
Lost and Found in New Mexico: The Revitalization of a Tlowitsis Crest Pole

“Thank you for the hard work, the dedication, that has been put in to make this day happen, to peacefully correct what had happened in the past, and thank you from the bottom of our hearts. This is from me and my family.”

- Chief Danial Smith, Tlowitsis Nation,
University of New Mexico, September 2017

For 75 years, a masterfully carved 40-foot crest pole from British Columbia stood outdoors on the University of New Mexico (UNM) campus in Albuquerque.

In the mid 1960s it was moved to the open-air courtyard of UNM Maxwell Museum of Anthropology, where it was installed without signage or interpretation. Little was known about its history until 2013, when UNM art history graduate student, India Rael, initiated research under the supervision of Dr. Beverly Singer, UNM Associate Professor of Anthropology and Native American Studies. Her research uncovered details of the pole’s early history as part of a story of colonial exploitation, re-connection, collaboration, and ultimately, revitalization (Fig. 1).



Figure 1.
In December 2016, Chief Danial Smith greets the Smith Family Pole installed in the courtyard of the Maxwell Museum of Anthropology, University of New Mexico. His Chiefs Hat contains initials of prior chiefs dating to his great grandfather who originally commissioned the pole. (Image courtesy of UNM.)

As with all collaborative work, issues of ownership, authority, representation, meaning, and cultural aesthetics are brought to the fore. How is indigenous cultural heritage treated and presented and who decides? As a result of the collaborative approach for this project, creative and unique treatment solutions were developed and carried out by the conservators together with the Tlowitsis carvers.

Uncovering the crest pole history

Ms. Rael’s research revealed that the pole was carved in 1907 for Chief Peter Smith (Siwid) of the Tlowitsis Nation, one of the Kwakwaka’wakw tribes in the Pacific Northwest. The carver was the renowned Charles Yakuglis James, likely assisted by his equally talented apprentice, Mungo Martin.

Represented in the pole are the crest figures for the Smith family, from bottom to top: Numas, or first man (gəlgəlis), first to walk in this world and who holds the people of the Tlowitsis Nation up; great horned owl (textexalił); river otter (Xwəmdi) or black bear (t’la’yi); whale (ğwəyəm); wolf (uligen); human (bəğwanəm); and on top a kingfisher (kədalawi).

The pole was raised in front of Chief Smith’s house in the village of Kalagwees on Turnour Island, British Columbia, where it stood until 1941 (see http://www.emilycarr.org/totems/exhibit/kwak/kalugwis/pn_hm/15557.htm for an *in situ* image). In the summer of that year it was removed under dubious circumstances by UNM anthropologist, Frank C. Hibben, who dragged it behind his boat to Alaska where it was transferred to a train to New Mexico.

Despite questionable acquisition documentation, the pole was accessioned into the UNM Maxwell Museum’s collection in 1942 (MM 42.9.3). Hibben later claimed that the village had been abandoned, but this defense rang hollow given his familiarity with the Smith family and their seasonal shifts between the village and summer camps. One can only imagine the shock felt by the community to find this important pole, which had stood for 34 years, simply gone.

The Smith family reported the theft to the Canadian police, but the claim was never pursued. The community dispersed in the 1960s due to a lack of government funding for schools and medical care. Perhaps in an attempt to obfuscate the pole’s actual provenance, Hibben later asserted that the pole was Tlingit, not Kwakwaka’wakw at all.

Extricated from its rainy Pacific Northwest home to the high desert climate of New Mexico, the pole was mounted into the ground, supported by a metal strongback pole bolted along its hollowed out back side, and the lowest section of the pole and base filled with concrete aggregate. Exposed to the elements, the pole experienced significant weathering, various pests, episodes of repair, and at least one repainting, over the ensuing decades.

