

NUU-CHAH-NULTH BIGHOUSE

Nuu-chah-nulth S.D. 70

Dr. George Clutesi Curriculum Program

INTRODUCTORY SUGGESTIONS

- Administer the pretest
- discuss with the pupils the importance of shelter to man
- have the pupils identify various types of shelter and the environment and climate in which they are found (ex. Swiss Chalet, Chinese junk, Inuit igloo, stilt-houses of Borneo, Mexican adobe, clay shelters of First Nations)
- after locating the area inhabited by the Nuu-chah-nulth people on a map discuss the region's climate and environment
- have the students list a variety of tools and equipment used in the construction of a house or building today
- have the students hypothesize as to the tools that were available for back in pre-contact times, before the use of metal.

UNIT ON THE NUU-CHAH-NULTH BIGHOUSE

Objectives- at the end of this unit the students will be able to:

- a) Identify a traditional Nuu-chah-nulth bighouse
- b) Describe the materials and tools used to construct a bighouse
- c) Explain the role played by the environment in the design and construction of the bighouse
- d) Understand the differences as well as the purposes of permanent, temporary and ceremonial Nuu-chah-nulth shelters
- e) Appreciate the suitability and merits of the bighouse in pre-contact Nuu-chah-nulth life
- f) State reasons why Nuu-chah-nulth people no longer live in the traditional bighouse and give examples of what first nations people live in today



+upka and the Bighouse

+upka, the Nuu-chah-nulth word meaning "Wide-open-eyes" watched as the heavy stones were placed on top of the roof of the new bighouse. His father the chief had within his maah=as a spot for the large cedar house near a fine gravel beach. Thirty-five of his grandparent's aunt's uncle's cousins and other relatives would live together under its sloping roof.

+upka had watched closely as men from the village went out to split planks from tall straight red cedars in the forest. Later after these boards were skillfully smoothed with stone adzes they were slipped between the thin cedar poles surrounding the huge carved corner posts.

Inside +upka counted three separate places for fires. He and his parents would live at the far end of the bighouse. Here his mother with the help of slaves stored the family's fish oil and berries cooked in the cedar steam boxes and wove beautiful cedar bark baskets and mats.

+upka daydreamed of the long nights he would spend in the bighouse listening to the singing and drumming during the winter feasts. He shivered as he recalled masked dancers leaping through the air casting giant shadows on the plank walls. Then he blushed to think of how he hid his face behind his mother's cedar robe in fear.

+upka could not decide where he liked living best. Was it here? Or was it on the sea coast where he practiced throwing his toy harpoon into a sealskin bag pretending to be his father killing the great whale? Or did he choose the village's inland fish camp by the swift river teeming with silver salmon?

+upka looked at the smoke curling up from the opening in the new bighouse roof. Someday when he was chief he too would build a bighouse!

Questions on +upka and the bighouse

1. The chief chose a spot near a gravel _____ to build the _____.
2. Planks were split from tall _____ trees.
3. Men used _____ to smooth the planks.
4. Before the huge corner posts were raised they were _____.
5. _____ people would live in this bighouse.
6. Food was cooked over a _____ on the earth floor.
7. Smoke escaped through an opening in the _____.
8. Besides the main bighouse there were houses on the _____ and _____.

