there.

Then they went to see a great shaman.

'What can we do?', they asked. 'We stick spears in him...he does not die. We try to cut his heart out but we can't find it. What do we do?'

'This giant has his heart in his right heel,' the wise shaman told them. 'To kill him, you must trip him and cut it out.'

The people went back to the village and got ready.

The next time the giant came, one brave man ran up behind him and hit him on the right heel with a club, knocking him out. Then they all thrust their spears into him and cut his heart out of his right heel.

To make sure they were rid of him, they built a big fire and threw his body in it. The body burned up and there was nothing left but ashes.

They took the ashes and threw them up in the air, saying 'bother us no more.'

But the ashes turned into mosquitos."



"Goo-Teekhl" = Giant cannibal; Chilkat Tlingit story