



Here is the latest newsletter update to share exciting history from the Research Centre archives with the communities. Some of you know all about this story while others may not, so it is my pleasure to introduce Vol. 3, Edition 2, of **Tales from the Vault**:

The Gift Canoe



PADDLING OUT FROM KELSEY BAY. PHOTO BY DUNCAN WILLIAMS, 2025

This account is based on the recollections of Percy Smith of Comox, a settler who witnessed the event. The story has been edited for clarity and updated to center Liḡw̓ilḡaḡw̓ perspectives.

In earlier times, our families lived together in a large village, where this story took place. The Liḡw̓ilḡaḡw̓ Chief and his people were preparing to hold a great potlatch. They had gathered supplies from the nearby logging camps, including bales of Hudson's Bay blankets, cases of pilot bread and soda crackers, and barrels of brown sugar for the occasion.

When all was ready, most of the logging crew from the camp were invited to attend on their Sunday off. This was considered an honour, as few outsiders were welcomed into a potlatch. In a festive mood, the men followed the shoreline toward eight or ten large communal houses. The buildings were adorned with totem poles and carvings. Close to two thousand visiting Kwakwaka'wakw people had gathered for the celebration, and their canoes lined the beachfront.

The big house was a large structure of great length and width. Its entrance was remarkable, formed as a huge carving of an eagle's head. To enter, guests stepped into the open beak, which tilted gently under their weight. Inside, seating lined the walls, and at the far end stood a raised wooden platform. A large fire burned in the centre of the earthen floor, with smoke rising through an opening in the roof. Oolichan grease was thrown on the fire, sending flames high, while attendants on the roof watched for sparks and poured water on smouldering boards.

On a slight platform at the front, stood several Elder Chiefs, each carrying an ornamental staff, with which they drummed against the floorboards. They wore blankets adorned with shells and bone ornaments, and headdresses made of skins and quills. As they moved their heads, out floated the down of birds, a symbol of purification and blessing that Percy did not yet understand.



Guests were given small canoe-shaped dishes filled with brown sugar, or, if they preferred, an iron dollar (big silver dollar). Other foods were also offered but visitors preferred the plain biscuits. Many long speeches followed, recognizing relationships, status, and the purpose of the gathering.

A hush fell, and all eyes turned upward to the smoke hole. A fearsome howl ripped through the silence, followed by a figure dropped through the opening who, suspended by a rope, swung clear of the fire and dashed madly among the people. More followed in quick succession. Now the place was in an uproar as people tried to get away from these wild creatures. To the visitors, it appeared chaotic and frightening, but Percy later understood this as part of an initiation ceremony, marking young men as they entered new roles and responsibilities.

When calm returned, the presentation of gifts began. The guest of honour, a Chief from the west coast of Vancouver Island, was called forward first and received many gifts. Other Chiefs followed, each according to their rank.

The highlight of the day came when the host Chief escorted his honoured guest outside, followed by the assembled crowd. On the beach stood a remarkable canoe.

The canoe measured about thirty feet in length and more than seven feet in depth, carved from a single cedar log. Its prow was shaped as an eagle's head, and along its sides were oval openings designed to shield paddlers in times of conflict. It was carefully carved and painted, its size and craftsmanship making a lasting impression on all who saw it. The canoe had been made by northern relatives especially for this potlatch and was presented as a final and significant gift.

Within this system, such a gift carried more than value. It carried law. To receive a canoe like this was to enter into a relationship, one that brought responsibilities that could not be set aside.

The visitors assumed the Chief would take the canoe home. When they were told he would not, they were puzzled. Some of the men pooled their money, raising \$150, and attempted to purchase it. The Chief refused, making it clear that no amount of money would suffice for the canoe.

Later, a large crowd gathered quietly on the beach. The visiting Chief stepped forward and struck the first blow against the canoe. Others joined him, breaking it apart piece by piece and placing it into a large fire.

This act followed protocol. The Chief could not take the canoe home due to the overland route they had taken to arrive. He could not sell it without breaking the law that governed the exchange.

To the logging crew, the act seemed wasteful. But Percy later reflected on what he had witnessed. The Chief could not take the canoe home, nor could he sell it. To leave it behind would have dishonoured his host. Destroying it was the only way to uphold the relationship and fulfill his responsibilities within that system.

There was also another meaning. A leader who could give away or destroy great wealth demonstrated discipline, strength, and dignity. In doing so, the visiting Chief affirmed that relationships, not possessions, define leadership.

Percy Smith, even in his later years, said he never again saw anything to match the beauty of that canoe or the significance of its destruction. Today, the story reminds us of responsibilities tied to giving and receiving, the discipline of leadership, and the meaning of wealth in our communities.