

Chiefs Robe 2:00 min

Weaving Chief's Robe

Evelyn Vanderhoop – Master Weaver, Haida Nation

I am weaving a chief's robe that we call the Naaxiin. The pattern that I'm weaving and creating with this particular robe is Qinga. He controls the ocean and he's leader and ruler of many sea creatures, and he also controls the weather. Our ancestors really depended on his benevolence.

In the past they were made out of mountain goat wool. And the Haidas, we don't have mountain goat on our islands, so we would travel by the canoes to trade the mountain goat wool. And it was the people inland, near the mountain ranges that would climb those mountains in the spring when the goats were losing their warm undercoat.

We have, as Haida people, as indigenous people, been really concerned about our environment and our ability to provide for our great-grandchildren and our grandchildren and the future generations. We look back at our stories that our ancestors told of the power of the ocean, and the reverence, and how to be respectful. These stories aren't ancient tales that don't connect to our world now. They really remind us that in order for our abundance, we thank our ancestors, and our grandchildren are going to thank us, hopefully, for our caring for our environment. So I think it's very important to continue our traditions in so many ways and so many respects.

Interview Carver

Jaalen Edenshaw, Haida Carver

With the Gwaii Haanas pole, they wanted to celebrate the anniversary of the creation of Gwaii Haanas, and the agreement between Canada and the Haida Nation. For myself, I also wanted to really pay respect to the Haidas who stood in the line at Athlii Gwaii, to stop the logging for the first place. Out of that and a lot of hard work and negotiations, there's the agreement so, you know, when I was thinking about how to carve the pole, and what to put on it, that was sorta at the forefront.

For our people it's a real pivotal point, and a real turning point as far as asserting our authority over the land.

For our people, the ocean is as big a part of the landscape, so to say, as the land is.

If you look at most of our stories, they refer to the oceans, you know, there's the Killer whale people, and most of our crests, a lot of them anyway, come from the ocean. The Elders, you know, all the ones that we've worked with for language or for stories and stuff, you know they all grew up fishing since 10 years old, they're out on their own, rowing and fishing, and so all their life stories come from the ocean. But also in the rivers, and on the beaches, picking seaweed, and on the rivers, fishing salmon. You know, there's not really a line, right, like the intertidal zone comes back and forth, and that's where the seaweed is, and the tidepools. And you go up into the forest, and that's where you're fishing for salmon, but the salmon all come from the ocean, obviously. And they're nourishing the forest. You know, there's not really a true separation of where, you know, ocean ends and forest begins.

There's a huge amount of artists on the island, you know, at all sort of different stages, and different levels of their career, a lot of people making some of their income out of the year from art, carving, or weaving, or whatever it be. On sort of the everyday use if you go to a feast, everyone will have their vests or their blankets showing their crests. At graduation the students will get a name and a blanket, and it's sort of a rite of passage. We recognize what crests we are. My daughter when she was about 2, and she was trying to figure out who someone was, an older kid, she "who's that girl? Who's that girl?" And I was trying to think of it, and she was like, "she has a shark on her blanket." So she recognized one of the crests, to the clan right, and we were able to figure out who she was talking about, and I thought that was pretty neat for a young girl to figure out.

Beyond that the sort of international recognition of Haida art has helped us in ways politically and stuff because people know who we are, right, so if the Haida take a stand and, you know, someone in Ottawa, or someone in Europe, has a framed Robert Davidson print on their wall, they'll know, and they'll just make that much more of a connection, and I think our political leaders have been able to use that recognition to further our cause, and, you know, again, just a small part of it, but, I think the art helps to push that.

Legacy Pole 7:30 min

Jaalen Edenshaw, Gwaii Haanas Legacy Pole Carver

Monumental Poles are more than just art. They hold histories. They mark events. And they tell stories.

This pole that we're working on here is 42 feet and it tells many different stories from the Gwaii Haanas area. It also represents the 20th Anniversary of the agreement between the Haida Nation and Canada to protect Gwaii Haanas from mountaintop to sea floor.

When I was a little kid my dad was always carving his, working on canoes, working on a totem pole right in our house. And as I grew up I started to realize how fortunate I was to be able to grow up around that, and learn from that. In the old days the poles used to line the villages. There'd be dozens in front of every village. In the early 1900s, missionaries were coming and encouraging the people to cut down the poles and collectors were coming in and taking them.