Reconnection and moving forward

As Ms. Rael researched the pole, UNM Maxwell Museum curator of exhibits, Devorah Romanek, posted images on Facebook which were spotted by descendants of the original carver as well as by the chiefly Smith family from whom the pole had been taken. Eventually, a dialog was opened between the Tlowitsis community, culminating in a 2016 agreement approved by both parties.

The Smith family did not request a repatriation of the pole but rather a restoration and revitalization. The agreement included the following:

- Ownership will be restored to the Smith family.
- The pole will stay at UNM as a loan from the Smith family, with periodic reviews for possible renewal of the loan.
- The pole will be appropriately renamed for the Smith family.
- The pole will be restored as part of its renewal and re-connection to its community.
- A didactic panel with contextual cultural information about the pole will be included with the re-installation.
- UNM will acknowledge the wrong that was done in removing the pole.
- UNM will fund the carving of a new pole to be placed where the original pole had stood on Turnour Island.

Preparing the pole for restoration

The decision to restore and re-paint the pole was made by its rightful owner, the current chief, Danial Smith. For the Smith family, the restoration encompassed a range of actions that would revitalize the pole, re-connecting the pole with the Tlowitsis people. The person selected by the Smith family to carry out this enormous responsibility was renowned carver/artist, Tommy Hunt, Jr., a descendant of the original carver of the pole.

All parties agreed that the pole would be moved from the courtyard to a covered atrium. In a twist of extreme irony, that atrium is located in UNM's Hibben Center for Archaeology Research, named for the very archaeologist who had, in his own words, "secured" the pole from the Smith family.

Preliminary actions

Conservator Landis Smith (no relation) was contracted by UNM Maxwell Museum curator of ethnology and Alfonso Ortiz Center for Intercultural Studies director, Lea McChesney, to lead the conservation of the pole with the goal of working collaboratively with Mr. Hunt to prepare the pole for its restoration and rejuvenation.

A first meeting between Landis and museum staff included a brief visual assessment of the pole's condition as well as a probe test; the test found the wood to be surprisingly sound beneath the weathered sapwood reducing concerns about moving the pole. A prior consultation with Alaska state conservator, Ellen Carlee, as well as more recent consultations with UNM engineer, Mark Manzano, and Museums of New Mexico director of conservation, Mark MacKenzie, greatly informed the plan for moving the pole.

Because the below-ground (uncarved) section of a pole was never meant to be seen, it is a common practice in Alaska

to cut off this segment when moving a pole to an above-ground platform mount. Therefore, as a first step in the moving process, the uncarved base of the pole was cut off, the wood section saved and later used by Tommy Hunt in the restoration. In addition, the concrete aggregate was shattered and the pieces removed as well as the metal strongback. Great care was taken to avoid damaging the wood.

Landis raised concern about pest eradication, necessary before bringing the pole indoors. The solution was to rent a 50-foot freezer truck. The pole, rigged for lifting by crane from the courtyard to the truck parked nearby, was kept in the truck before being moved into the atrium area of the Hibben Center.

Once there, a new strongback was fabricated and bolted to the pole's back, and the pole was propped horizontally on sawhorses until its final installation.

Collaborative decisions, examination, and treatment

Discussions with Tommy Hunt

Prior to freezing and with the pole placed horizontally in the freezer truck, the upper sections of the pole were, for the first time, accessible for close examination (Fig. 2). This was the opportune time for project team members to meet with Tommy Hunt to discuss a plan for the pole's restoration.



Figure 2.
Carver/
Artist
Tommy
Hunt, Jr.,
examines
the pole in
the freezer
truck.
(Image
courtesy
of Landis
Smith.)

Preliminary examination confirmed that although the crest pole was largely intact, it showed extensive weathering, the result of decades of sun, wind, rain, blowing sand, and summer to winter temperature extremes in an arid environment (Fig.3).

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Figure 3. The pole on sawhorses after being moved to the atrium of the Hibben Center, ready to be prepared for the carvers. The area with the “X” in the foreground indicates where the pole will be mounted. (Image courtesy of Mina Thompson.)

