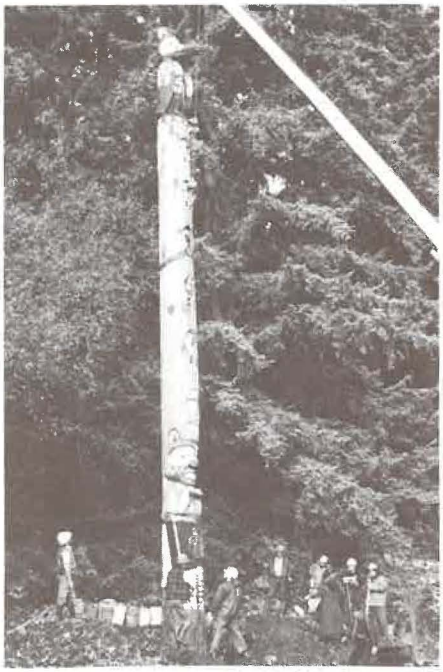

One year after its near destruction, Yax Te Totem stands again as silent sentinel over Auke Bay

The Yax Te Totem Rises Again

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On a soft, rain-washed Friday afternoon in September, just a little over a year from the time arsonists set it ablaze, the mended, renewed Yax Te totem pole lies stretched out full length on the flat bed of a trailer long enough and strong enough to carry a boxcar.

A truck with a tall, steel crane mounted on its bed and with AEL&P printed across the cab door has pulled the trailer and its silent, stoic passenger here to this spot between the mountains and the sea, to this small rise of ground across from Auke Bay. The truck has brought the totem from the Forest Service garage on Old Dairy Road where it has been protected and cradled and lovingly repaired. Now the trailer and the truck take up half the highway parked the way they are next to this place where the Yax Te stood for 51 years, a sentinel on the bottom slope of a mountain, this same place where once upon a time the Auk-kwan people lived and loved and died during the winters of their lives.

In tribal dress, descendants of those original Auk-kwan people are here—the dancers, the singers, the drummers, the young, the old—five generations of the Raven moiety. Bessie Visaya, 95-year-old matriarch of the Raven moiety, Dog Salmon clan, she is here. Her daughter, Rosa Miller, is here, too. Rosa is the matriarch's spokesperson, the one who will accept back the totem from the Eagle moiety. Arnie Dalton, the carver who scraped away the charred surface, repaired the cracks, the holes, who recarved and repainted the totem—he's here, achievement reflected in his face. Arnie is a member of the Eagle moiety, Shark clan. The tradition bearer, David Katzeek, is also Eagle, of the Thunderbird clan of Chilkat. It is the Tlingit custom for the carver, in whose custody the totem pole has been committed during its time of restoration, and for the tradition bearer to come this day and return the Yax Te to its rightful owners, the Raven moiety.

Others are here, too—folks from the Forest Service, from AEL&P, from Sealaska, from the newspaper. Fishing folks, shopkeepers, gas station attendants, teachers, schoolchildren, parents are here. There are out-of-towners, tourists. There are those here who understand the importance of tradition and for whom cultural ties provide an essential peace; there are those who don't understand, but wish they did.

The crowd has grown to hundreds now. Latecomers arrive in ones or twos or in groups. Everyone pushes forward, jostling for a view of the Natives who are about to dance, for a good place to watch the totem pole when the crane pulls it up from the trailer to a standing position. Forest Service folks direct traffic, try to keep the crowd off the one open lane of highway, and hand out leaflets that talk about the rededication, the ceremony that's about to take place. The driver of an Alaska Cablevision van reaches out his window and offers a Forest Service employee a candy bar. "You've probably missed your lunch, buddy," he says and waves as he drives on.

The line behind the orange survey ribbon grows longer. A few to whom ribbons are only ribbons step over that barrier. They cross to the other lane of the highway, spill over the yellow line to the open side, and mill among others who press closer to the multicolor-costumed dancers. A hesitant sun pushes forward, shines through the spruce trees and for just a moment dapples the hillside where the totem pole used to stand and where it will stand again. Men in hard hats and work clothes dig at the ground on the hillside. They dig a few more inches into the earth to provide a final, firm footrest for the pole.

All of a sudden there is the low, steady beat of drums and the beginnings of a chant. A dog barks and stops. Cameras click. A child cries. There is the smell of damp wool, of somebody's aftershave, of popcorn as a pony-tailed young man in a Levi jacket and with a rose tattoo on the back of his hand holds out his paper bag to the old woman, a stranger standing next to him. A whitehaired man wearing a yellow slicker helps a young mother adjust

the carrier and the sleeping baby on her back.

The drums grow louder. Native dancers begin to sway, to pick up tempo. The song they are singing gathers power, becomes as measured as a pulse beat. A few people in the crowd still talk, still jostle for position. Some children laugh and shove at one another. A woman reporter with long white-blonde hair stops writing and picks up someone's child who says, "I can't see, I can't see." More people cross the ribbon barrier, press forward until there are few divisions of space in the crowd. There is no room for traffic to pass at all now. A horn sounds down the highway and around the bend.

The breeze shifts slightly and moves the clouds. The sun pushes forward, retreats. There is an audible ah-h-h from a few in the crowd as the crane pulls at the cable attached to the top of the pole and inches it up from the trailer. Slowly and at first with jerks and starts, them more smoothly, the Yax Te totem pole rises. Up a few inches. Stop. A foot. A few more feet. Up, up, up. The chant of the singers and the steady beat of the drums grow louder and louder until they are above the noise of the crowd.

As if on cue, the clouds part, the sun shines through, and it strikes full on the totem pole as it's raised to a standing position in the middle of the highway. It stands there, rocks slightly with the sway of the cable, then the crane pulley lifts it higher off the ground, turns it around with its back to the crowd, and moves it up over the trailer to the other side and to the little rise of ground and the freshly dug hole at the base of the mountain.

The Yax Te has reached its spot over the hole and is slowly turned around so it faces the crowd. All eyes are on the tall, beautifully carved and painted pole. The raven on his regal 50-foot perch atop the pole, the frog monster, the princess, they all look solemnly, dispassionately out at the people.

The dancing and singing and the beat of the drums stop as speakers take their places. Most, but not all the words of the speakers are absorbed by distance from the crowd or are carried away by the breeze. The crowd moves back and forth on the pavement and the shoulders of the highway like colors in a kaleidoscope as people shift around to hear better and see better. Schoolchildren grow restless and are chided. Babies are bounced and shushed. The scream of a seabird mingles with the rusty cry of ravens.

"Right now our ancestors are holding hands together," says the Native tradition bearer. He pauses and turns to look at the pole. He looks back to the crowd, says something else, motions to the Natives in the crowd, to the carver, to the totem. His words are inaudible, but his meaning is unmistakable: this day, this event, this gathering is what tradition is all about.

It is almost certain that in the hearts and minds of many present, the ancestors are not the only ones holding hands today. No. There is more to this moment; there is a palpable something in the air. Caring people—Natives, Sealaska people, Forest Service folks, a trucking company, a utility company, an art gallery, and other individuals—have taken it upon themselves to mend what vandals burned and scarred. The refurbishing of the Yax Te totem pole has brought us all together and reminded us that we are all a part of something noble, something beyond the ordinary. We have learned once more that it is possible to work together and to help one another. We have learned once more that it is possible, truly possible for good deeds and human kindnesses to come from evil actions.

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As the drum beat grew louder, Native dancers swayed to the tempo as Yax Te Totem Rose