

6SHORT.DOC 11-6-03

Before leaving for Canada, I called Linblad Expeditions to know whether we were going to make wet landings on the trip up the Inland Passage. That's important to know, as rubber boots take up a lot of space. Shoes seasoned in the shortgrass country take days to dry on a ship in a humid climate.

The worry was unnecessary. The crew was careful boarding us from the ship's deck on zodiacs (rubber boats). On shore, they had enough people to pull the zodiac onto the bank. So much concern was shown about making the three-foot drop from deck to zodiac safe that on my turn the sailors sighed in relief once I was seated in the middle of the zodiac. The life jacket over my wet suit looked as trim as a deep sea diving outfit. I am sure I won the middle seat to be the ballast.

On one walk, we saw not a feather or a track across the trails. Every clearing was a fresh green meadow. Perfect setting for a deer or an elk. I suspect as late as September, migration or hibernation might be the reason for no game. The city folks invigorated by the fresh air were having a romp like an Irish setter released from his kennel. I didn't want to spoil the fun by asking the guide where the animals were.

The only port where the ship docked on the northward trip was at Alert Bay to go ashore and see the unveiling of a totem pole. We walked a mile or so along the bay to reach the site of the ceremony. Understand, totem poles are only mysterious to white men. The first nation people, or Indians, carve the poles to portray family history, or perhaps go so far as to record the family's enemies.

Appreciate, too, that the potlatch ceremonies of the Northwestern tribes are difficult to understand. When the people gather for a potlatch, the hosts give presents to friends and enemies alike and again present the family history. The family has two years after a death to be at peace before they can hold a potlatch commemorating the dead. (As many estate squabbles as I've witnessed, two years would equal the first round of golf on a miniature course for us to ever potlatch.)

Further proof we can't understand totems and potlatches: in 1870, the government prohibited potlatches in Canada. Came and seized the relics, interrupting historic succession of the families, never to be completely returned. The law wasn't enforced, but the damage was done.

But back to the unveiling of the totem pole. Here we are all standing: guest from the ship, the tribe, the chief, school children, a Mountie and dancers in colorful

costumes. Wind off the bay whips and pops a blue plastic tarp large enough to cover a 20-foot totem pole. The chief welcomes us and his people. Calls for a moment of silence to honor a friend who has died today – an English fellow. Claps for the dancers to begin. Gives off a radiant friendly countenance. Next, a few words spoken in his language.

And then the discovery that the wind has fouled the ropes to drop the tarp. The chief laughs and says, "Go on up to the Big House for a dance and food. Fred will come with his bucket truck and remove the tarp." (At this moment, a special thing occurs. Two high school boys start to pass in front of us, then pause and say, "Excuse me." I feel faint.)

Up at the Big House, a log structure the size of a gymnasium with a huge fire burning in the center, the young people dance in costumes. "Hi-yea, Hi-yea," the singers chant to the beat of boys and girls doing more than an act. In the end, the ship passengers join in the line, laughing and dancing. Minutes after the dance, a long table of food is spread so no one can leave without passing by servers. (Laws governing tour operators require one folk dance per trip. The most focused dancers are the wild Huli Wig Men in

the Southern Highlands of New Guinea. The pygmies' eyes literally feast on the audience.)

First, I asked the Royal Canadian Policeman about his assignment in Alert Bay, expecting crime statistics to be his answer. However, he replied, "I've only been here three months. I like it. The people serve food at every function." Second, a lady comes over, scolding me to eat. I ask her if her tribe can communicate with the Navajo people as I had read. She laughed and said, "Not only can we not communicate, the ones I tried to talk to in New York were so solemn I gave up talking in English or the dialects. Now, get some food."

Several times during the trip and in supplemental reading, there were explanations of totem poles and the potlatches. I suppose if we could defend our death customs, then we would understand why a generous tribe of men exists.