



# WEST COAST

# RENAISSANCE

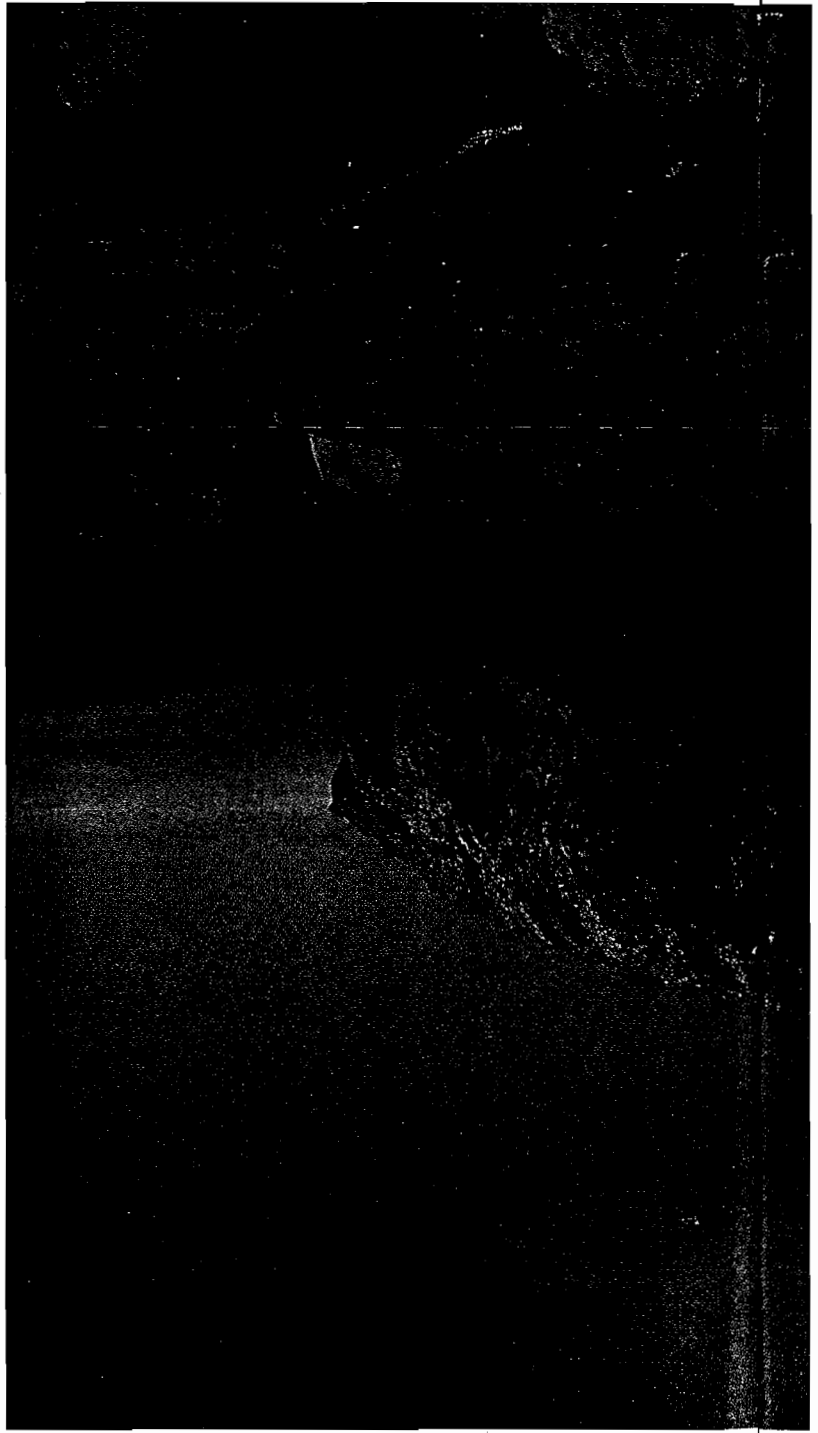
The people of Haida Gwaii are reclaiming their past and fighting to control their future, writes KEN MACQUEEN

**FOR LONG MONTHS** Andy Wilson and a floating band of helpers have laboured over a conception of his own design. Usually they work on the front deck of his home in the Haida village of Skidegate on B.C.'s Queen Charlotte Islands, drawing the curiosity of passers-by. A propane burner heats an aluminum beer keg filled with water. Pipes fanning from the top of the keg steam yet another cedar plank, precisely scored in three places. In 20 minutes—no more, no less—the cedar is pliable enough to fold into that marvel of West Coast Indian art and utility, the bentwood box.

