

Sacred objects confiscated as 45 arrested at potlatch

VANCOUVER SUN 2016/12/24 PAZ

KEVIN GRIFFIN

In the 1920s, chiefs in B.C. such as Dan Cranmer virtually ignored the federal law banning potlatches. Since 1884, anyone caught taking part in a potlatch could be charged under the Criminal Code and sentenced to up to six months in jail. Based on previous judicial decisions, Cranmer and others felt that the wording was so vague that it wouldn't hold up in court.

On Dec. 25, 1921, Cranmer and dozens of others found themselves testing the law in a big potlatch — some say the biggest ever on the B.C. coast — in the Kwakwaka'wakw village of 'Mimkwamlis (Village Island), located about 300 kilometres northwest of Vancouver. Cranmer held the potlatch on the remote island east of Alert Bay on Christmas Day to avoid federal officials and because that is where his wife's relatives lived.

Somehow, Indian Agent William Halliday heard about what was going on. Halliday, joined by B.C. Provincial Police officers including Sgt. B.E. Angerman, raided the potlatch and arrested 45 people. Their crime? Giving speeches, dancing, and carrying and receiving gifts.

Of those arrested, 22 were given suspended sentences, and three were remanded on appeal. Twenty men and women were sent to Oakalla Prison in the Lower Mainland — the sentences were two months for first offenders and three months for second offenders.

Not only were indigenous people jailed for practising an integral part of their culture, more than 600 masks, rattles and family heirlooms were confiscated. The treatment of the ceremonial objects was deeply offensive to Cranmer and other Kwakwaka'wakw. Many were considered sacred and were supposed to be stored away out of



Gloria Cranmer Webster, daughter of Chief Dan Cranmer and the curator of the U'Mista Cultural Centre in Alert Bay, is pictured in 1987 with an artifact confiscated from her father's 1921 potlatch. FILES

sight when not in use.

But Halliday transported them in an open boat and put them on display as trophies in the Anglican Church Parish Hall in Alert Bay. For a while, admission was charged. Halliday also allowed 33 objects to be photographed and sold to George Heye, a collector from New York.

He justified the sale by say-

ing he wanted to generate as much money as possible for the Kwakwaka'wakw.

Most of the collection was divided up and shipped east to various museums, including the Royal Ontario Museum in Toronto, the British Museum in London, and the Smithsonian Institution's National Museum of the American Indian in New York.

The arrest of Cranmer and his guests didn't stop people on the coast from holding potlatches. Indigenous people kept potlatching in secret to pass on tangible objects such as hats, coppers, and marks, and intangible rights such as a family's dances, songs, titles and stories.

"The ceremony to tell our stories and to show social changes such as birth, marriage, name giving, standing up a new chief, and death is called a potlatch," the U'Mista Cultural Centre says on its history of the 1921 potlatch.

"In the Chinook language it means 'to give.' The people we invite are not only guests. They are also witnesses of our potlatch and we give them presents for being a witness."

The potlatch ban remained in effect until 1951. The first legal potlatch was held by Kwakwaka'wakw Chief Mungo Martin in 1952 to celebrate the completion of his Big House in Victoria in Thunderbird Park at the B.C. Provincial Museum.

The Kwakwaka'wakw, however, never forgot about the loss of their revered ceremonial objects. In the late 1950s, Chief Jimmy Sewid and others began working to return everything seized and sold at the 1921 potlatch. Although most objects have been returned, some are still unaccounted for.

As a result of the repatriation process, the Kwakwaka'wakw built two museums to house the ceremonial objects: the U'Mista Cultural Centre in Alert Bay and the Nuyumbalees Museum in Cape Mudge.

The 1921 potlatch raid is such an important part of Kwakwaka'wakw history that it has become the name of the museum in Alert Bay: in Kwak'wala, u'mista means "the return of something important."

kevingriffin@postmedia.com