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Goldthwaite's Geographical Magazine



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Goldthwaite's Geographical Magazine
v. 6, No. 1. Jan. 1894

The Thling of Alaska.

By Bessie L. Putnam

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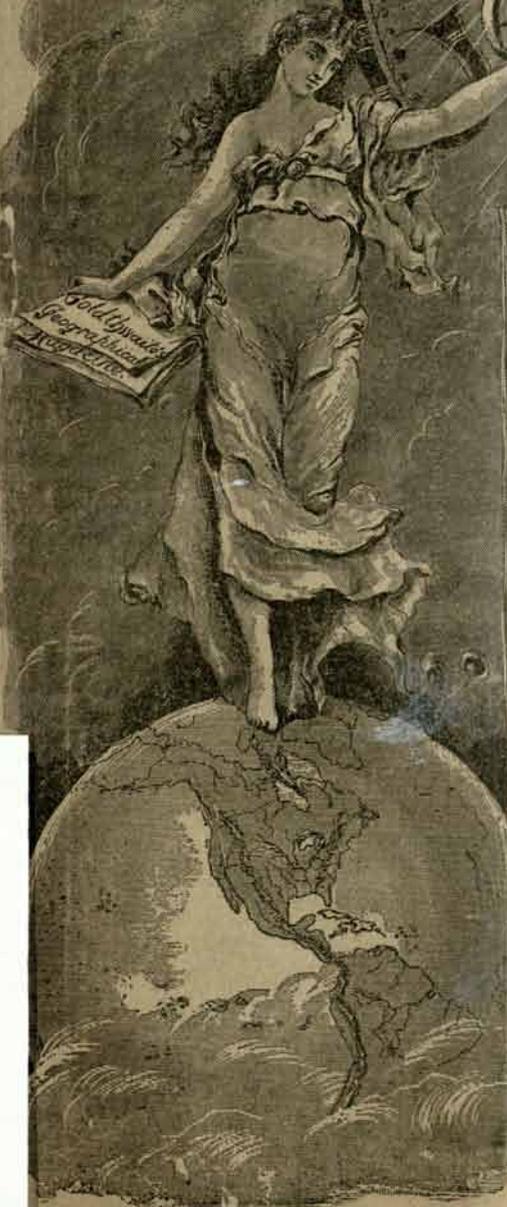
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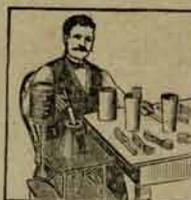
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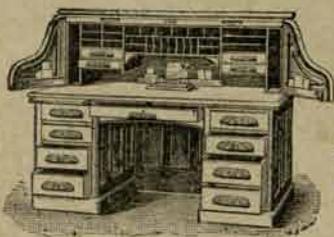
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THE THLING OF ALASKA.

By Bessie L. Putnam.



THE last census report numbers the natives of Alaska belonging to the Thlingit tribe as a little less than 4,800 souls. The majority of them inhabit the southeastern part of the territory, very few being found beyond Yakutat or below Prince Frederick sound. Their skin is lighter color than that of the average Indian, the facial expression usually good natured; the cheek bones are prominent, the eyes small, the face flat and wide. For generations they have spent the greater part of their time in canoes; hence the lower limbs have been only partially developed and exercised, the result of which shows in the ungainly manner of walking. As their methods of living have been greatly modified within the past few years, this defect in physical condition is gradually being corrected; use and exercise of the formerly almost unused members have done much to increase their efficiency, likewise to improve the personal appearance of their owner.

All of these people belong to one of two clans or totems, the Wolf or the Raven. These are divided into nearly forty sub-totems or phratries, as the Bear, Eagle, Shark, Frog, Beaver, etc., each of which has its chief whose power varies with his wealth and personal influence but is never absolute.