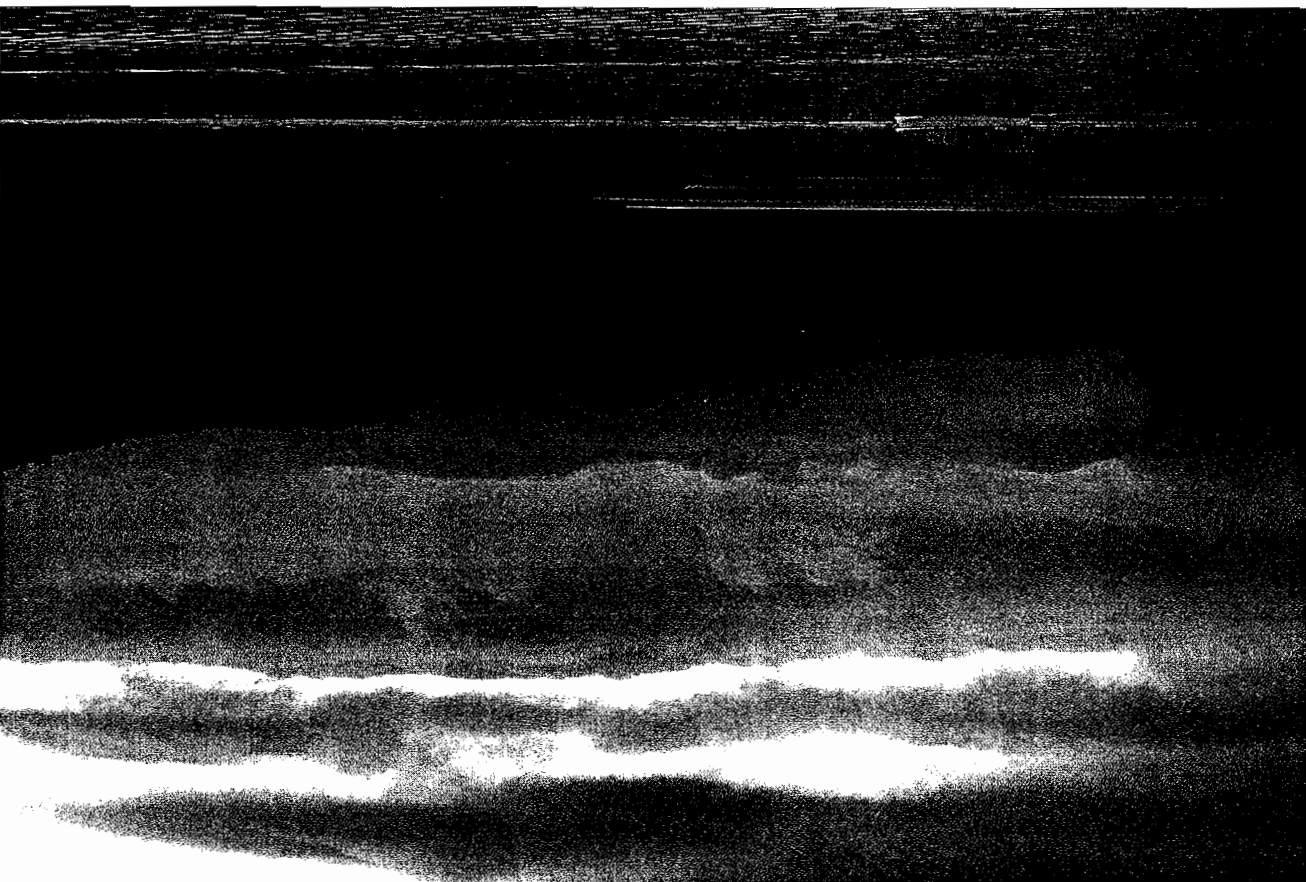
The people of Haida Gwaii, as the traditional inhabitants of the Charlotte Islands group tucked below the Alaskan panhandle, have used such richly decorated containers for uncounted centuries. There are few seams in the folded boxes, making them ideal for storing food or water, as they were used in the past. Such boxes are still utilized for the remains of the dead. This is the task that consumes Wilson on this fine fall day. The soft-spoken cultural interpreter and his pal Terry Williams, an artist and rock musician, were finishing the last boxes needed before a Haida delegation left for Chicago on Oct. 10 to recover the bones of 150 of the innumerable ancestors whose remains were plundered from the islands at the turn of the previous century.