So it's really nice to be part of bringing back of the poles to Gwaii Haanas.

When we're walking through the forest looking for a cedar to be used for a totem pole or a canoe, it's pretty, pretty neat feeling because the same features that we're looking for in the forest, the same things that my ancestors were looking for 5,000 years ago. And they were walking through the same forests.

The pole that we're working on is the first pole to go up in 130 years in Gwaii Haanas. This feature right here shows the Athlii Gwaii Blockade. What happened, was there's a blockade in the early 1980s and that stopped the logging and protected Gwaii Haanas for future generations. It was important for me to put the story of Athlii Gwaii on the pole and a lot of people put in a lot of work to create Gwaii Haanas.

This is the old story of how earthquakes happen on Haida Gwaii. The figure is Sacred One standing and moving, and as he moves, that's when Haida Gwaii shakes and causes the earthquakes. I put this on because after I started carving the pole, we had a major earthquake on Haida Gwaii, and the water in our hot springs down in Gwaii Haanas actually stopped flowing to the pools.

This figure here is a Watchman. A lot of Haida poles have Watchmen on the top, but I wanted to include this because we have the Gwaii Haanas Watchmen, and they look after the old village sites and they educate the people who come to visit.

I put this figure of a visitor peaking out of the ear of the Watchman. I wanted to include those who come down to the islands to explore and appreciate it, and have them represented in there.

Laurel Currie, Visitor to Gwaii Haanas

We just arrived here at Windy Bay. And we're just about to start raising the pole. There's lots of people as you can see, and we're getting really excited, and so honored to be here for it.

Jaalen Edenshaw, Gwaii Haanas Legacy Pole Carver

It's such a powerful moment watching the pole go up. It shows that our way of life is continuing. The world around us is always changing, but the meaning behind what we do stays the same.

First Nations History Overview 14:00 min

Doug Neasloss, Chief Councillor, Kitasoo/Xai'Xais Nation

I think there's been a bit of a rough past when it comes to First Nations, I mean, I think just not long ago, whether it's 150 years to 200 years there was nobody else here, it was just First Nations communities, you know, in my area here we have two different Nations from Klemtu. We have the Kitasoo, who are Tsimshian and they're the southernmost Tsimshian group and lived on the islands and then we have the Xai'Xais people who lived on the mainland and both Nations moved to Klemtu in the 1850's, but prior to that, you know, people lived, you know, quite nomadic lifestyles, and they followed the food resources in all of these different areas. At the time you know in our cultures were very complex. It wasn't just, you know, as simple as following food. It was people had a very complex governance structures, they had very complex relationships with different families. We had clan systems that distinguished different family groups and who had access to different areas based on different seasons. So it was a really complex relationship.

Around 1884 the government at the time decided to ban the Potlatch, which was the Potlatch in our community, our culture was the glue that held everything together. The singing, the dancing, the storytelling, the governance, becoming-of-age ceremonies, passing of sheaf themes, passing of copper shields. All those things were really important in our culture and in our community. And people used to prepare years in advance for Potlatch. So if I was going to host a Potlatch, some people would prepare 4 or 5 years in advance. But the Canadian government wanted to assimilate First Nations people into the mainstream society so at the time they banned the Potlatch in 1884 to 1951. And the same thing happened in other regions. In the U.S. it happened in 1884 to 1936. But 1884-1951 during the banning of the Potlatch, it was illegal to Potlatch. And if you were caught potlatching, you were arrested for doing that.

So at the time the government sent what they called the "Indian Agent," and it was a person up here to monitor the activities of the local communities. And so everyone was paranoid about potlatching. People didn't want to potlatch. But it was such an integral part of our culture and our community, people decided to take it underground in a way and potlatch in secret. So what people used to do is used to take the regalia and put it in the cedar bentwood boxes to make it look like it was a burial box, but it was actually their storage area for all of their regalia. And they used to paddle out to this one place we call it Dis'ju and it's a gathering place for people. And this Big House is hidden in the forest, you can't tell it's there going by in the boat, and people used to paddle out there in the roughest times of the year to go and Potlatch, so the Indian Agent wouldn't follow them out there.