The original paint had been mostly lost, as well as much of the re-painting done at UNM at some point after the pole was first installed in 1941. In addition, there were losses in the wood as well as some missing appendages, namely the whale tail and flippers and the wolf ears. The head of the topmost figure, the kingfisher, suffered major losses, including the area behind the beak, likely due to exposure to the elements (Fig. 4).



Figure 4. Detail of the pole showing numerous concrete and plaster fills in the kingfisher figure's proper right side. Note the beak, which does not match the head. (Image courtesy of Mina Thompson.)

Much of the loss had been previously filled with white plaster. The beak was determined to be a later replacement because it was shorter than the original would have been and did not fit well to the head of the bird, to which it was attached with a long bolt. The body of the kingfisher was also found to have very significant losses, some caused by knots in the wood, others possibly the result of bird activity, perhaps woodpeckers.

A metal cap, likely a lead alloy, had been nailed to the top of the kingfisher's head, protecting the exposed endgrain of the red cedar pole. Metal caps are commonly attached to the tops of carved poles to provide a measure of protection, preventing water from seeping down the center of the pole. However, in the case of the Smith Family pole, it appears that the cap was attached after a good deal of damage had already been done.

Landis and Tommy Hunt together planned a course of treatment to prepare the pole. Due to the tight time framework of four weeks for this project and given the size of the pole, Landis recommended that two more local conservators, Mina Thompson and Rae Beaubien, be asked to lend their skills and expertise to the project.

Together with Mr. Hunt, the group concluded that the conservators' main goal was to prepare the pole as much as possible for the carvers' restoration. This would include removing all previously applied fills and hardware for insertion by the carvers of newly made red cedar fills and replacement parts, and removing particulate and flaking overpaint, for repainting by the artists.

Preparing for the carvers' arrival

During a two-week period before the carvers' arrival, the conservators began preparing the pole by removing non-wood materials, used to fill 48 voids in the pole. These ranged in size from one to six inches in diameter and were concentrated on the proper right side of the pole.

The roughly-executed fills – 39 concrete and nine plaster – were removed by employing a combination of drills, blades, rubber and rawhide mallets, awls, stiff-bristle brushes, chisels, and vacuums (Fig. 5). Dozens of mostly ferrous nails and long bolts, used in conjunction with the fills and to secure wood figural attachments to the pole, were removed with pliers.



Figure 5. Conservators Rae Beaubien, left, and Mina Thompson drilling and chiseling out the fills. Note the metal cap, which obscures extensive plaster fill in the kingfisher's head. (Image courtesy of Landis Smith.)

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Loose paint was removed in order to provide a smoother surface for new layers of paint. Oral history of the maintenance of the pole at UNM, in combination with a comparison of photographs taken *in situ* in ca. 1933 in Kalagwees village and after installation at UNM, indicate that most of the visible paint was from a later repainting at UNM. To remove non-original flaking paint and particulates, the conservators used various wire brushes, blades, dental tools, and vacuums.

Working with the carvers

Once Tom Hunt and his apprentice, Bertram Smith, arrived at UNM, the treatments themselves became a truly collaborative effort. As the work progressed, treatment strategies changed and adapted as new condition issues came to light. A constant dialog and flexible approach were critical to maintaining a collaborative relationship and project.

Filling losses in the pole

The carvers brought newly carved red cedar appendages to replace the missing parts – flippers and tail for the whale figure and ears for the wolf (Fig. 6). These components were attached by the carvers, first holding them in place with screws to do final carving to shape them to the pole. They then removed the screws, filled the previously made screw holes with wood pegs and adhered the pieces to the pole with a commercial PVA wood glue.



Figure 6. Detail showing the new red cedar whale fins and one of the wolf ears carved by Tommy Hunt, Jr., in the background. Mr. Hunt is working on the other ear for a final fit into the wolf head. (Image courtesy of UNM.)