A man never marries one of his own clan; that is, one of the Raven clan must make an alliance with a Wolf, and *vice versa*. The children belong to the clan of the mother. (It would seem that the principle of woman's rights is not totally ignored even in the lowest depths of barbarism). A man's heirs are not his own but his sister's children as they belong to his own totem. The individual names, as a rule, refer to the sub-totem to which their possessor belongs. On this subject we find the following interesting note in a circular issued by the secretary of the Alaskan Society of Natural History, Miss Cassia Patton:

"A child receives various names at different periods of its life. The final name, which is purely a personal one, is usually taken from an ancestor on the mother's side. Most names, however, have some reference to the emblem to which the owner belongs, and on hearing it the Thlingites know at once to which totem the person belongs. For instance, at Wrangel, there is a male name, Sa-gatw, meaning voice like a frog. The frog is his emblem, and one knows at once that he belongs to the Raven group. Under one roof may be found people

belonging to two or more different totems or emblems, and, on the other hand, we may find the same emblem in three or four different houses. For instance, at Wrangel there are three houses where the frogs are found. These are distinguished as follows: the Ky-iks-a-deh, the Kagan-hit-tan (sun house people), and the Ti-hit-tan (bark house people)."

(Kiksadi)

For food, they find a great sufficiency and variety in the products of the sea and woods; dried salmon, halibut, and berries preserved in oil are their chief dependence in winter, though venison, bear, mountain sheep, and ground hog dried or boiled and preserved in the oil of the hair seal, herring, or porpoise form dishes by no means despised. They show no great liking for wild fowl, but the eggs of the sea gull, even after they have become rank, are eaten by them with avidity. Among fruits, native of their territory and esteemed as food, are our own strawberry, huckleberry, raspberry, thimble-berry, red and black currant; those not at once consumed are preserved for future use by drying, keeping in oil, or by macerating and covering with water; in the last case they are not considered ready for use until fermentation has taken place. It is stated that from the Thlingit point of view, a dressing of rancid oil is a great improvement to a dish of strawberries.

The salmon season begins about the first of July when the fish swarm up the fresh water streams to spawn. It is said that they collect in some of the pools in such great numbers as to almost solidly pack the surface. The waterfalls several feet high, which are numerous in these streams, though they may impede, do not prevent their progress, and it is not uncommon at such places to see a half dozen fish in the air at once in their frantic efforts to press onward and above the obstacle. The flesh loses its color, compact structure, and palatable taste by contact with fresh water, hence haste is made to capture it as soon as possible after it emerges from the briny deep. Hooks are never used for this purpose. At the mouth of the stream some are speared, others caught in nets. Those that succeed in passing this gauntlet are trapped in weirs, there to succumb to the spear or dip net. Each stream has its owner, and others who would fish there must give him satisfactory compensation for the privilege.

Halibut may be found in favored localities at almost any season, but are more plentiful during certain seasons of the year. The natives have made an extensive study of the habits of this fish, and could doubtless give to scientists some valuable information on this subject.

Their villages are oftentimes located on sites otherwise unfavorable, simply because they are near good halibut grounds. The census report gives the following items in regard to the methods employed to secure the fish:

"This fish varies in size from 20 to 120 pounds and is caught only with a hook and line. The fish stays close along the bottom, and is such a greedy feeder as to be readily caught by the clumsy hook. In fishing for halibut the canoe is anchored by means of stones and cedar bark ropes. The bait is lashed to the hook, a stone sinker attached to the line, and the contrivance lowered to the bottom. Sometimes the upper ends of the lines are attached to floats, and more than one line tended at a time. A fish being hooked is hauled up, played for a while, drawn alongside, grappled, and finally dispatched with blows of a club carried for the purpose. It requires no little skill to land a 100-pound halibut in a light fishing canoe. A primitive halibut fishing outfit consists of kelp lines, wooden floats, stone sinkers, an anchor line, a wooden club, and wooden fishhooks. It is impossible, with our most modern appliances, to compete with the Indians in halibut fishing. With their crude implements they meet with the most surprising success."

