

**Dances of History:
The Conflict of Culture
and the
Compromise of a Community**

Junior Division
Individual Web Site

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Theme and Historical Context

The Kwakwaka'wakw of Alert Bay, Canada, are the most anthropologized people in North America. They nearly lost their culture when they found themselves in the Centre of the conflict over Canada's anti-potlatch law. The conflict escalated until 1922, when many people were arrested. A terrible compromise was offered – surrender all ceremonial masks and regalia or serve a prison sentence. The Kwakwaka'wakw nearly lost their identity as a result of the ban and the confiscation of their precious cultural objects, which were scattered to museums around the world. Many years later, when the ban was dropped, a second compromise paved the way to the return of their culture. The National Museum of Man in Ottawa agreed to return their portion of the confiscated artifacts, on the expectation that they be housed in a museum, to ensure that the history they represented would never be lost. From this compromise, the U'mista Cultural Centre was created, and it now houses the history of the community as a whole. They have worked hard to preserve the many traditions that were lost during the dark years of the ban.

Research

I began my research with two movies titled, "Itusto: To Rise Again" and "Box of Treasures". The first movie was about the burning of the Big House in Alert Bay and the cultural importance of the potlatch. "Box of Treasures" was about the recovery of the Potlatch Collection and the founding of the U'mista Cultural Centre.

The more in-depth research began with An Iron Hand Upon the People: The Law Against the Potlatch on the Northwest Coast, by Douglas Cole and Ira Chaikin. This book presented an unbiased view of the potlatch ban from the viewpoints of the government and Canada's First Nations. It helped me keep facts straight as I read through many confusing books

and documents. I also obtained primary documents from the British Columbia Provincial Archives.

The most exciting and helpful part of my research was my Alert Bay trip. I had to prepare a formal proposal of my research and its purpose in order to gain entry into the community for study. Upon visiting Alert Bay and Campbell River, I was able to acquire stunning primary photographs and information from the archives. Standing in the galleries of the U'mista Cultural Centre, I felt watched by the masks, and became part of their story.

This is my second large research project. The Kwakwaka'wakw are referred to by several names, and many documents are not chronological, making it difficult to follow the history. I thought a Web site would be the best representation, so that the reader can easily look back for things they miss or forget. A visual category seemed best to display the beautifully stylized art of these Indians. By using Macromedia Dreamweaver, iMovie, Final Cut Express, and Adobe Photoshop Elements, I created a good-looking, functional Web site. In the future, I'll probably use this knowledge for professional schoolwork.