Wilson, among a delegation of 30 Haida, will spend this week at Chicago's imposing Field Museum, preparing the remains for their return and burial in the cemeteries at the Haida reserve villages of Skidegate and Old Masset. Members of the Haida repatriation

Hereditary chief Jones is angered by the callousness with which his people's remains were plundered



PHOTOGRAPH BY CHRISTOPHER MORRIS



Brochures note the islands supported the Haida culture for more than 10,000 years'

Far from it. The Haida, once the most feared warriors and seafarers on the coast, have staged a remarkable renaissance. The population has rebounded to about 6,000, half of whom live on the islands. Haida art, in the decades since carvers Bill Reid and Robert Davidson sparked a revival, is revered by collectors around the world. Politically, the Haida are again a force to be reckoned with, though warriors today pack an arsenal of lawyers. Last year, the Haida filed writ in the B.C. Supreme Court, claiming that the province and Canada "unlawfully occupied and exploited the resources of Haida Gwaii" and "interfered with the culture and livelihood of the Haida Nation." They claim compensation, and Aboriginal title to the islands and the seabed. The case, bolstered by solid evidence of Haida occupation for 10,000 years, unsettles some of the 3,500 non-Haida on the islands. It has profound implications for the province and for industry licenses, which have taken billions in timber, fish and mineral resources from the

ple that were thought to be dying out." **Brochures note the islands supported the Haida culture for more than 10,000 years'**

committees in the two villages have recovered about 350 bodies in the past seven years from such institutions as the Canadian Museum of Civilization in Gatineau, Que., and the American Museum of Natural History in New York City. It's always a logistical challenge with a heavy emotional toll. "It's no different than preparing some-body in your family for burial," says Wilson, who, among others, has become an expert in the mass production of beaver wood burial boxes. While there is a strong Haida belief that a person's spirit is reincarnated, many also feel the spirit is unsettled if bones are uprooted from their resting place. "They want to come home," says Wilson, whose gentle ways hide a relentless determination. "They don't want to be in a foreign place."

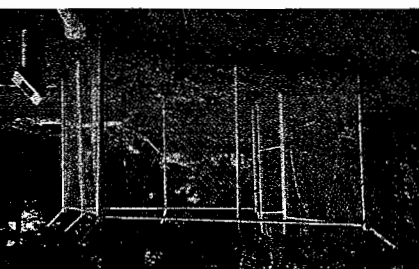
The bones have sat in storage at the Chicago museum for a century. By the time they were plundered, between 1897 and 1903, the Haida, who are believed to have numbered almost 10,000 before European contact, were decimated by smallpox, introduced by

of England, take her skeleton and put it in our museum and see how they feel." Returning the bones is "the right thing to do, ethically," says the Field Museum's reputation specialist, Helen Robbins. It's a view increasingly held by curators struggling to maintain their collections without victimizing the cultures they purport to celebrate. Still, the institution makes no apology. "Following common museum practice at that time," the museum says in a news release, "the anthropologists were collecting and preserving specimens from a group of peo-

**AFTER a century in a Chicago museum, the bones 'want to come home. They don't want to be in a foreign place.'**

traders and settlers. Villages throughout the archipelago were abandoned as fewer than 600 surviving Haida regrouped in Skidegate and Old Masset. Anthropologists and treasure hunters swept in, gathering Haida remains and artifacts for public and private collections in North America and Europe, with a callousness that still enrages many. "Maybe it's time to get even," says Roy Jones, a hereditary chief from Skidegate. "Let's get one of the old queens of England, take her skeleton and put it in our museum and see how they feel."