The surplus of fish, after due provision has been made for the necessities of winter, is converted into oil—the sauce indispensable for all food, be it fruit, meat, or the hard cakes made from the sea algae. Their manner of preparing it is extremely crude. The fish is cut into small pieces and placed in a wooden trough or canoe partly filled with water. Large stones are raised to a red heat, and with the aid of sticks or wooden shovels and thrown into the water; this raises it to a boiling point and partly cooks the fish. It is then allowed to cool, the oil that rises to the surface is carefully removed with wooden ladles and put away in bladders for future use. An inferior grade of oil, usually consumed at the time, is obtained by pressing the pieces of flesh between planks. A more savory dressing is the oil obtained from the heads of salmon and halibut which have been buried in the sand on the beach until they have become rancid.

The earliest visitors to these regions report no other garments worn by the natives than those fashioned from the skins of wild beasts, either in the form of furs or tanned leather. The outer garment worn by both sexes, a loose cloak of sea otter skin, was a great favorite with the early traders who eagerly bought all that were offered for sale, paying what seemed to the natives like fabulous prices. They were shrewd enough to discover before long that it was not profitable to cut into pieces skins which were so valuable, hence they substituted other material for their own wardrobe.

The northern tribes, notably the Chilkats, have long been adepts at the art of weaving blankets. Their warp is the bark of the cedar finely shredded and spun into a cord; the wool of the mountain goat dyed various colors, usually black, yellow, white, or rarely brown, furnishes yarn for the filling. These colors are fantastically arranged

in a pattern representing the totem of the owner, and the garment with its border of fringe is, when completed, a picturesque one at least.

As the fur traffic increased, the Indians gradually adopted the store blanket, at least as an outer garment. So popular did it become that it was even used as the common circulating medium; a man's wealth was estimated by the number of blankets he possessed; even the most atrocious crimes could be atoned for by a liberal use of this novel currency.

Among the native manufactures was a cloth of coarse grass or cedar fibers woven with the shaggy surface outside, rendering the fabric quite impervious to water, hence valuable for storm cloaks.

In a late report of the National Museum, Mr. Niblack in "The Coast Indians of Southern Alaska and Northern British Columbia" gives an interesting account of their industrial abilities.

"While the Thlingit, Haida, and Tsimshian are essentially wood-carvers, this is by no means their only talent. Out of the abundance of their resources they have not only adapted wood to their every need, but along with it have developed many other industries. They are, as well, expert carpenters, basket makers, weavers, and metal workers. Their tools are crude, but with them they accomplish the most surprising results. Along with the totemic system we find the identification of the individual with his totem carried out in the carving or painting of his crest on every article of personal property. The simplest implement or utensil is ornamented with some pictograph relating to the legends of the totem to which he belongs. Tattooed on the body, woven into fabrics, etched on the metal bracelets or ornaments, painted on the house fronts, drawn on the canoe outfits, emblazoned on the household boxes, carved on the huge columns, commemorated in metal, wood, and stone, the totem of the Indian is his earliest and latest care, yet it is all subservient to the ever-recurring struggle to live. In the circuit of the seasons a regular routine of duties is observed. In the time not devoted to hunting, fishing, and the procurement of food, the various arts and industries are practiced. In the summer camp odd hours are spent in cutting down trees, collecting furs, bark, and grasses, roughing out lumber, and in general collecting the raw materials which, in the winter's leisure, they convert into the various implements, utensils, and finished products for their own use and for trading purposes.

"Various kinds of grasses are gathered, and after being dried are dyed and trimmed to finished dimensions. Spruce roots are boiled until they become pliable, beaten with sticks, and the fibers picked into threads. The cedar bark, gathered for industrial purposes, is from the inside of the outer bark, that for food being scraped from the trunk itself. The former is soaked in water for several days, then beaten to

make it pliable enough to enable it to be stripped into shreds. * * * * "Other kinds of vegetable fiber, such as wild nettle and a species of wild hemp, are beaten on the rocks, shredded, and spun with a rude distaff and spindle into a strong twine or thread. * * * * Fiber of cedar bark, hemp, and goat's wool are spun into threads for use in weaving the blankets for which certain tribes are famous.

