



WRANGELL COOPERATIVE ASSOCIATION
Shakes Island Renovation Project

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Wrangell Cooperative Association Adzers Learn to Make Bentwood Boxes

Local adzers use both ancient and modern techniques for making bentwood boxes

Wrangell, Alaska – 10/24/2011 Steam pours from a steam box supported by a partially adzed plank as local adzers Susie Kasinger, Linda Churchill and Tammi Meissner prepare to insert cedar boards. Master carver Wayne Price quickly closes the lid and they let the boards absorb the steam for 10 minutes.

Under the gentle direction of Wayne Price, the adzers had carefully placed cross cut and carved dovetail shaped dados evenly spaced along the length of the boards the previous day. They then bundled the boards, tied them together using lengths of rubber and weighted them with rocks. Finally, they sunk the board bundle to the bottom of the harbor below the low tideline and left them for 24 hours.

“They didn’t sink on the first try,” said Tammi Meissner. “We didn’t have a big enough rock and when we threw the boards in the water, they floated the rock!” She laughs and then says “Wayne said to us ‘Always a work in progress.’ So, we added another rock and now it’s nice and heavy.”

A pressure cooker sitting on a propane camp stove heats the water and produces the steam for the steam box. The steam travels through a tube attached to the pressure valve on the top of the cooker to the wooden steam box. Inside the box, cleats hold the boards and allow the steam to reach the most surface area. The box can be opened at either end with a removable lid and wood chips or other materials are stuffed in any cracks where steam escapes.

When the boards are ready, the bending goes fast and it suddenly seems noisy in the shed with two boards being bent by two groups of two people each while the radio plays local station KSTK loudly in the background.

“Are you ready?” Wayne Price asks adzer Linda Churchill. Then, “nice and easy” he comments as she begins to bend her board.

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“You want me to hold that?” Susie Kasinger asks Tammi Meissner and comes over to help as Tammi also attempts to bend her board. Once Linda gets her board bent all the way around, she holds it in place while Wayne wraps strips of rubber tightly two times around then ties the strip off to itself. In the meantime, Tammi can’t get her board to make the last bend so she unbends it and puts it back in the steamer for a few more minutes.

The bentwood boxes sit overnight in the carving shed and are then moved into a nearby heated building for further drying. Boxes with adzed surfaces are slated for project fundraising. Once the boxes are dry, they will be glued closed and, again under Wayne’s tutelage, the adzers will learn to make bottoms and lids.

While the less experienced local adzers have been making bentwood boxes, the more experienced adzers from out of town have been working on various projects including making paddles, flutes, and making, repairing and sharpening carving tools.

The local adzers are learning these additional carving skills during a lull in adzing due to a wood supply disruption. Wayne Price recently traveled to nearby Etolin Island and selected new cedar logs, which are presently being milled into fresh planks. The rhythmic thunk of multiple adzes hitting wood is expected to resume this week.



Local adzer Tammi Meissner holds a bundle of cedar boards that have been soaking in the harbor for 24 hours and are now ready for bending.



Adzer Susie Kasinger looks on while master carver Wayne Price opens the steam box lid and adzers Linda Churchill and Tammi Meissner prepare to insert their bentwood box boards.



Local Adzer Linda Churchill holds her still steaming bentwood box.



Adzer Tammi Meissner and master carver Wayne Price work the second bend in her bentwood box.



Adzer Justin Smith from Whitehorse, Canada holds a paddle that he’s been carving this week in the shed.



Adzer Josh Lesage holds flutes that he’s been teaching the other adzers how to carve outside of working hours.

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Additional photos available upon request.

About Shakes Island

Shakes Island is located in the harbor at Wrangell, Alaska and contains the Chief Shakes Historic Site, a National Register site that receives over 10,000+ visitors a year. The island stands as one of the few lasting reminders of Southeast Alaska Natives and their unique totemic art. The site's main feature is a replica of a 19th century Tlingit tribal house which is set on the authentic location historically occupied by Chief Shake's lineage. Not only is the site important to the national chronology of Native-white contact, it is still used today for Tlingit ceremonies and contains the prized clan artwork – at.óow – of the Stikine Tlingits. Shakes Island is owned and operated by the WCA.

About the Shakes Island Renovation Project

The Shakes Island tribal house was completed in 1940 built by collaboration between the CCC, the Forest Service and the local Tlingit tribe. Except for minor repairs, no major reconstruction has taken place to the structure. Because the tribal house is listed on the National Historic register, the replacement timbers must be hand adzed. Master carvers from other communities are overseeing and training locals to complete the adzing. The old structure needs to be dismantled and then a new structure erected in its place with the hand-adzed timbers, new electrical and a new roof of split cedar shakes. The totem poles on the island also need to be refurbished. When the project is complete, a celebration of project completion will be held. Learn more or make a donation to the project at www.ShakesIsland.com.

About the Wrangell Cooperative Association

Wrangell Cooperative Association (WCA) is the federally recognized tribe of the Stikine River region. WCA's charter was approved by the Department of the Interior in 1942. The tribe's mission is to support the cultural, ceremonial and subsistence lifestyle for all Alaskans and to promote the safe use and availability of a healthy environment for present and future generations. WCA provides social services, employment and educational opportunities to both the tribe and the Wrangell community. Of the 2,000 residents of Wrangell, approximately 800 are tribal members.