**CHILD OF K'IID K'YASS**



A tall fence protects the tiny Sitka spruce

**A TREE GROWS in Port Clements—in protective custody.** The Sitka spruce, not yet knee-high, has an honoured place in the millenium park in this Queen Charlotte Islands logging village. Strangers admiring its curiously golden needles feel the protective stares of passing locals. This tree is not for cutting. It grows within a three-metre-high chain-link enclosure, topped with barbed wire. "This fence is here for a reason," says Betty Stewart, a volunteer, as she clears weeds from around the spindly trunk. The spruce is a cutting rescued six years ago from its dying parent, the beloved Golden Spruce—once the rarest giant on these magnificent forested islands. To the Haida, it was *K'iid K'iyass* or Old Tree, though at 300 years it was a relative youngster amid a stand of old growth on the banks of the nearby Yakoun River. When the sun shone, locals say, the tree seemed lit from within, its colour, due to a lack of chlorophyll, was a scientific puzzle: how did it survive?

Its beauty spared it from loggers, only to make it the target of self-described environmental crusader Grant Hadwin. "I don't care much for 'treaks' whether they teach in university classrooms, perform in the circus or are put on display as examples of old growth forest conservation," he later wrote of his January 1997 chainsaw massacre. Hadwin vanished before his trial, after setting out, inexplicably, in a sea kayak from Prince Rupert on the mainland to cross treacherous Hecate Strait for a court date on the islands. Months later the wreckage of his boat washed up in Alaska. Many here suspect he faked his death to escape justice.

Haida elders insisted the sacred tree be left where it fell, to return to the earth. It remains there today, a few of its greying branches hanging in the chill Yakoun River. K.M.

It was Guujaaw, in September, who laughed as he told the story. "I was a young boy, and I was in the village of Port Clements. He has talents in more places than any one person should have them."

Guujaaw calls the offer, made without consultation, "pure mischief." To even consider it is to accept a notion he considers preposterous: that somewhere, somehow, the Haida surrendered their lands to the Crown. "There's still a Haida Nation in place," he says, "whether they like it or not."

Provincial tourism booklets refer to the Haida Nation as having "supported the Haida culture for more than 10,000 years." The

late Bill Reid. As an eco-warrior, he helped chase logging off the bottom end of South Moresby Island in the 1970s, leading to the creation of the Gwaii Haanas National Park Reserve and Haida Heritage Site. The site is jointly run by the Haida and Parks Canada, a model for the future administration of the islands. "He annoys me exceedingly," says his friend Dale Lore, the non-Native mayor of the logging village of Port Clements. "He has talents in more places than any one person should have them."

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**Non-Natives and Aborigines now co-operate to protect the area's resources**



JUST NORTH of Skidegate, a retreating ice age deposited a massive boulder on the beach. It rests, improbably, on a small point of rock, a base so precarious it should have been toppled centuries ago by wind or wave. Instead, Balance Rock endures, about as solid a metaphor as you'll find for contemporary Haida Gwaii's struggle for equilibrium. The balance of the economy versus the environment, the balance of cultures, the balance of rights. The rules of engagement are being rewritten as the resurgent Haida wrest back a greater measure of control.