roof
adzes
cedar

bighouse
seacoast
fire

beach

inland

thirty- five

carved

HOW TO BUILD A BIGHOUSE

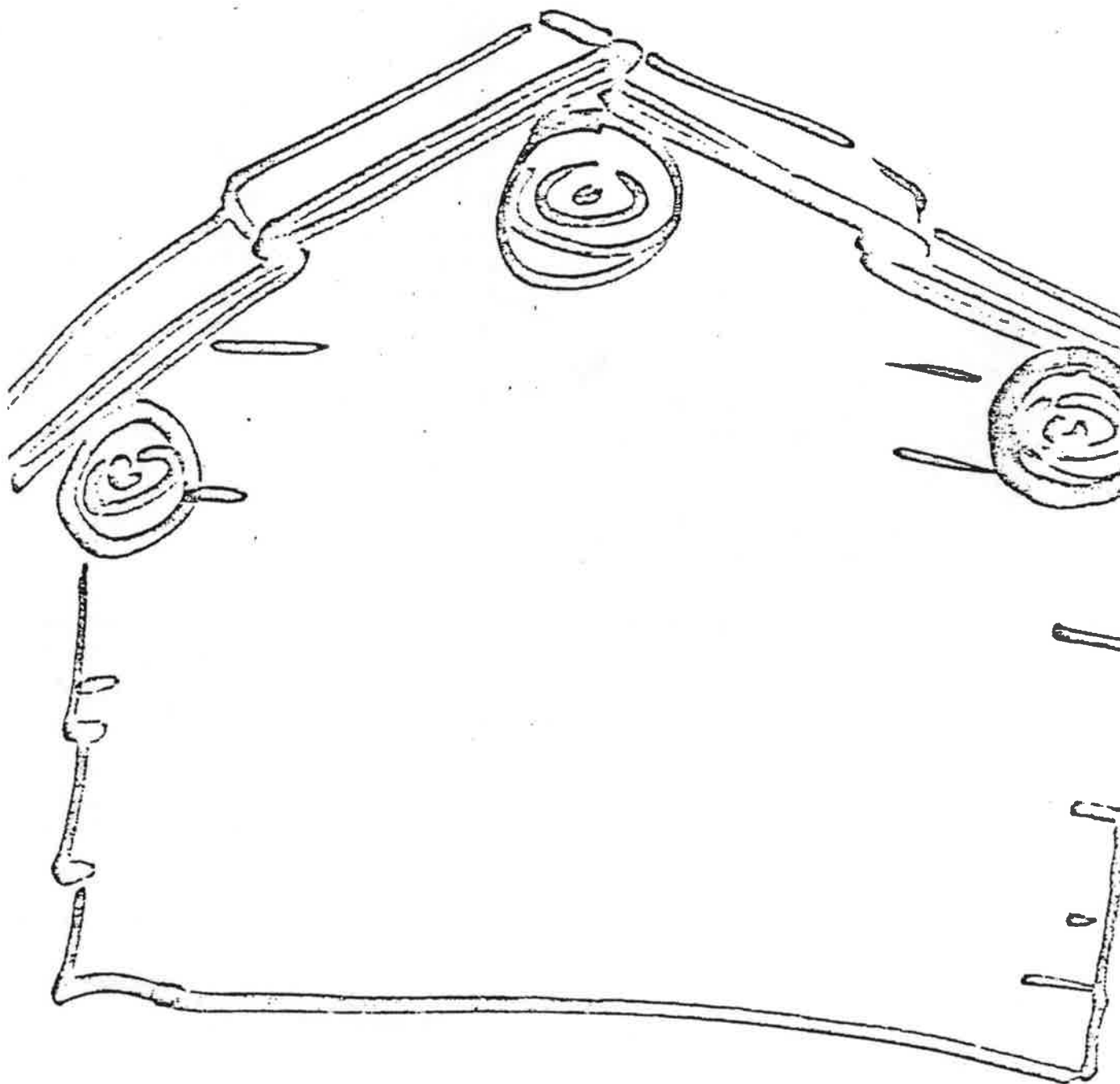
Cut out each strip and paste on Sheet B in Correct order

A
Roof beams are placed on 4 posts
After sides are on add roof
Work parties put up 4 corner posts
Place rocks on cedar shake roof
The chief had within his maah=as a spot
Last of all paint a design on the outside
Add side planks of cedar

HOW TO BUILD A BIGHOUSE

B

Possible frame for media compositions, written compositions or bulletin boards



A TRIP AROUND THE BIGHOUSE



*Bighouse Post , Alberni Valley
Museum, PN3439*

Pushing aside the woven cedar mat that covers the side entrance one's eyes quickly adjust to the relatively dark interior of the bighouse. Shafts of light filter down through the smoke holes high in the roof and through the narrow cracks where the plank ends meet. There are no windows. Towards either end of the cavernous room, burning continuously, are two large fires. Stacks of firewood, cedar boxes, baskets and various cooking utensils indicate that this part of the earthen floor is used for cooking. Along either side of the bighouse run raised, meter wide sleeping platforms*. These are obviously used as benches during the day. Above these platforms is a second or upper storage shelf at approximately chest height. On this is stored dried foods, rolls of animal skins, skeins of shredded cedarbark and bundles of grass, well out of the reach of mice and other rodents.

Each family lives in a section positioned according to their rank with the chief or head of the household. Judging by the quantity and craftsmanship of the articles found in the rear of the bighouse it is occupied by a most wealthy and important family while at the opposite end of the bighouse on either side of the entrance the meager amount of simple utensils and mats suggests its inhabitants are of low or slave status. These living quarters are vaguely defined with an arrangement of storage boxes, large baskets, rolled mats and a variety of other handmade house-hold articles. Some areas have waist high

*some elders recall 2 meter wide benches where a person could sleep with their head to the wall.

plank partition when standing, one can see about the whole house. Hanging overhead from thin fir rafters, out of one's way is fishing gear, sea lion bladders of oil and endless rows of cut fish drying on racks.



