

## *Villages*

Haida villages consisted of one or two rows of houses strung along the beach. Double-row villages were common, and there may have been villages with up to five rows of houses in ancient times. Generally, the chief owned the largest house, which stood in the middle of the village.

Their complex society was hierarchical, with classes of commoners and nobles, slaves and *skaggy*, or medicine men. Upper classes, or nobles, owned hunting and gathering rights near Haida villages. Commoners had to pay to hunt, fish, or gather in these places. Some commoners enjoyed prestige as artists, mask and canoe makers, shamans, and as relatives of the chief. Other commoners were simply considered lower-class citizens, while slaves, with no rights, were scarcely considered part of Haida society. Captured in raids and warfare with other tribes, slaves were always men or boys. They were forced to do the most menial chores around the village. Yet if they proved themselves skilled as craftsmen, hunters, and fishermen they might someday be freed and honored for their ability. Eventually, the Canadian government outlawed slavery among the Haida and other coastal peoples.

## *Families and Clans*

Haida society was matrilineal, which means children traced their descent through the mother's side of the family. A man inherited wealth through his mother's side and his social rank through his mother's brother, who served as family head. A chief, for example, usually inherited his title from his mother's brother—his maternal uncle. Property, titles, names, crests, masks, performances, and even songs were among the hereditary privileges. A group of related families descending from a common ancestor formed a lineage, or family line. The Haida did not wage war with villages of the same lineage

and were hospitable to members in the extended family, whether they were acquainted or not. During the warm months, men worked to amass more wealth, which enhanced their status. They displayed their wealth in feasts known as potlatches. The term potlatch comes from the Nootka word *patshatl*, meaning "to give away."

Made up of about ten closely related nuclear families of the same lineage, each household generally included between thirty and forty people. The house was headed by a chief. However, the houses of powerful chiefs were often larger, with up to a hundred individuals. Each lineage also recognized the authority of another chief who would lead them in times of war. Inherited positions determined the order in which chiefs or other people of high rank were seated at potlatches and other feasts.

The most important of the Haida's ceremonies was the potlatch. The building of a house and the raising of its frontal pole might become a major occasion for hosting a potlatch. A high-ranking man might devote years to gathering great wealth so that he could lavish gifts and enormous amounts of food upon his guests. Those who had never given a potlatch or who did not own a house or major property were considered commoners. Many Haida owned slaves, who were captives from war or the children of captives taken from neighboring tribes on Vancouver Island or the mainland.

All families belonged to either of two large social groups, or moieties, known as Raven and Eagle. Within each moiety, members of a particular lineage lived at opposite ends of the village and chose mar-

riage partners from the other group. One could not marry a member of one's social group; an Eagle had to marry a Raven, and vice versa.

Families controlled many resources, such as locations for fishing, hunting, and collecting sea creatures, as well as sites for building homes. People also owned an abundance of myths and legends, dances, songs, and musical compositions. Even names were highly desired as property and were bestowed to acknowledge different stages of a person's life. People gave names to cherished belongings, such as fish traps, houses, canoes, feast dishes, and spoons. Designs used for face painting and tattoos were also considered property of the family, as were the seventy crests of the Haida.

Clans were made up of a number of houses belonging to either the Eagle or the Raven group. Each clan was represented by both its own crest and that of the Eagle or the Raven. These crests were thought to have been obtained by the ancestors of the clan through an encounter with an animal spirit. Rights to a crest could also be acquired through marriage, as a gift, in war, or by the extinction of the clan. Clans frequently displayed their crests. The most prestigious house was that of the clan chief. All of the clan chiefs in a village formed a council, and the head chief among them served as leader of the village.

The Raven was made up of twenty-two families and the Eagle of twenty-three. Members of the two groups often helped each other. For example, if an Eagle chief died, the Ravens arranged the funeral, after which the Eagles would reward them with a potlatch. When a child was born, the other social group crafted a cradle, and if a Raven

needed a new house, the Eagles arranged to build it. In return, they received presents from the Ravens when the house was dedicated.

The head of the most wealthy or populous lineage in the community became the town chief. He remained in charge only so long as he won respect and his lineage kept its wealth. The competition for this position could become fierce. Over the last century, for example, there was intense rivalry between two leaders—Chief Ninsingwas and Chief Skidegate. According to Newton H. Chittenden, the nineteenth century surveyor, “They quarreled bitterly over their rank for a long time, Ning-Ging-Wash (Ninsingwas), by means of his more liberal potlatches finally prevailing, but not until two of their adherents had been killed.”

To this day, Haida society depends upon leadership by a chief and the division into clans. Relationships shift between conflict and resolution. All Haida are either Raven or Eagle and trace their descent through their mother.