

The Feast System – Adapted from “Indians of Washington State,” Dr. Willard Bill, Publication of the Office of Native Education, OSPI, Washington State

The people of the Native tribes of Washington had and have frequent traditional gatherings to celebrate. Some of these ceremonies and religious practices are closely linked to seasonal cycles. The purpose of these gatherings are to give thanks, share foods, establish and strengthen social ties, and to have fun.

Potlatch

Potlatch gift-giving feasts were held by many tribes, although they were not as highly formalized among the Northwest Coastal tribes. The word “potlatch” comes from the Chinook word “patshall” which means “gift” or “to give.”

Gifts were given and feasts were held to mark special occasions such as marriages, puberty rites, the giving of a new name, when the annual salmon run begins, at death, reburial, celebrating a successful hunt, upon return from trading markets or meetings with outsiders such as other tribes or settlers. A major potlatch might last several days and involve years of planning. Potlatches distributed real property such as: surplus food, blankets, copper shields, cedar bark or cattail mats, canoes or carved items, to mark the transfer of intangible property such as names, crests, dances, songs, legends, and chants which were owned by families. Crests were hereditary privileges such as guardian spirits, special names, initiation into certain secret societies with the right to perform dances or other ceremonies, and family histories. Gift-giving at a potlatch was an important way Northwest Coast tribal families showed how much power, status and riches they had. It was also an effective way of sharing those riches and establishing social ties.

Some potlatches were held in large houses especially built for them. At large potlatches entire tribes came to visit and to give and receive presents, with the host always outdoing his guests. Between meals, guests and the host danced and sang, usually the songs taught to them by their spirit helpers, and the young men may have wrestled or held a tug-of-war match. Sometimes they played a game called shinny on a mile-long stretch of beach with a wooden ball and long, curved sticks of vine maple. Or canoe races might be held on the smooth water of the river at high tide. They came back ravenous for the daily feast and sometimes they held an eating contest.

Finally came the last day when the gifts were to be given out. This was the feast giver's great moment – the time when he made his speech and sang his songs. There is no doubt, but this was one of the grandest moments of a man's life. As governed by protocol, gifts were presented in amounts or values that varied according to the rank of the recipient and were distributed in the order of rank. It was an insult to give a gift of less value than the rank of the recipient entitled him to receive. The more the host gave, the more important everyone thought him to be. Sometimes the family would work and save for a year to make sure they had enough to give away to all of the guests. Sometimes they had very little or

nothing left for themselves when the potlatch was over. But, before a year passed, each guest had to give back twice as much goods as this host had given to him. So, before long, the host was rich again. Honor was very important to Native people. To keep your honor when you received gifts at a potlatch, you were expected to repay the giver by putting on another potlatch and giving gifts that were of greater value than those you had received. If you were unable to, you lost your honor, and persons complaining that they didn't receive as much or more than he had given would be ridiculed for being so greedy.

After the distribution of gifts, the guests went home. As they departed in their canoes, they sang goodbye.

With a few feasts like this behind him, a man could be sure of his position among the wealthy and influential. He would also be assured of the best possible start for his children, who would not otherwise be worthy of wealthy visions and of good marriages. If he thought of building a new house, he could get people to help him. If there was doubt as to who should be the next chief, a man of such wealth, status, and energy would have the best chance.

During the early contact period with Europeans, the focus of the potlatches shifted with the transferring of rights and crests which were, themselves, becoming less important than the value and quantity of property that was distributed to validate them. As the interest in social status and financial worth increased, the potlatches grew larger and a greater variety of goods, including European goods, were given away. Early Europeans eager to encourage the fur trade with local tribes also participated in potlatches distributing such items as Hudson's Bay blankets, jewelry, musical instruments, clothing, furniture, and sacks of flour.

As more Europeans arrived following the original fur traders, permanent settlements were established and the power and influence of these white settlers increased. These later arrivals, not understanding the significance of this ceremony, did not approve of potlatches since they felt the Indians spent too much time preparing for feasts and that they should learn to save things for themselves rather than give them away. In Canada, whites outlawed potlatches and Indians were arrested and put in jail for holding them. Today, however, Indians are reviving the traditional potlatch custom and non-Indians are more understanding of the reasons and purpose of the potlatch. Not only is this ceremony important for passing on rights and wealth, but it also gathers people together and unifies them.

First Salmon Ceremony (Coastal, Salish Sea, and Plateau Regions)

A ceremony over the first salmon taken in a run of a fishing expedition is an important event celebrated by tribes throughout Washington. There is a wide range of variations of this ceremony, but the protocols were/are similar. In the traditional ceremony, the first caught salmon of the season was brought home by a fisherman and laid aside for special preparation. Traditionally, it was the role of women in the home to prepare the fish in a customary fashion taught to her by the Salmon Chief for the First Salmon Ceremony. The

Salmon Chief also directed and controlled the rituals of the ceremony. Everyone in the village attended the feast and gave thanks. Since time immemorial, the bones of the salmon are carefully returned to the water, making sure the head is pointed upstream. The rite is believed to insure the salmon run for the future and honors the place in which the salmon was caught.

The spring or Chinook salmon, the first run of the year, came in for special regard, and Native people were very particular about how this fish was caught. No one could talk casually or carelessly about it. In rivers in which several species ran, the first of each species might be given identical treatment, or the earliest species might receive the most elaborate attention while others would receive less elaborate handling. All were treated with respect.

Many tribes have yearly First Salmon Ceremonies following the traditions of their ancestors honoring the special relationship Indian people have with salmon and with fishing. Also, due to the placement of dams and reduced runs, several tribes, especially in Eastern Washington, have been unable to practice the First Salmon Ceremony since the salmon does not reach them anymore.

First Root Festival (Plateau Region)

In the Plateau area, First Root ceremonies are conducted in the spring of each year, perhaps in late March or early April. Before gathering the first roots, Plateau people fasted and purified themselves in sweat-lodge rituals. The sacred root festival ceremony occurs after the first roots are harvested, and the event is a solemn occasion.

Traditionally, the women of the tribe prepare the roots for the ceremonial meal. Although the men of the tribe do not do any of the cooking, they do help prepare the venison meat for the festival. The roots of the bitterroot and camas are the main dishes.

Sacred mats are always used during the root festival feast. These mats are used only for the festival and placed on the ground where meals are eaten. The serving of food on the ground is symbolic of the gathering of roots from the Earth.