"The simplest cords or lines are those of kelp, sometimes single, sometimes laid up into two or more strands for additional strength as rope. The neatest ropes and cords, however, are made from strands of spruce root or bark fiber, the small stuff being dexterously twisted like our own ropes. A few of the most important uses to which different varieties of native cordage are put may be enumerated as follows: Warp for blankets, fishing lines, canoe anchor lines, sheets for sails, lashings for boxes, grommets for heads of chisels and wedges, head-dresses, girdles, guys for erecting columns, and dipping lines for turning the smoke-hole shutters of the houses.

"Mats are made principally of bark, and are used for bedding, for sails, and as covers for canoe cargoes. The coarser kinds are thrown over the canoes to protect them from the weather, and as screens for building temporary camps at night in traveling. The use of mats, however, for sails and tents has given place to the substitute already mentioned, cotton sheeting. Among the Thlingit, on ceremonial occasions, the chiefs were carried on mats, borne by the slaves from the canoes to the houses, or in embarking in state. Matting from the different parts of the northwest coast can be distinguished by the patterns and texture. * * * * In general the mats of the southern Indians are made of soft, red, pliable cedar bark, while those of the northern are stiffer, coarser, lighter in color, and bordered with black strips interwoven into the texture of the fabric."

A tribe of savages without some curious legends and superstitions would be an anomaly. Among those of the Thlingits is one that the bear is a man changed into that uncouth form. This fact, so the story goes, was discovered accidentally by the daughter of a chief. She went one day to pick berries and came upon a bear's track. As a punishment for the terms of ridicule which she applied to the beast it decoyed her into its lair, revealed to her its former condition, compelled her to assume an ursine form and marry it. Finally, her uncouth husband and children were slain by her kinsmen, she was permitted to resume her human form and return to her friends. Variations of this legend are common among other coast tribes, hence it is not strange that to this day when a native finds himself in proximity to a brown bear, profiting by the sad experience of the princess, he at once

says the most charming and flattering things he can think of about bears in general and this one in particular.

Previous to the purchase of this territory by our Government slavery was one of the dark features of their life; slaves were obtained either as spoils of war, by barter with other tribes, or were the offspring of female slaves. They were allowed no civil rights; were not allowed to own property, and even a present made to one of them became at once the property of his owner. They were seldom allowed to marry and never without the master's consent. A liberated slave became one of the lowest caste of the Thlingits and belonged to his mother's clan. They were often sacrificed on festive occasions, the old or diseased members being almost invariably chosen as victims, for the shrewd master had too keen an eye for financial prosperity to part with an able bodied slave. That a faint spark of mercy still shone in the heart of the Thlingit is shown by the fact that if the intended victim made his escape or temporarily concealed himself his life was spared. And it is added, further, that on more than one occasion a master has aided his favorites in making such escape.

The last rites performed at the death of a member of the tribe vary with the rank of the deceased. Slaves were accorded no burial but their bodies were cast into the sea. The poorer classes simply bury their dead with little or no ceremony. Formerly the bodies of sorcerers were placed in boxes fastened upon poles. Other persons of prominence were cremated upon funeral pyres. Previous to the final ceremony, a great feast was made by the relatives of the deceased to which none but those belonging to his wife's clan were eligible as guests. No stated time was fixed for the ceremony, and the body was often in an advanced state of decomposition before all were in readiness. The cremation process was conducted wholly by the guests, the relatives meantime howling, burning their hair by placing their heads in the flames, smearing their faces with ashes of the deceased, slashing their arms with sharp knives, or bruising their faces upon the rocks. When the body was reduced to ashes the guests repaired to the house of the widow. The relatives followed and commenced the funeral dirges; as they became exhausted the guests took up the song, and this was kept up for four successive nights, the only cessations being for taking refreshments. If the deceased was a man of wealth, one or two slaves were at this time slaughtered to serve him in the future life. On the fourth day the relatives washed their blackened faces, adorned them with a coat of bright paint, gave presents to the guests and especially to those who had been officious in burning the dead body, and the ceremony was ended with another feast.