Village, BC Archives, a_02682

The bighouse is rarely ever quiet and is not so now. From the centre of the room come the voices of women talking and laughing as they prepare the evening meal; from the benches' along the wall come the voices of grandparents singing softly to their young grandchildren playing on the ground close by and from outside come the voices of men working on the hull of an overturned canoe. One's nose is greeted with the smell of alder smoke from the fire, the aroma of fish soup boiling in a box and the pervading scent of red cedar.



Woman Carrying Firewood, Alberni Valley Museum, PN02016

Outside in the bright sunlight, well-worn paths mark the coming and going from bighouse to bighouse and to and from the beach to the village. Narrow planks pegged upright in front of the huge plank house provide backrests for a breathtaking view of the sheltered bay and the sparkling ocean beyond. Pulled up above the high water mark are dozens of canoes. Children play a noisy game of tag under the eyes of a tall Welcome Figure carved with its arms outstretched to all who enter the bay. Two women set off in a small dugout to gather firewood, while out in the middle of the bay a solitary man fishes for cod.



Bighouse frame and Welcome figures, BC Archives, g_07265

Alongside some of the larger bighouses are huge war canoes and sleek sealing canoes stored on racks and covered with protective mats. Towards the rear of the village and off to one side is a huge pit* where refuse is thrown. Narrow paths, here and there, lead off into special prayer spots and hunting areas within the forest. Such was the Nuu-chah-nulth bighouse and village two centuries ago.

* these middens reveal much to anthropologists about the way of life of people long ago.

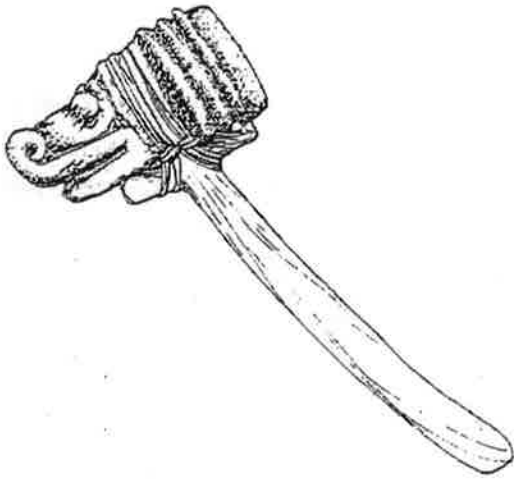
. . . their houses or dwellings are situated close to the shore. They consist of a long range of buildings some of which are one hundred and fifty feet in length, twenty four or thirty broad and seven or eight high from the floor to the roof, which in them all is flat and covered with loose boards. The walls, or sides and ends, are also built up of boards and the framing consists of large trees or logs. They first fix firm in the ground three rows of large posts, on these are fixed longitudinally, large trees the whole length of the building, across these they lay the boards that serve for the covering, and those of the sides are fastened to the posts. Many of these boards are thirty feet in length and from three to five broad, and are all procured by splitting large trees. . . . Every range of buildings is generally divided into a number of rooms, each seldom containing more than two lengths of apartments, so that each apartment which is about twelve feet

broad and sixteen or eighteen long and seem to be the property of one family has to close or boarded sides that is one side and one end here they place their wooden boxes (also of red cedar wood) containing their skins and other effects; here also they place their bales of dried fish and whatever else they have to set out of the way as being the driest part of the house. The fire place is in the middle of the apartment. Their Household furniture consists in a few wooden boxes of different sizes some wooden vessels for their Vitals and a few mats, bags etc."

