

Sitka Weekend

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Killer Whale Hat Back in Tlingit Hands

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Special to the Sentinel

After holding it for 100 years, the National Museum of Natural History has returned an antique killer whale hat to its former Tlingit owners in Sitka.

In a ceremony at Mt. Edgcombe Hospital last Sunday, the hat was received by the head of the Killer Whale House, Mark Jacobs Jr., 81, who is a patient at the hospital. In accordance with Tlingit tradition which calls for members of the opposite tribe to dress leaders in such ceremonies, the well-preserved hat was placed on Jacobs' head by David and Herman Davis of the Raven clan.

Tribal members performed a traditional Killer Whale Hat song to celebrate its return.

The repatriation came after the Smithsonian, responding to reports from Sitka about Jacobs' serious medical condition, sped up the process begun when Kootznoowoo Inc. of Angoon originally filed for return of the hat in 1997.

As head of the Killer Whale House, Jacobs bears the honorary title of gushteihen, meaning "spray behind the dorsal fin."

The Museum of Natural History Web site says the hat, carved in the shape of a killer whale with a detachable dorsal fin ornamented with women's hair, was one of several items purchased in Sitka in 1904 by John Swanton of the Bureau of American Ethnology.

Swanton, who was conducting research on Tlingit culture, intended to include the objects in the Smithsonian's exhibition at the 1904 Louisiana Purchase Exposition in St. Louis.

Swanton reported that the hat was "worn as a true emblem by gushteihen" of the Daklaweidee family (clan) in Angoon. It had been in use four years at the time he acquired it.

The hat was sold to Swanton by the son of the man who had it in his possession. The son would have had no right to sell the hat, said Harold Jacobs, the son of Mark Jacobs Jr. and a cultural resource specialist for the Tlingit and Haida Central Council. Tlingit tradition gives inheritance rights along matriarchal lines, he said.

"We say it's a shameful thing, holding on to your father's property," Jacobs explained.

Repatriation of this hat is an important event because of its great significance, Jacobs said.

"Crest hats are the most prized possession a clan could have," he said.

R. Eric Hollinger, a repatriation case officer from the National Museum of Natural History — a component of the Smithsonian Institution — personally delivered the hat from Washington after it was approved for repatriation.

Hollinger explained repatriations of

this sort began in the early 1980s when the first of the laws was enacted allowing the return of Native artifacts held in public museums.

In 1989 the National Museum of the

Privately held items, such as the spruce root hat recently purchased at auction by Kodiak's Alutiiq Museum and the Anchorage Museum of History of Art, are not covered by the legislation.

With a repatriation staff of about 20, the NMNH has the largest such group of any museum in the country, which has enabled it to complete the most repatriations. NMAIA gives funds for repatriation work to the Smithsonian.

NAGPRA has "been a strain on museums," since detailed research is often needed to clarify ownership, and few museums have staff dedicated specifically to dealing with repatriation cases, Hollinger said.

"It can be very tough for tribes" as well, he said. Research costs incurred by the need to visit the archives or investigate direct relations might be beyond a tribe's means.

While there are NAGPRA grants — administered by the National Park Service — which aim to meet this need, tribes often spend thousands of dollars and a large number of man-hours investigating ancestral connections to remains and artifacts.

After having spent years in the climate-controlled environment of the NMNH, the Killer Whale Hat will remain in the Jacobs' house as long as he remains gushteihen.

"The process aims to restore legal rights to the rightful owners," Hollinger said, adding that sometimes upon repatriation tribes nevertheless choose to leave items in the NMNH's archives or in museums where they can be professionally preserved and displayed for public audiences.

Harold Jacobs is still hoping for the return of a couple of beaver screens, carved wooden walls which bordered fire pits and separated house leaders from other members of a house. He began working on their repatriation prior to jettisoning his effort to reclaim the hat.

"I'd just like to see the things returned that we could still use in our ceremonies," Harold Jacobs said.

Hollinger emphasized the mutually beneficial exchange of anthropological information between museums and tribes brought about by NMAIA and NAGPRA.

"Museums have been seen as agents that removed things from their context," Hollinger said. Yet now, "tribes have a better understanding of what it is museums do and why we do it, and how many of the things we do are of interest to them," Hollinger explained.

"Tribes have always wanted to preserve their cultural objects. We have preserved things such that they can come back into tribal use. If we didn't do that ... these would not exist today. The tribe would not be able to revitalize their cultural traditions."

The process "took too long, but I'm glad it's back," said Jacobs. "I wish we could have had it back when (my father) could have danced in it."



In this photo, taken by Vincent I. Soboleff around 1895 in Angoon, the family of Gusht'eihen, holding dagger, gather with Killer Whale regalia. One of his sons sold the hat that was returned Sunday. That hat and the one he's wearing in this picture were made by Yeilnaawu. The man on the left is Billy Jones (L.aangooshu) and the one in the foreground is Billy Johnson (Aayeil) both sons of Gushteihen and Aank'aawsteikh, and their daughter Yiktusaan in the background. The man in back is Shkuweil. (Photo provided by Harold Jacobs)

American Indian Act (NMAIA) required all branches of the Smithsonian Institution to catalogue the entirety of their Native American materials, identify their tribal origins and disseminate information to all federally recognized tribes.

The addition of the 1990 Native American Graves Protection and Repatriation Act — NAGPRA — expanded the repatriation requirements to all museums receiving federal money.

"If they get a nickel of federal money," Hollinger explained, "they are subject to NAGPRA."

Prior to enactment of the repatriation laws, the tribes often didn't know what types of artifacts from their ancestors were in the NMNH archives. Jacobs said that during his first of several visits to the archives, he was struck by the "rows and rows" of Tlingit objects from previous generations that were being held in storage.

While tribes must prove "cultural affiliation" to an item or set of human remains in order to be granted a repatriation, individuals or families who can prove direct lineage take priority over groups.



BACK WHERE IT BELONGS - Mark Jacobs, Jr. wears a Killer Whale Hat during a repatriation ceremony at the SEARHC Mt. Edgcumbe Hospital

cafeteria Sunday. The story of the hat's return to Alaska, after 100 years, is told in today's Sitka Weekender. (Sentinel Photo by James Poulson)