At the forefront is Guujaaw, the burly 50-year-old elected president of the Haida Nation. He's equally adept at hunting for razor clams or sifting through legal minu-

And it imperils the B.C. government's goal of having an offshore oil platform in the region by 2010. The ancestral remains, so carefully catalogued by museums, are yet more proof of the Haida historic claim, but Wilson says firmly, "repartition isn't about politics." He slides across his kitchen table a long list provided by the museum, heart-breaking in detail: "Shaman, partial, cave, north island," "Partial skeleton, village, 1.5 miles south of Masset"; "Fragmentary infant, Katsun." Wilson smiles, anticipating the incredulous question he's heard before from air freight carriers and customs agents. "You're bringing back what?" The inevitable follow-up question is, why were they taken. "And," he sighs, "we can't answer that."

trial past. The advantage of the Haida over outside interests, she says, "is they're here. They have a concern for what's going to go on down the road."

Perhaps the best indicator of the shifting balance of power is the unlikely alliance formed last year between the Haida and most of the islands' loggers. The association was driven by concerns that Weyerhaeuser, with the province's sanction, was cutting at unsustainable levels. Siding with the Haida was a matter of self-interest, says Lore, a logging-road builder and 18-year-resident of the Charlottes: the Haida are best able to defend the islands' long-term interests. Lore subsequently was elected mayor of Port Clements on a platform of greater municipal co-operation with the Haida—a vote, he says with a chuckle, that about demolished the village's reputation as a redneck haven.

Where that relationship leads, Lore doesn't pretend to know. He's troubled by two unresolved issues: "We still must have confirmation that, with the strength the Haida have in their court position, they will share power. That isn't assured yet." And, can the islands' residents gain control of the resources while there's still enough left for the local economy? Of one thing he's certain: "If we don't work something out with the Haida, I don't see any future here for my children."

**THE BENTWOOD** boxes, as Andy Wilson knows, are as much for the living as the dead, as much for the future as the past. The ancestors offer a history lesson. Elementary students in Skidegate and Old Masset sewed the black-and-red blankets decorated with burtons that will be used to wrap the bones. High-school students in Haida-studies class painted many of the boxes where those bones will be placed.

He takes a limp cedar plank from the steam rack and sets it on his deck, straining to make three quick folds. The cedar bends without breaking, a minor Haida miracle. Flexibility can be coaxed from the most unlikely objects. It's a matter of preparation, Wilson says, and just the right amount of pressure. In these tumultuous times on Haida Gwaii, maybe there's a lesson there, too.

province's statement of defence in the title

case, though, reads: "British Columbia does not admit the existence of the 'Haida Nation.'" That one legal sentence negates much of what Guujaaw holds dear: the crumbling totems, the ancient trove of artifacts, the old stories of myth and history passed on from parents and grandparents. The province also claims the islands' Aboriginal people "abandoned the sites they occupied." It neglects, though, to add the reason why: the epidemic of white-borne smallpox raging in the mid-1800s. Mass graves were dug, longhouses were burned, bodies were dumped at sea because there weren't enough surviving Haida to tend to their dead. When the last bones are recovered from the world's museums, Wilson has promised, there'll be a final end-of-mourning ceremony for those troubled spirits, too. Guujaaw considers them victims of germ warfare. Colonization wasn't possible, he says, "unless they wiped us out in that kind of way. That's part of our case in court; that kind of warfare isn't legitimate." As lunch concludes, he fixes a visitor with a stare. Not trying to sell anything, just stating what he sees as fact: "Our people, without question, will win this title case."

Many on the island are inclined to agree. They cite a B.C. Court of Appeal ruling last year that effectively forced American forest giant Weyerhaeuser Co., holder of the largest logging licence on the islands, to consult and accommodate the Haida in advance of treaty settlements. The ruling, under appeal to the Supreme Court of Canada, caused the company to reduce its cut. Notably, the judges based the ruling on "a reasonable probability" of the Haida eventually winning title to parts of Haida Gwaii.

From her cozy home in Port Clements, Betty Dalzell, the 84-year-old daughter of pioneering white settlers, has watched "barge load after barge load" of logs carried off-island for processing elsewhere, leaving little behind but stumps. She remembers three booming mills in her village alone. "What do I think if they take over," she says of the Haida, "I couldn't care less. Black, white, pink or blue, you're going to get good guys and bad guys." Dalzell has written three histories of the islands and helped establish the village's

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