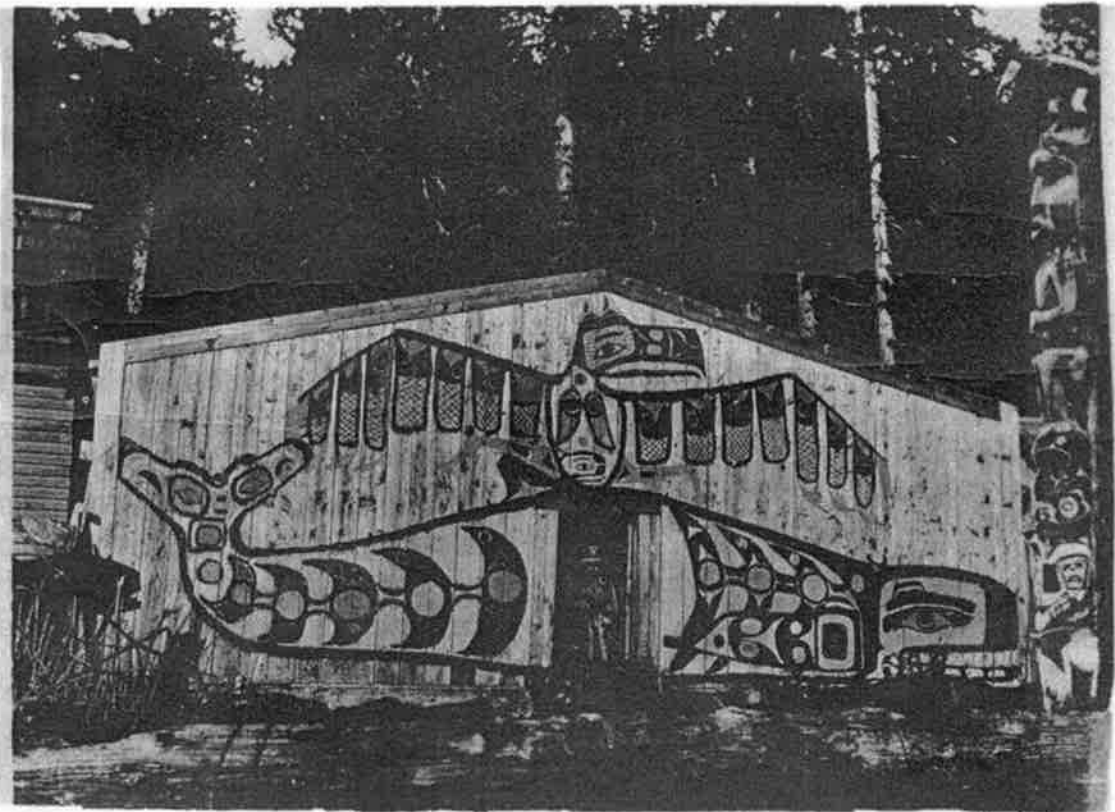
(Cook, Beaglehole edition~ 196?)



Ceremonial houses were given sacred names even though it was the site and not the bighouse itself that was sacred. Inside, the house had the far end partitioned off with a painted screen. Behind this screen was kept the paraphernalia belonging to the secret societies and it was here that the initiated performers in the ceremonies made their regalia changes, out of sight of enthralled spectators. A combination of one large fire and several smaller ones created a dramatic setting for the eventful ceremonies and feasts that occurred throughout the winter months.



It has been said that this area of the northwest coast was the richest and most favorable area for human settlement. That its inhabitants enjoyed a prosperous and abundant existence with substantial leisure time was reflected in beautifully carved corner posts and painted wall board of the chief's emblem or crest, both inside and outside the bighouse. Many of the artifacts such as boxes, bowls, spoons, halibut hooks, masks, etc. bear witness to the Nuu-chah-nulth people's well developed artistic skill.



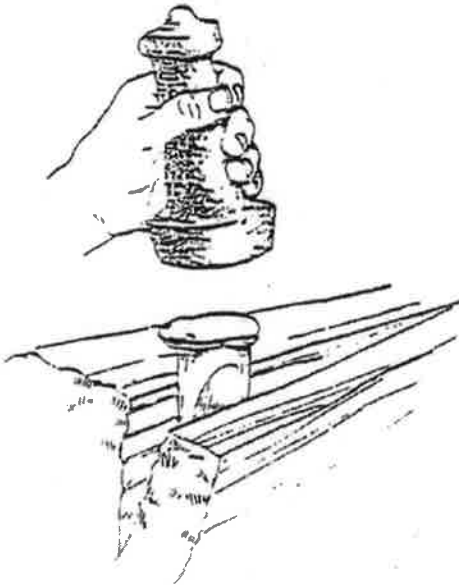
A LAM MADE CHIEF AND HIS HOUSE

Copyright by N. H. K. Co.

*House Front of a Chief, Alberni Valley
Museum, PN14013*

Quote:

"On the 3rd. of December the whole tribe quitted Nootka, in order to pass the winter at Tashees and Cooptee, the latter lying about thirty miles up the sound in a deep bay, the navigation of which is very dangerous, from the great number of reefs and rocks with which it abounds.



On these occasions everything was taken with them, even the planks of their houses in order to cover their new dwellings. To a European such a removal exhibits a scene quite novel and strange canoes piled up with board and boxes, filled with men women and children, of all ranks and sizes, making the air resound with their cries and songs.

...On our arrival, we all went to work covering the houses with the planks we had brought, the frames being ready erected, these... in a most secure position from the winter storms, in a small vale or hollow on the south shore at the foot of a mountain."

