

"Totem poles were
like **early-day
newspapers** or
bulletin boards."

-*Sidne Overturf*

Title: Pacific Northwest Totem Poles

Thesis: **Dearborn defines** totem poles as the Pacific Northwest native's visual records of their history and legends (*Dearborn 14*). Knowledge of these poles' commission and creation, ritual, and significance help to deeper appreciate this indigenous craft.

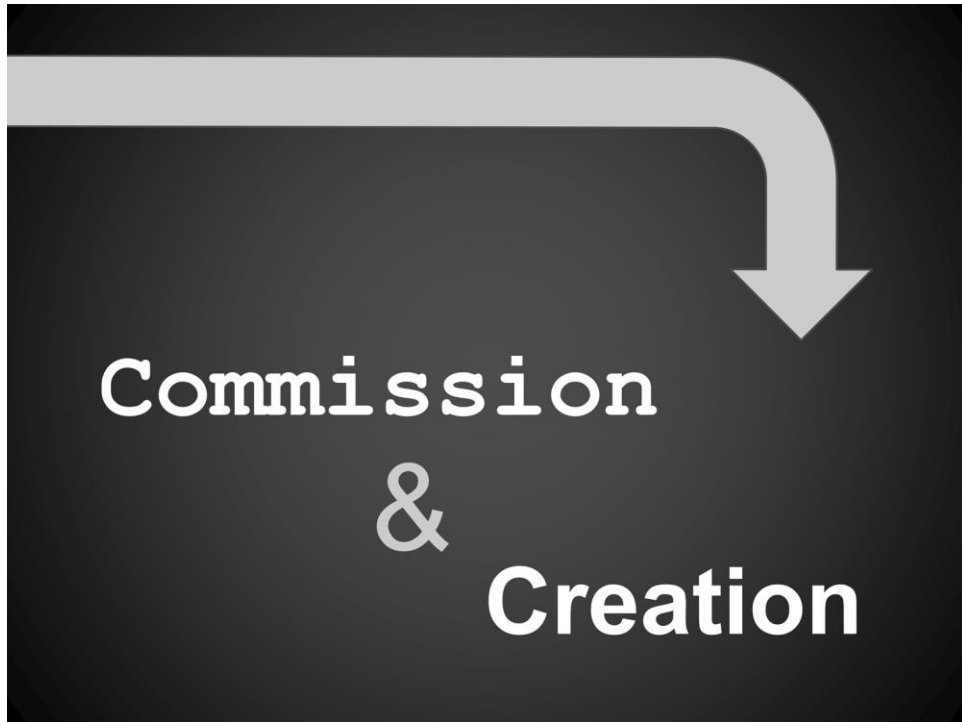
I. Introduction

A. Hook: **Sidne Overturf, writer for *Grit* journal and author of "Totem Poles Tell Tales", compares** totem poles to our daily sources of information in saying that, "Totem poles were like early-day newspapers or bulletin boards"(*Overturf 10*).



B. Background: **According to Keri Dearborn, author of *Totem Poles***, 19th century Tlingit, Haida, Kwakiutl, Tsimshian, and Gitksan peoples of the Pacific Northwest (primarily Alaska and British Columbia) were carvers of these poles (*Dearborn 14*). Very few remain, but the **Society for Science and the Public reports that** elders have tried to pass on the skill of carving to younger generations in hopes of preserving it. 87 boys of the Civilian Conservation Corps (CCC) restored 100 totem poles in Alaska after learning the skills of their ancestors (*Society 269*).

C. Thesis: **Dearborn** defines totem poles as the Pacific Northwest native's visual records of their history and legends (*Dearborn 14*). Knowledge of these poles' commission and creation, ritual, and significance help to deeper appreciate this indigenous craft.



II. Commission and Creation - commissioning someone to create a totem pole is the first step in the totem pole process. In this step we encounter: the commissioner and the carver.



