

Former fisherman turned his talents to wood

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Tourists shuffling in and out of the University of Alaska Museum stop to gawk at a 20-foot-long masterpiece coming to life in a roped-off area on the west lawn.

Nathan Jackson, 50, master totem pole carver, wields his adze with deft determination. He chips and scrapes, steps back for a wide angle survey, and consults, occasionally leaning over at the pencil sketch on a piece of cardboard. Bits and pieces of red cedar pile near his feet.

Curious bystanders skim through posted information sheets on the man and the project, and edge over to the spot where Jackson is working.

"Are you Nathan?"

"How long will it take to finish this?"

"What kind of wood is this?"

The questions don't stop, and for most part, neither does Jackson. He talks while he carves, pausing only to gesture with his hands, or switch tools.

Jackson, along with apprentices Lee Wallace and Bert Ryan, is carving the "A Treasured Heritage," a collection of traditional Alaska Native arts, now on display in the museum. The pole they carve will be part of the museum's permanent collection and stand outside its main entrance.

The exhibit consists of works created by masters and apprentices working together, and is being presented by the University of Alaska Museum. Wallace and Jackson arrived from Kotzebue on the evening of June 30 in time to begin work on campus the next morning. Ryan lives in Fairbanks.

The totem, bearing likenesses of an eagle, wolf and bear, will honor the wolf clan. According to legend, the wolf was injured by a splinter in his mouth and met a man who took it out. In return, the wolf bestowed good fortune upon the man, who then claimed the crest of the wolf for the symbol of his clan.

Jackson, born in Tenakee Springs into the Sookoye clan on the Raven side of the Chilkoot-Tlingit tribe, was raised in Southeast Alaska. Today, he's acclaimed nationwide for his towering creations, but his knack for carving was an accidental discovery.

"I was traditionally indoctrinated to be a fisherman," Jackson explains, "but I was a member of the Eskimo clan. You had to know how to fish, but I didn't, and I wasn't ready to settle down right away. At 18, he enlisted in the Army.

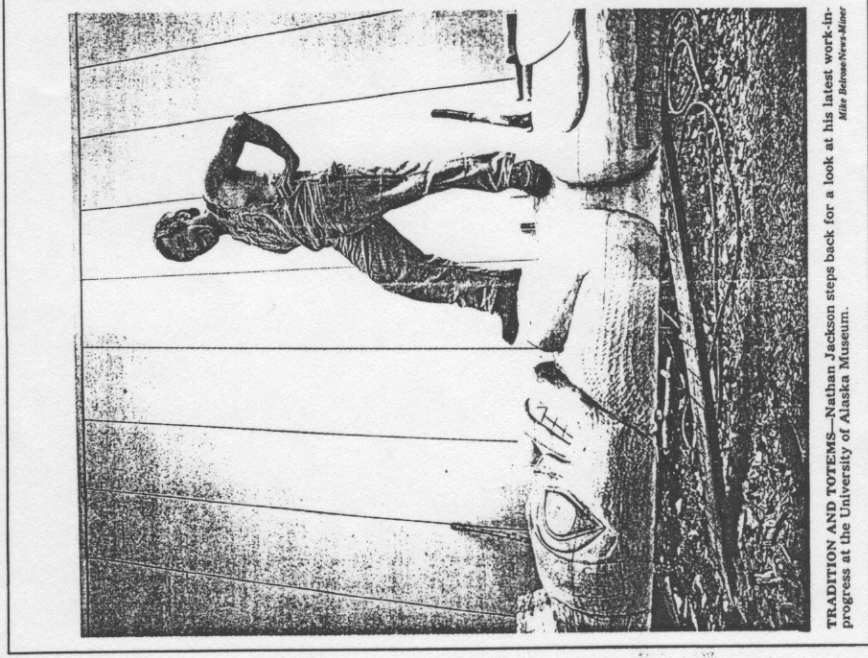
"I wanted to get in young so I could get out young," he said. "So I volunteered to do my time." He reconsidered the statement. "I also wanted to get away from home."

After a two-year stint, he returned to Haines and fished for a while. He then moved to Anchorage, where factory jobs were the result of inhaling paint particles while sanding his boat. He spent 35 days in the hospital. Jackson remembered watching an uncle carve to fill empty hours in a hospital room, and decided to give it a try. By the time he was discharged, he had filled the hospital showcase with dozens of tiny figures.