Excerpt from John R. Jewitt's Narrative (August 1803)

The chief as custodian of the village usually had the largest bighouse with those of the heads of other families situated on either side. The families living in each bighouse were related to a common ancestor through bloodline or marriage. By uniting this way the individual members enjoyed not only greater fellowship, increased protection,

the prestige associated with their chief but also the combined efforts of the group in the food harvesting for the winter months and other cooperative efforts. (The larger the group the greater the amount of food and wealth amassed.) While folk history and anthropological data tells of a Chief Maquinna overseeing a bighouse (30 by 18 meters) that housed 100 people* most information describes the average bighouse as about 12 meters long and 9 meters wide and containing anywhere from 25 to 30 people.

* half of whom were extended family the other half slaves.

When all in one family could not fit into the main house, smaller houses were built behind.



*Village from beach, Alberni Valley
Museum, PN03404*



*Present Tseshahat longhouse,
Tseshahat Resource Center, Dcp02068*

The ridgepole raised the pitch of the roofline by perhaps a metre thereby giving the roof a gentle slope. Cedar planks of slightly smaller dimensions than the wall boards were laid over narrow poles resting on the roof beams. Some groups ran a groove along the planks so that they interlocked and aided in rain run-off. A second layer of planking might have been added to cover any cracks.* During windy weather, heavy stones were placed on top of the planks to prevent them from shifting or being blown off. One or two holes, depending on the size of the bighouse, were left in the roof to act as the main smoke vent(s).

Elaborate permanent house frames were located at the main winter sites while temporary residences, located at the salmon fishing site and on the outer coast were identifiable by their minimal or lack of decoration. These temporary dwellings were, in effect, smaller, rougher versions of the bighouse. When moving from the winter camp down towards the outer coast a family would place their house planks across the gunwales of two freight canoes. By creating this large surface area a family and all of its household goods, hunting and fishing gear could move to their next campsite during the seasonal food quest

* with the introduction of metal tools after contact smaller planks were made and attached in a manner similar to shaking done today.

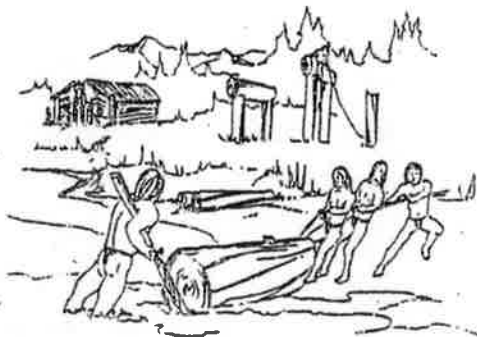


*Cedar tree, Denise August,
Hashiilthsa*

Shelter, one of man's basic needs, shielded him from the cold, wind and rain and protected him from wild animals and other dangers that might threaten him. Since time immemorial the Nuu-chah-nulth people inhabited the west side of what is now Vancouver Island they developed a shelter that not only provided refuge from the elements but also played an integral role in the culture. As far back as folk memory goes the Nuu-chah-nulth people always lived in plank houses, shelters that grew progressively larger, and eventually evolved into that awesome structure, the Bighouse.

The Nuu-chah-nulth people's skillful exploitation of the area's abundant natural resource, the red cedar was no better illustrated than in their selection and utilization of the wood*** or the construction of the bighouse. Prayer and ritual bathing were critical in locating the correct trees for building material. Since not just any tree was suitable, men frequently had to travel considerable distances in order to find what they needed. One elder explained that all cedar were disguised to look the same and that a vision helped reveal to a man the precise stand of trees to be used.

*** Both versatile and readily available the red cedar grows to heights of sixty-nine meters with a wood that is light, straight grained, rot resistant, pleasant smelling and easily worked.



Before a tree was felled a prayer was said to its spirit informing it of what was to happen. (This respect for all living things was reflected in all aspects of native life). One elder recalls shouting "Ho" when approaching the tree to tell the spirit of his arrival and then turning away as the tree fell, lest it splinter.

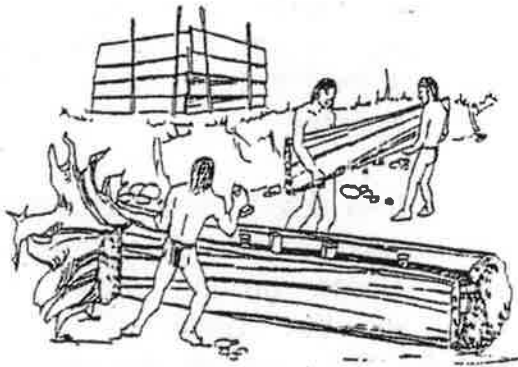
To cut a tree down meant laborious work with bone adzes* and stone mauls until it toppled. Some groups used controlled burning at the base of the trunk. Manpower, flotation and the use of levers and wedges helped transport, hoist and erect these posts which sometimes measured up to forty-eight meters in length and a meter and a half in diameter.