Unfortunately around the early 1900s, there were so many families that did not make it back. A lot of families died trying to go out and potlatch in secret. So by the early 1900s Klemtu stopped potlatching altogether. And that was a huge loss for the culture. Again, because that was the glue that held everything together. And that was just, you know, one of the reasons why we during that time we lost a lot.

I've sat down and had a lot of discussion with our Elders about life, and even, you know, we live in a pretty isolated area, so we didn't have actually a lot of contact until quite late. The first contact we had was actually Captain Vancouver. I believe that was in 1793, when he came up and it was, you know, what people, the Elders always talk about how nomadic the lifestyles were. They talked about the seasonal camps, and the permanent camps. They said the food harvest would start in the wintertime. It

would start with the clams and cockles in the winter. And then early spring, around March, the halibut would start to come in and they would start harvesting halibut. And then once the halibut was finished, they would start to move over to the herring and the herring eggs. And that was huge. That was probably one of the most important foods in our community, because it wasn't just used for food consumption, but it was also used for trade. And there were huge trade routes along the coast amongst different families up and down the coast. So Klemtu used to harvest the herring eggs and trade it with the Bella Coola people and also the Kitimat people, and they used to trade for eulachon grease, and that was huge because we didn't have eulachons in Klemtu area, and then once that was finished, we'd move over to seaweed in May, and right after seaweed was finished then you would go on to salmon, in particular sockeye salmon, and then later on in the summer, late summer, you would start to get all the salmon, so the coho, pink, and chum would start to come in.

So people were very dependent on all of these resources, and especially because it was such an isolated community, those aquatic resources are extremely important because food costs here in the community are so expensive. People, you know, depended on those, and we had different camps based on different things. Like Marvin Island is a herring camp. People just went there to go and harvest herring eggs. And while they were there, they would dry the herring eggs, they would dry the halibut, because a long time ago there were no refrigerators or freezers, so they would dry everything. Everything was sun dried. Or they would smoke it. And that's how they'd preserve things.

We've watched a lot of those resources dwindle over the last number of years. Partly because of mismanagement, and people coming in and harvesting too much. And, you know, in my lifetime, we've witnessed huge declines. Everything from abalone. Abalone used to be a once abundant shellfish in our territories. And the Elders talk about it ... that is was some areas they said you couldn't even touch the ground there was so many abalone. They were all over the place. Today, you probably will never see an abalone. In my lifetime I've never actually tried an abalone in the last probably 20-something years now because they've all just been wiped out. You know, the commercial fishery came in and harvested way too many and they just haven't been able to come back in numbers. With things like abalone you need large numbers because they're broadcast spawners and so the population just hasn't been able to come back and do that.

Same thing with salmon. I listen to the historical numbers of salmon. Some the Elders will say some of the rivers and the estuaries would be full of salmon. They said some rivers were just plugged wall to wall with salmon. And I looked at the historical numbers of them, and there were about 80,000 fish in some of those systems. Today, we are down to about 5 or 6 thousand in some of those same rivers.

So, you know, I think there's been way too much over harvesting. I think with things like global warming, there's a number of different impacts that are effecting salmon. So, I think we have a long way to go.

I think the loss of culture during the ban of the Potlatch. I mean that was huge. I mean we had, you know, very strict ceremonies for different seasons. The return of salmon. The return of eulachons. The return of herring. The return of all these separate things were celebrated in a way, but also it was a ceremony to let the community know what time of the year it was, and food harvesting, I think there was traditional stories that were lost during that time and traditional stories that taught lessons of respect for certain resources and you know I think the governance structure, I think there was a lot that

was lost, you know, songs and dances, and songs in our culture was a way of documenting an event, you know, that was going on so it wasn't just a simple song it had some meaning to it, and it came from a certain area, and it belonged to a certain family.

The passing of Chieftanship. You know we have a very complex hereditary chief system in our community. So hereditary chiefs, you weren't just born a hereditary chief, you were groomed to be a chief, and you know the rule of the hereditary chief is you're there to steward, you had a responsibility to take care of a certain area, and so if you were a chief you would carry title to a certain inlet, or a certain estuary, and it was your responsibility to make sure that what was going on there was sustainable and "schief" in our language means "to serve." It means that you're there to maintain order of a house. So we had chiefs that had ... they're responsible for a Raven House. And that house, they had to make sure people were keeping the songs alive, keeping the stories alive. You know, harvesting the different berries, or harvesting deer, and salmon, and things that hunters and gatherers.