A. Commissioner- requests figures and decides order (*Dearborn 14*)

1. pays carvers

2. **Marius Barbeau, a writer for the**

Geographical Review notes in his research that often times in some tribes the family members will work together to make their own totem pole (and do not commission outsiders) (*Barbeau 258*)

B. The carver: is a high-ranking individual in the tribe, and admired for his talent

1. In her article on totem poles, **Keri**

Dearborn also explains how the carving trade passed from father to son, master carvers works w/ several apprentices

2. when commissioned the carver decides

how figures are presented(*Dearborn 14*)



C. Creation

1. Either the family or the commissioned carvers cut down a cedar

2. **Linda and Carl Muggli, well known totem pole carvers residing in Minneapolis, claim** that the tree must be debarked right away to keep from worms. Then the design is sketched on log w/ charcoal (*Overturf 10*).

3. **Dearborn describes** the process in which the poles are carved: 1st the carver chips basic shape of the figures w/ adze tool (which is like a curved hammer with a large gouge on the end)

4. Then he uses antler chisels, beaver-tooth or metal carving knives, or a stone maul and hammer to carve details

5. Finally, he paints the pole with long-lasting paint made of a mixture of plants/minerals and salmon eggs--traditional colors are red and black, accented w/ brown, green, white, yellow (*Dearborn 14*)

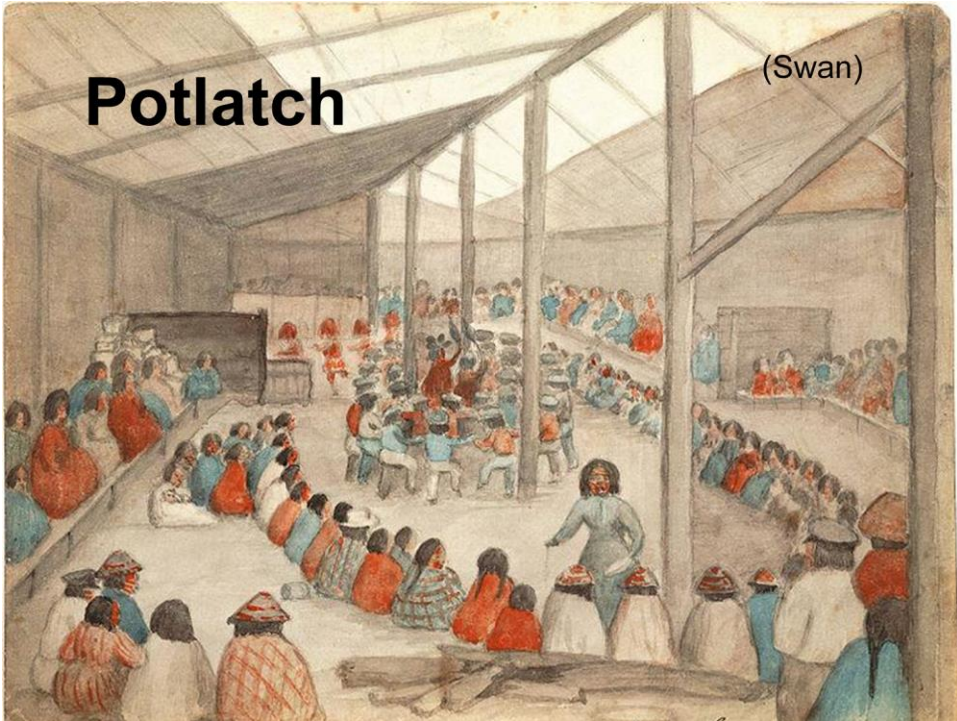
Ritual



III. Ritual - to commemorate an event > consisting of a village gathering/*Potlatch*/raising of the pole

Potlatch

(Swan)