The kingfisher at the top of the pole required the combined attention of both the conservators and the carvers. Because Tommy Hunt had made the decision to replace the existing beak with a newly carved one, he asked that the conservators remove the current beak as part of the pole preparation. The bolts holding the beak in place were removed by the conservators and the old beak detached. This revealed the enormous extent of loss within the bird's head, which had previously been filled with plaster.

After discussion with Mr. Hunt, it was agreed that the conservators should remove as much plaster as possible and then create a new fill, especially in the area behind the beak, which would be strong enough to withstand drilling and pegging the new beak in place. Mr. Hunt left the choice of fill material to the conservators.

To meet the above criteria, the conservators selected Araldite AV 1253, a two-part epoxy putty with phenolic microballoons for the fills. The putty was applied over a barrier layer of mulberry tissue affixed to the surfaces of the loss with methyl cellulose. The first Araldite fill was made in the area directly behind the beak, and so was brought flush with the surface. The second fill, located in the large loss along the proper left side of the kingfisher's head, was recessed to provide room for the carvers to attach a superficial cedar wood fill on top of the Araldite (Fig. 7).



Figure 7. Detail of the Araldite fills in the kingfisher head as seen from the proper left side of the head. The fill for the beak is the light-colored flat surface on the top of the image; the other is the light-colored rectangle recessed into the large loss along the side of the head. Neither of these fills would be visible after attachment of the replacement beak and red cedar surface fills along the large gap. (Image courtesy of Rae Beaubien.)

This cedar fill and the newly carved cedar beak were both secured into the Araldite fill by first drilling and then inserting traditional wood pegs, set in place with a commercial wood glue (Fig. 8).

Figure 8: Detail of the proper left side of the kingfisher head, with the beak and cedar fills in place. The beak is fully shaped and already painted white, while the cedar fills along the side have only been roughed in. The white ring is Milliput epoxy putty filling gaps around the cedar plug. The small wooden pegs would be cut down to be invisible. (Image courtesy of Mina Thompson.)



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The body of the kingfisher also presented some challenges. Removal of the small concrete fills exposed a huge cavity within the kingfisher's body, extending into the human figure below. According to oral history in the UNM Anthropology Department, the cavity may have been made by woodpeckers. Numerous rocks and brick fragments, perhaps added by UNM students to deter further woodpeckers or other nesting creatures, along with a wasps' nest and foam peanuts, were extricated by the conservators.

Given the extent of the cavity in the body of the kingfisher and the thinness of the wood, the group agreed that some kind of fill was called for. Mr. Hunt proposed to carve long cedar plugs, but these would need to be anchored against the cavity wall and the gaps surrounding the plugs would need to be filled. Landis recommended that the fill material be compatible with the wood of the pole and plugs, and proposed a paper pulp mixed with methyl cellulose and a small amount of an archival polyvinyl acetate emulsion, Jade 403.

In order to anchor the two large cedar plugs and ensure reversibility, a barrier layer of mulberry tissue was applied to the interior wall of the cavity with methyl cellulose adhesive before the paper pulp fills were applied. The tissue was tamped down to ensure conformity with the irregular surface of the interior wall and allowed to dry. A "pillow" of macerated archival blotter paper pulp/methyl cellulose/Jade 403 was then pressed against the tissue barrier by a conservator, while Mr. Hunt pushed the cedar plug through its respective hole and into the paper pulp until it was anchored (Fig. 9a,b).

Figure 9 a, b.
(a) Tommy Hunt, Jr., hammering in a large red cedar peg to fill a void in the surface and span the large cavity within the kingfisher body.

(b) Paper pulp/adhesive mixture used to help anchor the peg against the inside wall of the body. (Images courtesy of Landis Smith.)



The paper pulp pillow was allowed to dry before any gaps around the cedar plug were filled with more paper pulp and the surfaces finished.

