



## Focus Activity

### READ TO LEARN

How did the Tlingit use their environment?

### VOCABULARY

- technology
- totem pole
- potlatch

### PLACES

- Sitka

## LESSON 1



# Native Americans of the West

## Read Aloud

*"When I was growing up," says Marie Olson, whose Tlingit (TLIHNG iht) name is Kaayistaan (Kl yih stan), "I was taught to treat the environment with respect. . . . A fisherman would talk to a fish before catching it. He would say thank you for coming to his net."*

## THE BIG PICTURE

As you read in Chapter 3, Native Americans have lived for thousands of years in what is now the United States. In each of the five regions of the United States, Native American peoples created their own ways of life. Each group was strongly influenced by its environment.

The Western region of the United States has many different environments. Some Native Americans, such as the Mohave (moh HAH vee), lived in the mild climate of what is now southern California. Others, such as the Paiute (pi OOT), lived in the deserts of the Great Basin. After 1000 B.C., most people in the Western Hemisphere got most of their food by farming.

The Northwest Coast had a wet climate. Native Americans, such as the Chinook and Tlingit, lived in villages, but they did not farm. In this lesson you will learn how the Tlingit used the resources of the sea and how they lived.

## GEOGRAPHY OF THE NORTHWEST COAST

The Northwest Coast is a narrow area of land that extends just south from Anchorage, Alaska, to San Francisco, California. To the east are forests, plateaus, basins, and rivers. To the west is the Pacific Ocean. As you saw on the United States climate map on page 37, this area has a wet climate with mild winters and cool summers.

## Riches from the Forest and the Sea

How did the people of the Northwest Coast live without farming? First, the wet climate of the Northwest Coast helps plants to grow. The peoples of the Northwest Coast gathered roots and berries from the forests. Second, the forest was home to deer, elk, beaver, and bears. Third, Native Americans of this area got almost everything else from nearby streams, rivers, and the sea.

At sea, fishers in huge canoes caught large sea animals. On shore people gathered mussels, clams, and seabird eggs. Salmon was the most important food of the Northwest Coast peoples. Native Americans always knew when and where large numbers of salmon could be caught.

## The Salmon Run

The salmon run was, and still is, an important event in the lives of the Native Americans of the Northwest Coast. The salmon run is the yearly return of salmon to lay eggs in the freshwater rivers where they were born. From early spring to late summer, millions of them swim from the Pacific Ocean up the rivers.

During the salmon run, a family could catch over 1,000 pounds of fish. Men and women went to the river to catch the fish. The salmon was eaten, dried, or smoked, then stored for meals throughout the year.

On Washington State's Columbia River, a Native American fisher catches a salmon.

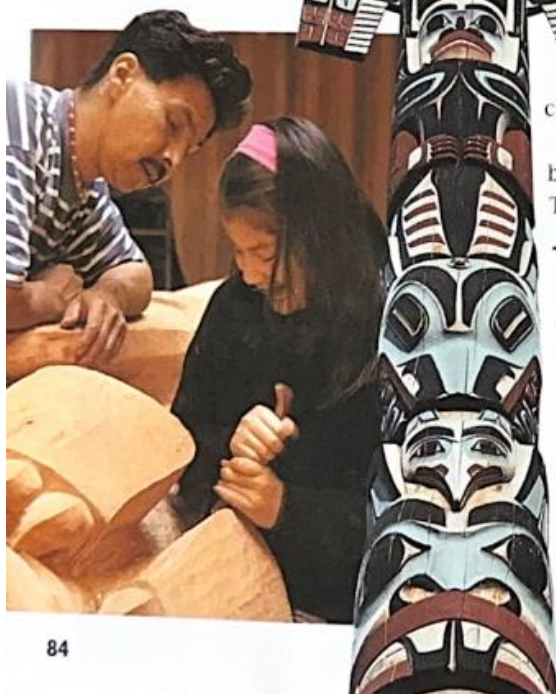




## THE TLINGIT

Today if you visited **Sitka**, Alaska, you would find a busy American city. Sitka stands in the heart of the Tlingit homeland of long ago. As you can see on the Infographic on page 76, the Tlingit lived in what is now the southernmost part of Alaska, along the Northwest Coast. Like others in this area, the Tlingit got most of their food from the sea. In winter they hunted animals from forests and mountains.

The Tlingit had water routes from the coast to other parts of the country. They could trade their surplus food for goods they needed. They even traded with the Inuit in the far north.



A Tlingit father teaches his daughter to carve a **totem pole** (far left). Someday her carvings may come to look like this totem pole (near left) in Haines, Alaska.

Their trade helped to make the Tlingit a wealthy people.

### Technology and Art

Because there was much food, the Tlingit could specialize in making art and developing **technology**. Technology is the design and use of tools, ideas, and ways to solve problems. The Tlingit used their technology to build dams and traps for catching salmon. They also made large canoes.