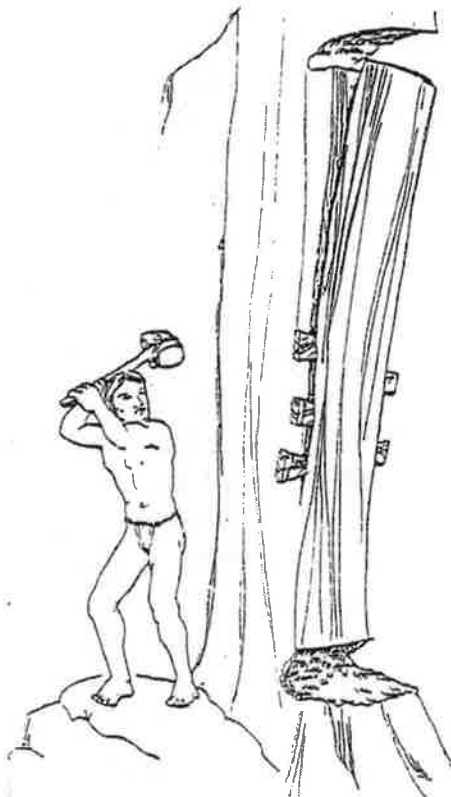
The exact positioning of the bighouse took into consideration such factors as prevailing winds, beach accessibility and the possibility of enemy attack. Preferred sites were usually located in sheltered bays, fronted by gently sloping sand or gravel beaches and backed by dense forest. In pre-contact times the four corner posts positioned the bighouse with its length running parallel to the beach while after contact the bighouse fronted on the beach. After the four corner posts were erected, eight intermediary posts were added as supporting timber. Huge adzed* roof beams were then hoisted on top of these. This tremendous feat was accomplished by the coordinated effort of groups of men heaving and pulling with strong cedar twined ropes.**

* the adze removed any irregularities and left a pleasing rippled finish.

** experiments show that the cedar with ropes equaled steel cable in strength.



Once the permanent frame was up pairs of fir poles, over two meters in length were driven into the ground around the perimeter of the bighouse. In between these poles were slipped large notched cedar planks (1.8 meters long by 1.2 meters wide by a distance of 3 fingers deep) each plank overlapping the one below it. These planks were obtained from either standing or felled trees. This entailed driving a series of graduated yew wood wedges along the grain of a large cedar tree until a plank split off. Several such planks could be removed from a living tree without killing it. (In fact loggers in the Port Alberni area report finding living trees that have had lumber removed in this manner years ago) These cedar planks lasted many years and were only replaced when they became split or warped. In fine weather these side planks could be removed to allow greater air circulation and light; in the winter, moss was used to chink the plank joints. Doorways were left at one end and along one side; at night or during inclement weather a long board or a mat covered these entrances.



The entrance way also served as a place of preparation for young men. To prepare them for harsh weather they would be placed half in and half outside to strengthen them up for hunting.

