

# Telling Tales of Totems

by Howard Osterer

**T**otem poles are a friendly reminder of a wonderful culture that sends a timeless message to all of us who want to know more.

Originating from west coast Canada, totem poles are a Canadian icon recognized all over the world. Visitors to these areas are treated to a host of totem poles that range from short totem poles, frontal totem poles, towering welcome poles, and mortuary poles. Most of us are accustomed to seeing the tall freestanding pole.

I first encountered a totem pole over forty years ago as a member of the 39<sup>th</sup> Ottawa Cub pack. Our pack visited the Royal Victoria Museum (currently the Museum of Natural Sciences). I will always remember being greeted by this totem pole that just never seemed to end.

In my travels across Canada, I have had the privilege to encounter quite a few totem poles. Fascinating enough, many were outside Scouts Canada facilities. If you think about it, it is amazing the number of totem poles that have traveled such distances to find new homes. A little online search will list the number of totem poles in your province.

Directly outside my office window at Scouts Canada's National Office, a

twenty metre totem pole welcomes visitors, friends and Scouting members. This proud symbol of our First Nation western coast culture was a gift from the Boy Scouts of British Columbia. It was carved in 1960 by Chief Mungo Martin, of the Kwakiutl Tribe and his grandson Henry Hunt. Most of the carving was done in Victoria, B.C.; upon completion the totem pole was shipped in two pieces by flatbed railcar to Ottawa.

Tragically, the Chief's son, David, was swept overboard from a salmon boat in 1959. At 76 years of age, Mungo Martin carved a memorial pole single-handedly. It was raised on May 26, 1960 beside the Big House in Centennial Park. In 1974 it was moved to the Comox Band reserve on Victoria Island, B.C.

Mungo Martin's skills can be seen at many sites across Canada: the Douglas border crossing (U.S. entry - Blaine, Washington) into Canada, Museum of Anthropology, University of British Columbia, Maritime Museum in Vancouver, and at Thunderbird Park, Victoria, B.C. Chief Martin once held claim to the tallest pole in the world (38.9 metres at Beacon Hill Park, Victoria, B.C.).

The Chief was buried at Alert Bay in 1962. An elaborately carved totem pole made by his grandchildren, Henry and Tony Hunt was erected near his gravesite in 1970.



Totem at Camp Samac, Oshawa, ON.



## There it goes!

Erection of Chief Mungo Martin's beautiful totem pole in front of Scouts Canada's National Office, 1961.



The Quebec Council has created a series of postcards to promote its Scout Shops. This one shows the unveiling of a totem to commemorate B.-P.'s 100th birthday in 1954.

Photo of The Scout Leader (January, 1961) Scouts Canada Archives | Lead Photo courtesy of Howard Osterer

## Totem Web Sites

An excellent tour of a selection of totem poles can be found by clicking on [www.virtualguidebooks.com/The-maticLists/TotemPoles.html](http://www.virtualguidebooks.com/The-maticLists/TotemPoles.html).

Take a peek at pictures of many Canadian totem poles at <http://community.webshots.com/album/25297867pBstwBOUSe> (Thunderbird Park).

## Totem Tidbits

### (neat facts for your youth)

- o Totem poles are carved from the trunk of a single western red cedar. Before bringing down the tree, the feller would ritually address the spirits in prayer.
- o Carvers would be commissioned by a Chief, who would tell what crests or figures he would like. The design would be done in charcoal and etched out with knives and special tools. Paints would be applied; pigments were made from grinding various minerals and mixing powders. Nowadays commercial paints have replaced and expanded the color palette.
- o The world's tallest totem pole is 53 metres high in Alert Bay.
- o Totem poles can portray figures and crests.
- o Figures are portrayed vertically.
- o Contrary to popular belief, the "top man on the totem pole" is not necessarily the highest ranking or most important. In most cases this figure represents the clan or lineage. The largest figure, generally found at the base of the pole is the most prominent.
- o Mystical beings play a special role on many totem poles.
- o Wildlife creatures also play a very important role. Birds are often shown with eyebrows; the raven has been seen with its beak up or down; eagles have a short downturned beak; a bear can be distinguished by prominent ears and flared nostrils; a wolf has long ears.

### Add a totem to your program: creating your own figures and stories

- F Visit online museum and totem pole sites.
- F Invite a First Nations representative to come and speak to your group.
- F Develop a unit on our First Nations people.
- F Research totem songs, arts and crafts.



▲ Henry Hunt, Chief Mungo Martin's grandson, is shown adding the finishing touches to the totem pole destined for the national office.

Here he shows the new totem to Mr. Jackson Dodds, Deputy Chief Scout and Mr. R.C. Stevenson.



- F Identify figures and create six new names.
- F Experiment with making colors out of natural ingredients.
- F Create your own myths and legends.
- F Send us your pictures of totem poles outside Scouts Canada facilities ([hostrer@scouts.ca](mailto:hostrer@scouts.ca)).
- F Have a "Name the totem pole" contest.
- F Potlatch celebration: help plan this special event. At one time this was a special gathering of the elders and clans. It was a time to celebrate and unite tribes. The word potlatch means "give away"; during which there was food and song, retelling of legends and exchanging of gifts. Plan your "potlatch" celebration with other Cub packs or Beaver colonies.
- F Make figure stamps – carve out figures in potatoes, apples... apply sample to stamp pad.
- F Paper bag totem poles figures. Draw out characters, figures, fill paper bags with recyclable material (newspaper) to keep the shape. Build totem pole any size or height.
- F Egg carton totem poles.
- F Map of Canada - identify where totem poles are located. Don't forget to identify local poles!

## Famous Totem Poles: Where they're found

- Alert Bay, Vancouver Island, BC
- Bella Coola, BC
- Campbell River, Vancouver Island, BC
- Duncan, Vancouver Island, BC
- Queen Charlotte Islands, BC
- Museum of Anthropology, Vancouver, BC
- Stanley Park, Vancouver, BC
- Museum of Civilization, Gatineau, QC
- Visitor's Information Centre, Cape Breton, NS
- Royal Ontario Museum, Toronto, ON

## Project Totem Pole!

Let your imagination guide you in making totem poles a part of a future meeting. You could...show a photograph of a totem pole and ask the youth to identify it.

Ask them to identify the purpose and function for totem poles.

Using construction paper, have youth construct their own totem based on their lives and beliefs, and assemble several totem poles. They could write a paragraph explaining their totem. (It may be interesting to connect with another group and trade totem poles to enhance the idea of the individuality that each totem holds!)

Help your group enjoy the mystery and beauty of this proud symbol of the Canadian First People's heritage. ✕  
– Howard Osterer is Director of Fund-raising and totem pole enthusiast.

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