As skilled woodworkers, the Tlingit built large homes. In front of most houses stood a **totem pole**. Totem poles are tall logs carved with many designs. Most totem poles were 40 to 60 feet tall, but some were as high as 150 feet. Many totem poles were built to honor family members or new chiefs, or for special events.

Even everyday objects made by the Tlingit were beautiful. They were also very useful.

### The Potlatch

To mark an important event, a family sometimes held a **potlatch** (PAHT lach). Potlatches are special feasts at which the guests, not the



A Northwest Coast **potlatch** (above) was an elaborate event. Handmade baskets such as those shown below were often given as gifts by the Native American hosts of the feasts.

hosts, receive gifts. A potlatch, for example, might be held to honor a new chief or to celebrate a wedding.

It could take years for a family to prepare for a potlatch. A special gift was collected or made for each guest. A guest's importance determined what gift the host gave.

Suppose that you could attend a wedding potlatch. The host would wear one of the family's best woven blankets. The ceremony, which could last for days, would include songs and dances.

An important guest might receive a canoe or fur robe. The host

might give out hundreds of valuable gifts. In return, the host received the respect of the community.

To show how generous they were, each host's family tried to give more gifts than the hosts of the last potlatch. Sometimes the host's family gave away all of their valuables. Over time, wealth would return when the potlatch was held by another host. Potlatches may have been a way of sharing

wealth and determining social standing. They were also happy events.

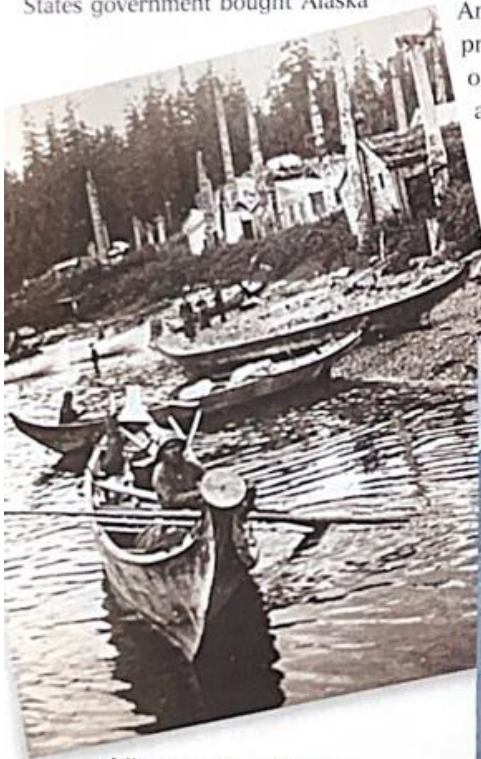




## CHANGE COMES TO THE TLINGIT

As you will learn in Chapter 6, contact with Europeans led to great changes in the cultures of many Native Americans. Russians were the first Europeans to become interested in Alaska. An explorer named Vitus Bering sailed from Russia in the mid-1700s across what is now called the Bering Strait.

Soon Europeans were trading with the Tlingit for fur. In 1867, the United States government bought Alaska



A Northwest Coast village in the early 1900s is shown above. Present-day Tlingit fishing boats are on the right.

from Russia. Sitka was the place where the Russians handed over control of Alaska to the United States. Alaska became our country's 49th state in 1959.

### Conflict with the Government

When their homeland became part of the United States, the Tlingit found it hard to keep their way of life. In some places, the United States government forced Northwest Coast peoples to move far from the ocean.

The Tlingit and other Native Americans in the area struggled to preserve their culture. As a result of efforts by Native Americans and the Inuit, the United States government passed the Alaska Native Claims Settlement Act in 1971. This law gave them back control of over 44 million acres of their original homelands.



## WHY IT MATTERS

Today Sitka is a major business center. Many of our country's 15,000 Tlingit work at logging and fishing. Some have moved to large cities. But the creation of beautiful artwork and the giving of potlatches are still an important part of Tlingit life.

Looking at how the Tlingit lived in the early 1700s, you can see how important environment is to people. To understand our country's history, it helps to learn about people and their environments all over the United States. The next lesson continues this story.

These members of a Tlingit dance group wear traditional dress during performances.



## Reviewing Facts and Ideas

### SUM IT UP

- The West includes many types of environments in which many different Native American peoples live.
- Native Americans of the Northwest Coast of North America developed a rich way of life that was based on resources from the sea.
- Because food was plentiful in their region, the Tlingit were able to spend time developing their technology and art.
- The potlatch is a feast at which the host gives away many valuable gifts to the guests. It is still an important part of Tlingit life.

### THINK ABOUT IT

1. What role did salmon fishing play in the life of Native Americans of the Northwest Coast?
2. What purposes does a potlatch serve?
3. **FOCUS** How did the Tlingit use the natural resources in their environment?
4. **THINKING SKILL** What conclusions can you make about the effect of trade on the Tlingit? On what information did you base your conclusions?
5. **WRITE** Suppose your class gave a potlatch. Write about your reasons for holding it and the activities you would plan.