

CHAPTER 9

Turning of the Sun at Coyote's Great House

Keatley Creek is an arid place much of the year. Wind devils envelop sagebrush and prickly pear cacti in sudden gusts of dust without warning. The sun beats down on the backs of excavators squinting to distinguish natural rocks from encrusted artifacts. In the field, it is difficult to imagine flesh-and-blood people having held the dirt-caked artifacts that today are exposed to the light of day for the first time in one or two thousand years. It is hard to imagine the small fragments of animal bones with the flesh and fur that was once on them. It is hard to imagine the housepits filled with people and food, furs and feasting. Yet we now know that they were there. Sometimes on moonlit walks in the remains of the houses, it is a little easier to imagine these things.

Back in the laboratory, the careful inspection and recording of thousands of pieces of bone, stone, and charred plants does not lend itself to a view of what the living culture was like either. Each specialist works on a single part of the prehistoric puzzle, sometimes never knowing what lies beyond a pile of stone or bone. I have strived for interdisciplinary interaction in analyzing the archaeological remains from Keatley Creek, but this is not always easy to achieve. In an attempt to bring together the various threads and to breathe some life into the remains over which we have labored for 10 years, I would like readers to indulge me for a few more pages. I would like to present a glimpse of life in one of the great houses in the way I imagine it. Some of the details are based on the well-documented conclusions that have been discussed in preceding chapters. Some details are drawn from ethnographic observations on traditional Plateau life. Some details are based on my own hunches concerning what probably transpired and why (see Hayden, 2000 for further details). So, take this opportunity to relax and imagine that you are one of the guests that has been invited to Coyote's Great House, Housepit 7. The year is A.D. 950.

MOON OF THE TURNING SUN

The winter winds funneled through the frozen canyon, over the raging crests of the great river, whistling above the creek like the bone flutes that pubescent girls played when alone in their special huts. Although the hunter's family was not of noble lineage, they had agreed to help support Coyote's Great House in the upcoming feast to celebrate the Turning of the Sun, the Winter Solstice. The hunter had uncommon luck

during the fall, killing two deer during the season. His wife had dried half the meat and spent many hours turning the hides into a buckskin shirt, a quiver, moccasin boots, and some other small items. It was above all the dried deer meat that the nobles in Coyote's House were interested in procuring for distribution to their guests. They had agreed to repay the hunter with dried salmon and a flawed, heavily used nephrite adze after the next Salmon Moon, more than a half a year away.

The repayment was not nearly everything the hunter had hoped for. If anything, it seemed somewhat less than equitable. However, the cousin of the Firstman in Coyote's House had assured the hunter that he and his immediate family would be welcome to attend the Turning of the Sun feast at Coyote's Great House. Moreover, the hunter had always yearned to own a nephrite adze, and this might be one of the few opportunities to acquire one, even if it was not of very good quality. He also secretly hoped that members of the Coyote House would be sufficiently impressed with his abilities as a hunter and his willingness to work hard so that they might consider enlisting him and his family as one of the non-noble families of the Great House. His wife was a great asset for these hopes since she was known as a hard worker who produced some of the best dried meat in the region, meat that was neither completely hard and carbonized nor soft or rancid. It was always perfectly prepared and perfectly delicious. She was also renowned for making fine buckskin and clothing.

Being part of the Great House would mean more security from famine when the salmon failed to appear, for the great houses had more stored food than others. It would mean more security from attack when in the mountains, for the members of the great houses kept together in groups within their special mountain areas; it would also mean easier and less costly use of special items that had to be borrowed for special events, potential support for advancing further in occupations such as hunting, and potential support for arranging beneficial marriages for his children and advancing them in rank. And, finally, it would mean being able to participate in feasts more frequently than he could at present.

Therefore, tonight, it was essential to look and act as distinguished as possible. He wore his new buckskin shirt with its modest fringes. He and his wife borrowed other buckskin clothes and some simple bone jewelry from distant relatives, although there was a price to pay for borrowing these items. He had to give those families several pieces of the salmon that he was supposed to receive as repayment for his dried meat. His two children put on their sagebark shirts that were made that autumn and then wrapped themselves in small robes of dog skins sewed together. The robes were from vagrant dogs that no one had fed or cared for, dogs that would have died that winter from starvation.