The most important festivity of the tribe is that in memory of a deceased relative, "to glorify the dead," as they term it. Monuments

are often erected on such occasions, more, perhaps, to glorify the giver of the feast than the dead whose memory he strives to honor. Only the most wealthy indulge in these feasts, and guests are invited from all the settlements, even the most remote. As in civilized life, these elaborate banquets often reduce their host to bankruptcy; yet he is content to spend the rest of his life in poverty with the clear conscience of having glorified his ancestor.

Many of the customs alluded to in this paper have become, or are rapidly becoming, things of the past. Sorcerers are losing their influence; excepting in the more remote tribes, the blanket has been doffed for white man's ready-made clothing; pupils in the Sitka mission school object to being called Indians. "We are Alaskans," they say; potatoes for their own consumption and to sell are raised in their gardens, and the old method of cooking with hot stones has been replaced by the stove and modern cooking utensils.

They are ingenious, imitative, bright; and treat the women and especially the aged, with the utmost kindness.

Of their future prospects Mr. Niblack says: "Contact with the whites has staggered and arrested these Indians in their development. They are now adjusting themselves to a new mode of life. Although much reduced in numbers, they are far from being near extermination. Much is to be hoped for in the recent establishment of industrial and other schools, and in the general interest now taken in the Indians. In the prohibition and prevention of the sale of liquor to them a great step has been taken. Much more needs to be done in the suppression of prostitution, in the recognition of Indian rights to hunting and fishing grounds, and in medical assistance to a people childishy ignorant of the simplest laws of health. Their Indian doctors are fast disappearing, and with them much of the degrading superstition of an ethnical group capable of almost any rise in the scale of civilization."

A FARMER'S PHILOSOPHY

HE TUMBLES ON TO A FEW GOOD REASONS WHY THERE ARE HARD TIMES.

THERE is being so much said in this country about hard times and the scarcity of money, and as everybody has a cause and knows a remedy, I thought I would write to tell your readers what I think is the cause.

"We buy more than we produce.

"There is too much flour and bacon shipped here every year. The things we ought to make at home we are buying.

"We let our timber rot and buy our plow stocks, singletrees, ax handles, hoe handles and fencing.

"We throw away our ashes and buy soap and axle grease.

"We give away our beef hides and buy hamestrings and shoe-strings.

"We waste our manure and buy guano.

"We buy garden seed in the spring and cabbage in the winter.

"We let our land grow up in weeds and buy our brooms.

"We waste the wax out of our pine and gum trees and buy chewing gum for our children.

"We build schoolhouses and hire teachers and send our children off to be educated.

"We land a five cent fish with a four dollar fishing rod.

"We send a fifteen cent boy out with a twenty dollar gun and a four dollar dog to kill birds.

"We raise dogs and buy wool.

"And about the only things in this country that there is an over-production of are politics and dogtics."

A WONDERFUL CLOCK.

By E. R. E. Cowell.



RECENTLY asked a leading house in this line how close the best watches ran—what was the best time kept—the reply was: "the best time keepers are watches with lever encasements and chronometer balances—those of the best makers with care ought to run within *one second* variation per day. We have records of watches running ten months with variation of only *seven seconds*."

Full chronometer for the pocket are not in use as they are so very delicate a sudden motion is liable to effect them.

Chronometers are in use aboard ships as they are so balanced as not to be effected by the motion of the vessel, and are always in one position as they could not be if carried in the pocket and then laid in a horizontal position, &c.

A watch that will run for ten *months* with only seven seconds variation is indeed a wonderful time-keeper.

But what should you think of a clock which would run ten *years* with *no* variation at all? That would be a marvelous clock. Could human skill construct such a time-piece?