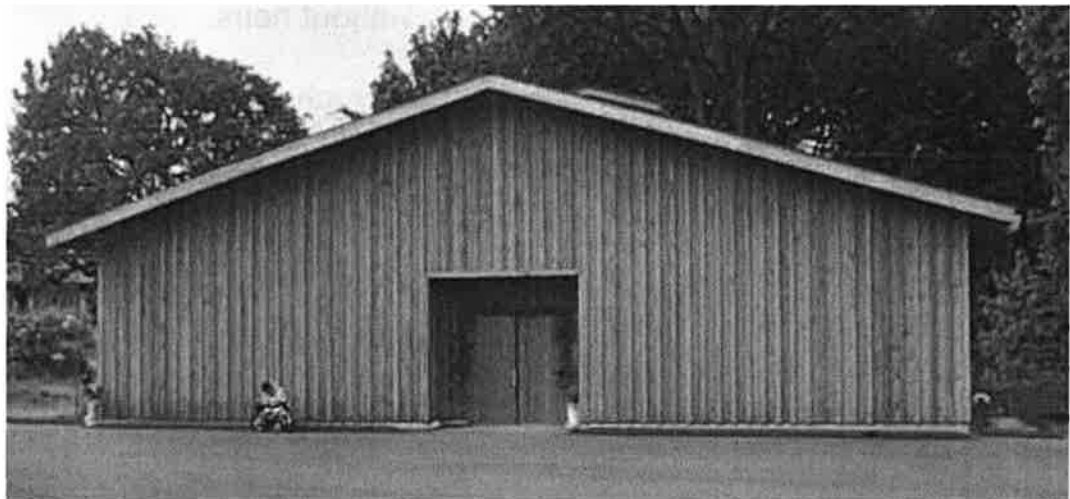


Village, BC Archives, a_02682

A number of factors contributed to the gradual disappearance of the bighouse. By the late 1800's the bighouse was still being built according to the old plan but utilizing sawn lumber and manufactured nails. The huge adzed corner posts and massive beams became obsolete as commercial siding was nailed directly to the house frame. As the use of money replaced the barter system manufactured windows and doors became common features in native homes. Other less obvious factors were the persuasion of the Nuu-chah-nulth people by missionaries to abandon living in multi-family dwellings, the ravages of measles and smallpox that virtually emptied some bighouses, the migration of young people to larger urban centers, the removal of children from home to attend residential schools, the trend away from seasonal to more home-based employment and the death of a number of hereditary chiefs, without heirs.

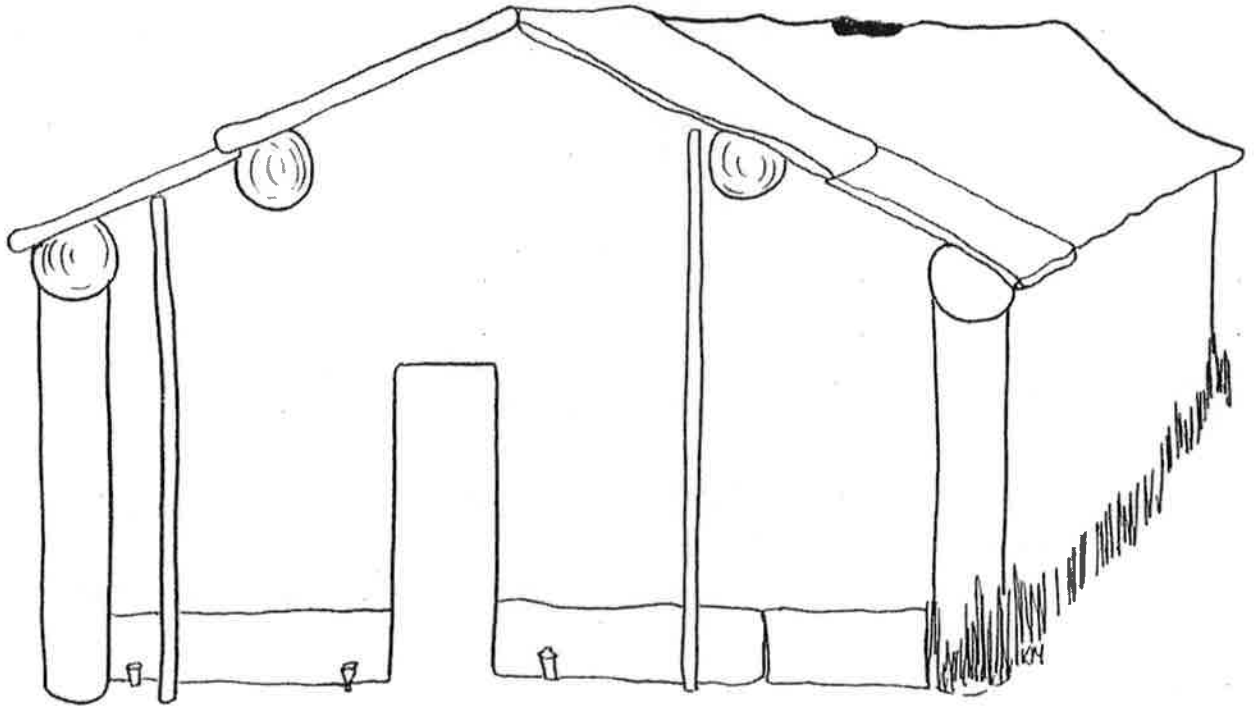
Any changes in family tradition, large or small, served to weaken the role of the bighouse in Nuu-chah-nulth culture.

While native people today live both on and off reserves and in all types of housing certain practices, characteristic of the days of the bighouse, still remain. The extended family typifies many contemporary natives homes. Many of our grandparents do not go into homes for the aged but live with their offspring and still play an active role in the raising of grandchildren. Family members tend to live near one another. Relatives from out of town are treated as welcome guests for whom another bed may always be found. Those involved in the harvesting and preparation of traditional foods such as herring eggs, fresh and dried salmon always share generously with others. And not to be overlooked is the multitude of ceremonies, feasts and potlatches held in the bighouse ,today as long ago.



*Tsashaht Longhouse, Tsashaht
Resource Center, Dcp02065*

Finish the bighouse by adding the missing details.