When they had painted their faces by the light of birch bark candles, and combed and oiled their hair, when everyone was ready, they opened the side-door flap and ventured into the bitter cold, leaving a scant, smouldering fire in the house for the other three families that remained behind. Their house was small, but usually snug and warm enough with 18 people in close quarters. Outside, the wind rattled the high, boney branches of the cottonwoods in the creekbed and the children clung to their parents, fearing the cannibal spirits that were reported to roam the country on nights like

this. The stars were like thousands of piercing spectral eyes. This was the night that the sun would turn in its path according to Coyote's sacred men, the men who daily recorded the setting position of the sun from behind certain trees (Teit, 1900, p. 239; 1909, pp. 604, 610). The feasting and gaming had already begun two days ago; however, only a few select noble families had been invited for those first days. This was to be the most important night of feasting.

The hunter and his family did not have far to go and could already see the long ladder pole with the Coyote sculptured high on its end, eerily illuminated from the bright fires underneath the smoke hole. The entrance cover had been removed for this event in order to allow the smoke to escape and to cool off the dense crowd of spectators. As the hunter and his family approached the base of Coyote's Great House, they passed five long poles stuck into the ground, pointing skyward, each with the partly decomposed and frozen body of a sacrificed dog at its end, the muzzles pointing skyward. These were messengers to Coyote and other spirits, bearing requests for abundant deer and salmon, for fertile marriages, and for the wealth exchanges that accompanied good marriages. Only the skulls remained on the poles from the dogs sacrificed in previous years. In the winter skies, beneath the sacrificial poles and the strangely lit Coyote ladder, there was certainly the feeling that Coyote himself was present and hovering around the entrance.

They walked on the mats, spread with sweet-smelling fir boughs, covering the path leading up to the great ladder (Teit, 1912b, p. 367). The path passed by the covered and steaming roasting pit just beyond the edge of the house. Delicious smells steamed up from the earth and provided mouthwatering portents of the meal to come. The hunter and his family began their ascent on the roof path. They peered in through the entrance hole vibrating with the sound of drums being played in unison, sounds focused through the entrance like an acoustic funnel. It was almost like looking underground at a light- and sound-filled spectacle, obstructed in part by a platform of poles halfway down. One by one, the hunter and his family descended the ladder to the platform and then continued on another ladder to the bustling floor where one of the House workers greeted them and escorted them to a mat and evergreen-covered part of the floor among the common families of the great house. All the mats and hammocks that usually hung between the large support posts had been taken down for the feast (Condrashoff, 1980, p. 5).

The hunter and his wife gazed around in wonder at the sumptuous display, the likes of which they had never seen. The most impressive scene was the Firstman and his entourage, for he was seated on a wall bench richly covered with deer and bear furs, behind which were elaborately decorated mat hangings bearing the stylized face of Coyote together with symbols of the places where he performed his magical feats. The Firstman wore long-fringed buckskin pants and shirt, embroidered with various colored porcupine quills and trimmed in places with lynx and fox furs. His headdress was full of eagle feathers, other colored feathers, and was trimmed with fur (Figure 9.1). Sparkling white dentalium shells and glittering copper beads and squares covered his chest; a long nephrite adze hung from his belt. Red and white paint accentuated his imposing noble features. His three wives sat on either side, with his first wife similarly



FIGURE 9.1. *These are some of the finest traditional clothes of the Interior Salish Indians of British Columbia. All these garments are made of the finest, most supple buckskin and are handsomely beaded. They are worthy of the most wealthy and powerful traditional families and represent their attire for special events. The man on the left also wears a fine headdress of rare feathers. The woman at right has a lavish display of costly fringing on many of her garments, as well as fur on her cape.*

arrayed in the finest white-fringed buckskin decorated with many dentalium shells and much quillwork. The women's glistening hair was made even more beautiful by the white bone combs and pins ornately carved and then set into their coiffures. By their sides sat their children, all finely dressed in buckskin clothes. Beneath the Firstman sat two male slaves almost completely naked and shorn of their hair. To the left, his female slave was occupied together with the House's common women in preparing food for the coming feast. There were large piles of dried meat, berry cakes, and skin bottles containing salmon oil (Bishop, 1987, p. 77). The Firstman's most valuable hunting dog had also been brought into the house for this special occasion and lay by the slaves. His pet fox was attached to one of the platform posts. The scene was so awe-inspiring that the hunter did not dare look directly at these nobles.