But they would also grant permissions to certain people to access certain areas, and that was all based on sustainability. So you had to make sure that the stocks were there, and if they weren't there, they would deny access to certain areas.

And we also had very complex arranged marriages as well, so if you wanted to access an area, today people just go on there and fish in an area. A long time ago it wasn't like that. You had to get very strict permission or it was often done through arranged marriage. So, if I was a chief and I wanted to access someone else's area, you'd do an arranged marriage, and I would have access to their salmon, they would have access to my berries. And it was So it wasn't just anybody that could do in. And that could get you in big trouble, I think, a long time ago if you just waltzed in there today and go and access certain areas. So I think that system, the hereditary system they used, a lot of that was lost during that time. Luckily we do have some Elders that still have some of that knowledge.

I think at the time there was this huge movement to assimilate First Nations people into the mainstream society, so by banning the Potlatch was a huge step in terms of trying to assimilate and get First Nations people to forget their culture, but prior to the banning of the Potlatch came disease. So disease ran rampant in all of our communities and we estimated we had a population of about 3500 to 4000 people out in KITASOO Bay alone and disease swept through there around the 1860s and there was a smallpox epidemic that killed off quite a bit of the communities. In some cases it was like 99% of the communities. So we have some stories where one or two people survived the smallpox epidemic. Also around 1913, there was also the flu epidemic as well, and that decimated, again, quite large populations. I heard stories from our Elders where so many people died that they didn't really have time to give them a proper burial. It was just dig a big hole, put them in the ground, and hopefully you don't get sick. So I think those introduction of diseases played a huge role and a lot was lost.

So not only to have to deal with smallpox and the flu epidemic, and the banning of the Potlatch. Communities were still around in the early 1900s so the government started to introduce Reserve systems. They started to take First Nations nomadic people and started to push them all to these small parcels of Reserve and basically said "You're not going to live in these areas any more." And they sort of pushed these people into small little blocks. So, my community was settled here in Klemtu and this is about 100 acres here in the community. It's not very big, but our community, our territory is massive because we followed all the foods and that's what our territory is based on today.

You know, unfortunately, now if you look at our system now, we only have about, we have less than 1% of our land base, if you were to go by their reserve system today. Although my people have always said they never signed a treaty. They've never surrendered rights and titles, so they've always said "this is theirs" and it's based on the chieftainship that's there.

Another major event was residential schools. In the 1930s the government created these residential schools and basically, you know, we have some of the literature from the churches that said the banning of the Potlatch wasn't working – people were still speaking the language, people were still practicing their culture, whether that was doing it in secret. So they needed some ways to really try and get people to forget their culture, forget their language, and become, to be assimilated into mainstream society, so the idea of residential schools was created.

There were boats that came into the community in the early 1930s and basically scooped up all the kids in the community and people had no choice, and they had to go and they were taken on the boats and they were taken out to schools, and they were spread out all over. A lot of people from Klemtu went down to Vancouver Island. And around Alert Bay area. Some people went down to Port Alberni. Some people from Klemtu went as far over as Edmonton in the 1930s. Some people went to Vancouver, to the mission school that was there. And the idea was to separate young people from their parents so that oral tradition wasn't passed on. And people, if you listen to the Elders who have gone through these residential schools, they were strapped for speaking their language. They had to cut their hair a certain way. The food quality wasn't good and there was a lot of other things that went on in the background that were not the best things to happen to young kids. And that really changed a whole generation of kids, because now you take a bunch of kids, you put them in these residential schools so that that love you get from your parents was not passed on throughout families and that had a trickle down generation, we still feel the effects today of that generation because some parents grew up without the parenting skills that you would learn from your parents.

Some people grew up with no love and that really effected households and families, communities and so I think it's my generation's kind of the first generation that are fortunate and hasn't had to deal with all of that stuff now, and I think things are a bit different today than they were back then. So I think you're going to start to see a bit of a resurgence of stewardship and I think you're going to get this new generation that's going to come up and start to reassert their stewardship responsibilities, reassert their authority as hereditary chiefs, as owners, or stewards of the land. And I think that's something that we want to be able to work with provincial and federal governments. And we want to stop the mismanagement of these resources and we want to work together and somehow come out with some sort of strategy to best take care of these areas.