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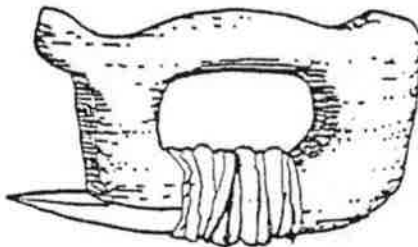
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Discussion Ideas

1. In many ways the Northwest Pacific was the richest most favorable land for human settlement on the entire continent. Give examples that support or disprove this statement.
2. a) If you belong to a group that depended on natural resources for food and shelter describe the area that would be the best to live in? (Discuss such needs as food, clothing and shelter.)
b) What type of environment would you prefer not to live in?
(Refer to climate, resources, etc.)
3. What are the benefits of living in the following locations?

on a river
in the mountains on a beach
on an island
on the tundra, etc.
4. Discuss the role played by the environment and climate in the design of the bighouse.
5. Many Nuu-chah-nulth people maintain they have always lived on the West coast. They have no folk history of having else. Discuss.



Discussion Questions

1. a) How do you think we know about Nuu-chah-nulth life before the European arrived?
b) What do you know about your ancestors?
c) How did you learn this?
d) What are some ways to learn more about your heritage?
2. a) The Nuu-chah-nulth people could hunt, gather and harvest enough food in three months to last through the winter. Discuss how this would affect the way they lived during the winter months. .
b) What do you do in your free time?
c) Do you think there are people with no spare time?
If so, who are they and why is this so?
3. a) What are the advantages and disadvantages of living within a large group?
(Give examples of when people might live with a large number of people)
b) Why would you like/dislike living in a bighouse if you had been born long ago?
4. What would you do if you accidentally came across perfectly preserved Nuu-chah-nulth t bighouse? Why? (Have your teacher read from The Whale Hunters, a book included in the kit about the Ozette dig and the Makah, relatives of the Nuu-chah-nulth people.

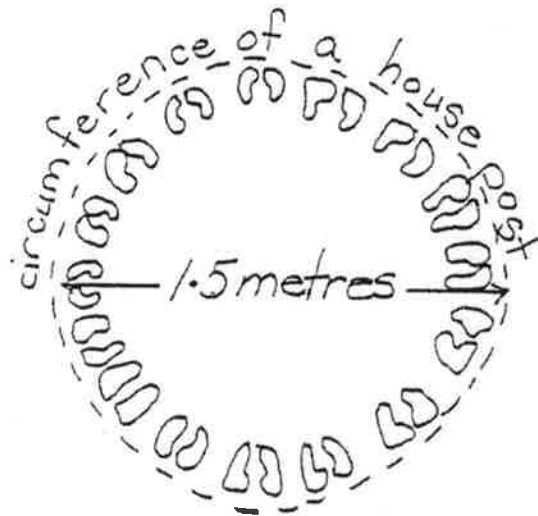
a) Discuss why you think it was important (or not) to have a head of the household
b) Is everyone 'equal' in your house?
c) Who makes the final decisions in your class, school, city, country etc.?
5. a) Why did the West Coast people have more than one residence? Why was the winter residence permanent?
b) Do you know anyone who lives part of the year somewhere else? Who? Why? Where? How?
(Don't forget to include cottages, tenting, R.V.'s, ski chalets, etc.)

THINGS TO DO

Examine the model of the bighouse, available from the Resource Centre. Then study the photographs of the bighouses found in the kit and the pictorial "The Nootkan Indian". List as many facts as you can about what you observe. e.g. (location, building materials, size, windows, etc.)

With the help of your teacher or a reference book learn to identify red cedar. (Use the tree's bark, needles and shape to aid in identification) Take a walk through Cathedral Grove and find a cedar and a fir tree, then make a list of the differences in appearance.

Knowing that the diameter of a corner post was 1.5 meters draw a circle on brown paper that is of equal diameter. Cut out the circle and have as many students as necessary stand around the circumference. This will give you an idea of how large the corner posts of a bighouse were. Can one person in the class encircle the post with their arms? Can two people?



THINGS TO DO

1. Examine a piece of freshly cut cedar or a cedar shake. (Feel it, smell it, float it, split it) What are some of its characteristics?
2. Using the models in the kit, and the book "Sea and Cedar" illustrate the tools and equipment used to build a bighouse. On the same project show what tools and machines are used to perform the same operations today.
3. List the reasons why the Nuu-chah-nulth people needed shelter long ago and compare it to a similar list of why we have shelter today.
4. Make a mural illustrating the different stages in building a bighouse. Be sure the details of the construction site indicate a suitable location.
5. Try building your own shelter in the woods using only the materials you find there. Discuss the problems you encountered and the discoveries you made later, in class.