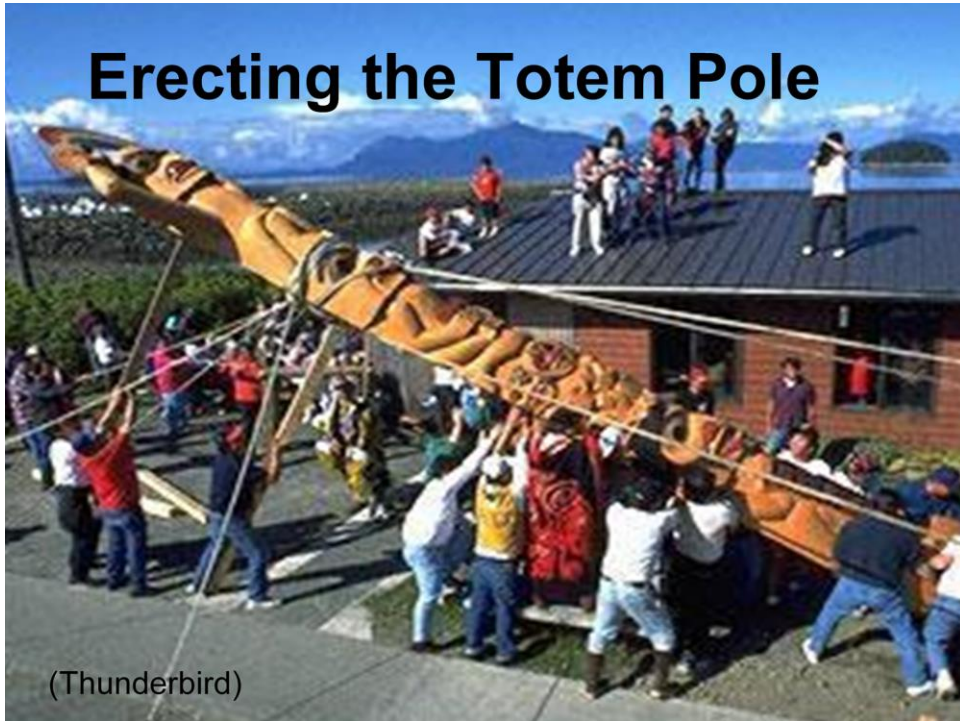


A. **Dearborn claims** that after the creation of the totem pole a village would gather to celebrate. These public gatherings were to commemorate/remember special people and events

(For Ex: in the instance of a chief's death his son must commission a totem pole before he claims his father's inheritance...his village gathers to recognize his new position and honor their former chief)

B. *Potlatch*- a village feast (*Dearborn 14*)

Erecting the Totem Pole



(Thunderbird)

C. Erecting the pole

1. **In her article, Dearborn stresses the fact** that raising the totem pole takes a lot of manpower considering poles can be anywhere from 6 to 70 ft tall.
2. Poles were commonly placed to the front-center of a family's longhouse, and sometimes had a hole or arch to form a doorway(*Dearborn 14*)



IV. Significance- perhaps the most important aspect of totem poles is their story

A. **Dearborn writes** that the final part in the totem pole ceremony consisted of an elder explaining the significance of the totems (telling the story behind the creation of the pole) in order to teach the history and heritage of their ancestors to the younger generations (*Dearborn 14*)

B. *Totems depict:*

mythological creatures, animals, or plants: **Barbeau claims** that the most common symbols included the raven, eagle, wolf, beaver, bear. Less popular ones included the frog, whale, and fireweed. Clans were very possessive of their special emblem.

These symbols displayed pride, and helped the clan members to recognize their kin in other villages.

C. These poles are read from the bottom up with the most important figure on the very bottom and the clan emblem on the very top (*Barbeau 258*).



V. Conclusion

A. C. Thesis: **Dearborn** defines totem poles as the Pacific Northwest native's visual records of their history and legends (*Dearborn 14*). Learning about these poles' commission and creation, ritual, and significance help to have a deeper appreciation toward this indigenous craft.

B. Now we know that every villager plays a special role in the totem pole process. The commissioner initiates the construction after an occasion. The carver creates the visual record. The village gathers, feasts, and together raises the pole. And finally, the elder tells the story behind the pole to his people in hopes of preserving the tales and history that make them who they are.

C. Return to hook: Next time you read a newspaper, or one of the school bulletins, or you flip through an old photo album, try to imagine standing at the foot of one of these great totem poles.

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