"But it was for fun, not something to make a living," Jackson says. "I also tried sketching and painting, beginning with a portrait copied from a news clipping. "I am glad I did well. I was pretty good to me."

In due time, Jackson had regained his health, but two months had passed and so had the fishing season. To compensate, he continued doing portraits, which he sold in stores and bars, sometimes for as much as \$30 apiece. "I was really at sea," Jackson said, "so I didn't lose out in my fishing at all."

His calling was now clear. He went on to study at the Institute of American Indian Arts in Santa Fe, N.M., "to further my knowledge," concentrating on fabric design, silk-screening and graphics.



TRADITION AND TOTEMS—Nathan Jackson steps back for a look at his latest work-in-progress at the University of Alaska Museum.

In 1984, he returned to Haines to work with Alaska Indian Arts, Inc. In the years that followed, he taught wood block and silk screen techniques, woodcarving, design and dancing.

For a short time, he ran his own business in Haines, but he eventually returned to Fairbanks to work for Studio closed. Eventually, he received a honorary doctorate of humanities from the University of Alaska Southeast.

Rarely, Jackson said, does he lament foregoing a sea-faring career.

Carving is in his blood, Wallace maintains. His grandfather, great-grandfather, and great-great grandfather were all masters. His father, a fisherman, carved for a while and stopped.

"It was a time when it wasn't popular to be Indian, to know your lineage and life and the meaning," Wallace said. "Two years ago, he decided to learn as much as he could about it."

"Working with Nathan is always a learning experience," Wallace said. "He has a good sense of humor, and you always pick up things working with one of the best." Jackson is a hard worker with an enthusiastic artist, Wallace said, telling how the trio went to work at 5 a.m. the first day.

"He wouldn't sleep," Wallace said. "He was full of anticipation."

Work doesn't always begin that early, he added, but often continues until well into the night. "By last 10, maybe midnight," he said.

Bert Ryan, a recent fine arts graduate from the University of Alaska Fairbanks, is Jackson's second protégé for this project.

He is one of Jackson's newest apprentices, and started working with him last fall. Wallace, he considers it a privilege to train under Jackson.

"It's not as easy as it looks," he said. "The whole thing is a challenge, from start to finish."

As far as Jackson is concerned, Ryan and Wallace are the cream of the crop, or he wouldn't have taken them on. He's picky about his apprentices. An even temperament and willingness to immerse themselves in their work are prerequisites.

"I'm not going to take just any goofball," Jackson said. "They have to be interested in working."

He also prefers to teach those whose families have a vested interest in carving, particularly when there have been generations of carvers.

"It all fits in with tradition," Jackson said. "They have to have an interest, a desire and a goal."

If there's anything he'd like people to remember about him and his craft, Jackson said, it's that totem carving isn't a lost art. It's still being done, with the same pride as it was done 100 years ago. That it's taking place in Fairbanks is an added bonus.

"You normally won't see this in northern Alaska," Jackson said, "but now poles are a traditional art form of the Indian and southeastern Alaska and British Columbia, not this area."

It's no secret that the initial "roughing out" of the design was done with a chainsaw. So far, Jackson said, no one has taken issue with the technique.

"Some people might say, 'You're cheating,' but I don't see any horse and buggy out there, either," Jackson said. "So who's cheating? Everyone's driving around in an automobile."

Using the saw undoubtedly saves time, but according to Jackson, that's irrelevant.

"The time is a Christian issue," he said. "You go to the office, you get paid, you go home. Everybody knows exactly how much time is spent doing what."

"With this, I think it has to become a labor of love," Jackson said.

After working steadily for more than an hour, Jackson puts down his tools and sits on the pole, elbows propped on his knees and feet propped on a plank. A new group of visitors gathers around him.

In tones of congenial authority, he answers the same round of questions one more time. In between, he makes himself at home, sipping coffee. A few minutes later, he stands up and turns back to the job at hand.

"It's fine to be a talker," Jackson tells his friends, "but I wanted to be a carver." Jackson tells his friends, "If all goes as planned, Jackson will wrap up the project this weekend, when acrylic black, blue-green and red paints are used to add definition to the pole's features."