The disadvantage in using the paper pulp fill material proved to be its long drying time. Because of the tight time frame and after discussion between Mr. Hunt and the conservators, Milliput epoxy putty was subsequently used for gaps around the smaller cedar fills in other areas of the pole, including those around the newly attached beak.

Priming and painting the pole

Once all parts were attached, voids filled, and loose paint removed, the re-painting could begin. The carvers used a traditional color scheme and carried out the majority of the painting, with some limited assistance from conservators Landis Smith and Mina Thompson as well as various UNM/Maxwell staff and students. Particularly during the repainting phase, the carvers listened to traditional music from their community.

The entire pole was first painted white, an approach which required some adjustment for conservators accustomed to preserving original surfaces. The monochromatic scheme had the advantage, however, of accentuating the preferential erosion of the wood. The unpainted and painted wood surfaces weathered differently, resulting in a clear indication of the original formline design which was followed by the carvers (Fig.10).



Figure 10. Apprentice carver Bertram Smith and conservator Landis Smith (no relation) painting the pole. Note the subtle carving relief made more visible by the white paint. (Courtesy of UNM)

Historically, exterior house paints have been used for Northwest Coast poles. Marquis brand exterior house paint was selected by the carvers to paint the Smith Family pole in a traditional color scheme of white, black, red, yellow, and green. "New Mexico blue," a turquoise color, was used by the carvers to paint the eyes and some design elements on the body of the kingfisher as an homage to the pole's home in New Mexico.

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The finished pole was mounted in its designated spot in the Hibben Center atrium in May 2017 (Fig. 11). As part of the agreement between UNM and the Smith family, funds will be acquired for another pole to be carved and raised where the stolen pole had stood.



Figure 11. The Smith Family Pole, mounted inside the atrium of the Hibben Center. (Image courtesy of UNM.)

The Blessing

On September 16, 2017, the raised pole was blessed by the Smith family with prayers, songs, and dances. In attendance were representatives of the Tlowitsis Nation (Fig. 12); UNM officials, faculty and students, and conservators. As described by the Smith family, the pole breathed new life as a result of the act of re-painting and in the ceremonial blessing of the pole after it was raised.

Interim UNM President, Chaouki Abdallah, offered this apology on behalf of UNM to the Smith family:

“It is important to acknowledge past mistakes before moving forward. Today I acknowledge the University’s involvement in the appropriation of the beautiful and culturally important totem pole belonging to Chief Smith Sewid’s family of the aboriginal village of Kalagwees on Turnour Island in British Columbia. The totem pole was presented to UNM in the 1940s by one of its faculty, and the University at that time failed to carry out due diligence regarding its ownership or examine the propriety of its removal. No attempt was made to present the indigenous social-cultural context and meaning, and this was a missed opportunity for the UNM community. The treatment of the pole between then and now is something we should have handled also much differently and we regret. While we cannot erase this record, we can acknowledge our past failures and express our sincere regrets to you, your family in atonation [sic] of these actions. Please accept our formal and sincere apology and know that we will work with you to insure the care and interpretation of the Smith family’s pole according to the family’s wishes.”



Figure 12. Chiefs John and Danial Smith, the Smith Family, and members of the Tlowitsis Nation blessing the pole on September 16, 2017. (Image courtesy of UNM.)

Chief Danial Smith’s blessing:

“My heart is full, and you can tell from the look on my family’s face that there is a lot of joy, and we are able to put something to rest and to open up a new chapter with a connection to not only all the people that we’ve met but to the Maxwell Museum and recognize what they’ve done, they’ve corrected something and stand with honor that we feel very blessed and happy. Thank you for the hard work, the dedication, that has been put in to make this day happen, to peacefully correct what had happened in the past, and thank you from the bottom of our hearts. This is from me and my family.”

Acknowledgments:

Chief Danial Smith and Family, Tommy Hunt, Jr., Bertram Smith, Lea McChesney, Beverly Singer, Devorah Romanek, India Rael, Dave Phillips, Ellen Carrlee, Mark MacKenzie, Mark Manzano