

88-49-110

George Ramos speaks at the Festival of Native Arts in Fairbanks, Alaska in March 1977

Jeff Kennedy, moderator

Series: Potlatch series

1977

Song by Waylon Jennings

George Ramos appeared at the Festival of Native Arts to talk about Tlingit culture. He speaks in Tlingit. He thanked people for coming. He said in the old days the elders said once you enter into a house for potlatch it was like the tide has gone out and you are stuck, the doors are closed. He said on July 16, 1741 Bering stood on the deck of his ship as the sunrise reflected on the mountain. He named it St. Elias. This is the name of their dance group. Below the mountain is the Malaspina Glacier. The sand beach of Alaska stretches for ninety miles. He talked about Tlingit dancing. He said you have to know a little bit about the history of the people in order to understand the dance groups. There is a history to the songs and dances. Some of the larger villages were in the Yakutat area. All of the villages had large community houses. In the spring the smoke from the community houses would cover the whole coast before diseases reduced the populations. Each tribe had their own chief and moved within their own land. The boundaries were rivers and mountains. The lands were acquired by purchase, settlement or conquest. You had to have permission to move across another chief's land and abided by his laws. Boys were placed with their uncles for training. The young boys would sit in the river in the morning and then whipped with branches. It was for training in combat. The rest of the day's activities was spent in the uncle's specialty. In the evening they attended classes. The uncles told stories of the history of the creation of the world. They passed their stories from uncles to nephews. Raven told them the stories. You learned the history of your own tribe and how they acquired the land. Good and bad deeds were told. Rules for daily living were learned. All animals and things of nature had a spirit and you did not offend them. You must always help a wounded animal. They had rules about where they caught fish. Seals were not bothered during the time when pups were born. Each tree had a spirit. Different areas were designated for different uses. When laws were broken there was punishment.

He said because of its location Yakutat used to be a great trade center. They traded with tribes from the north and down to the Canadian area. He remembers hearing about the Flathead Tribe when he was a child. They traveled in canoes. They also traded with tribes from the Interior of Alaska. When the boats came into the bay they would stop and the sails would come down. The people on the boats would start their drumming and singing and fill the whole bay. After they finished their song the people on the beach would start singing the welcoming song. They also welcomed the people coming in from the Interior area as they walked down the beach. He said the Interior Indians were just a little taller than the coastal Indians. They carried a pack with a strap on their forehead. The first three days were spent on dancing and feasting. Every tribe tried to outperform each other in singing and dancing. Each man had a trade partner. They would trade throughout the year. After the three days it was your responsibility to

entertain your trade partner. You gave him gifts. Some of the songs they have come from those trading days. Another custom was a village would invite another village to a potlatch. The invitation was sent a year ahead of time. They would prepare food and practice singing. At the time of the potlatch a guide would be sent to the other village. They were quartered about a mile or half-mile from the village and from there they would prepare and go to the village to dance. Yakutat was there in memory of Harry Brenerman, Sr. He was a chief whose tribe originated in Copper Center. He finished a lot of projects in his community. He was known for his dancing. He was known throughout southeast Alaska. Ramos said he was a pupil of Harry's. Ramos has passed on this knowledge. He talked about going up to the potlatch and singing an outside song. He introduced the dancers.

Song by Doc Watson

Jeff Kennedy introduced Stan Ulrickson from Inuvik who told a bear story. The bear ran up to him, Stan put his hand up and the bear snapped at him. He took his glove off and began hollering. The bear backed off about twenty-five feet and he was able to make it into a stand of trees. The bear bit his foot and shook it. He started hollering at him again and the bear backed off again. Stan said he began climbing a tree. Each time he'd climb the bear would pull him down. The bear pulled him out of the tree three times before he managed to get up high enough to avoid him. The bear then left. The interviewer asked him what he first thought when he saw the bear. Stan thought he was a dead man. He didn't have anything to protect himself. He thought the bear might have had a cub behind it. He said if the bear wanted to do him in he could have easily been killed. He described his injuries to his legs which needed about four and a half hours of stitching.

Song by Judy Collins.