Instead, he gazed straight ahead at the other noble families of the house, all arrayed against the opposite wall, and all lavishly dressed but in a slightly less grandiose manner than the Firstman. They, too, had beautifully decorated mat hangings, baskets, buckskin clothes, and jewelry. There was much more movement among the other noble families as they played the spiritually powerful drums, rattles, and whistles of the House. They then began singing and preparing for the dances. The Coyote dancers all wore impressive costumes and jewelry, with their faces painted to resemble coyote features. They howled as they began dancing in the special sacred area in front of the Firstman. One of the dancers wore the special ancestral Coyote mask of the House. The dentalium shells that adorned their shirts were only loosely attached so that a number of shells fell off as they swayed to and fro during the dance. Everyone watched the shells fall to the floor with eyes wide while the less inhibited children darted into the dance area to pick them up (Teit, 1912b, pp. 358–359).

Each noble family had a blazing fire in front of their seats in the house. The invited noble guests sat on mats opposite from their hosts, as well as in the available parts of the center floor. The hunter and other guests of lower status sat tightly packed with the House workers behind the guest nobles. Behind them all, children scampered up on the wall slope of the house and crouched under the roof in order to see better. Other children perched themselves on the entrance landing to watch the events below.

After over two hours of drumming, singing, and dancing almost everyone had arrived and the more formal parts of the feasting events began. Between the heat of the fires and the heat generated by the energetic drummers and the 100 people crowded inside the house, the hunter began to feel uncomfortably warm, and he wondered how the Firstman could tolerate the heat with all of the buckskin clothes and furs that he was wearing.

The Firstman finally beckoned to his spokesman who conveyed instructions to the dancers to end. At a signal from one of the drummers, all of the drumming and dancing came to a sudden stop. The Firstman waited and then rose from his seat and walked in a stately fashion to the center of the floor in front of his seat. His spokesman servant held up his arms for silence. When there was silence, the Firstman began speaking in the special language that nobles used amongst themselves. The hunter could only guess at the general meanings of some of the words. The Firstman's mouthpiece addressed the guests, translating and welcoming them on behalf of the Firstman and the entire Great House of Coyote. He expounded upon the spiritual strength of Coyote, the ancestral founder of the Great House who lived many scores of generations ago before the great transformations that occurred throughout the land. The Firstman expounded upon the continuing good training and upbringing of all Coyote's descendants. He expounded upon the great rewards that had been given to Coyote's descendants for their trueness of spirit, for their spiritual training, and for their diligent work. They were a great house, one of the most powerful of all the land. Their wealth and success was proof of their spiritual worth. They brought valuable shells from the coast; they brought furs and robes from the great houses to the east; they brought slaves and sun metal; they brought sparkling black arrowstone from the distant north; they married their daughters to great and wealthy families of the Coast; no one dared attack their

members whether in their homeland or elsewhere; they traveled far to the southern great river and returned with wondrous tales and powerful carved objects. Tonight, Coyote's Great House would elevate three of their most meritorious children to greater status and worth so that they could continue the noble tradition that Coyote had begun. The Firstman spoke at great length of all these matters and the valuable characteristics of the children being elevated. His words resonated from the conical roof and came back to his ears in a focused, amplified, almost echoic fashion that seemed to give a magical quality to his words, although only he could hear this effect since only he was at the center of the house floor.

Finally, after going on about all these matters, the Firstman drew to a close, once more welcoming his noble guests and inviting them to share his pipe, to receive his food, and to receive the wealth of Coyote. His mouthpiece servant brought the Firstman his pipe pouch and lit the pipe for him, a pipe full of sacred herbs from the mountains that relaxed the smokers and enhanced their enjoyment of the drumming, dancing, and feasting. The Firstman took the first puffs and then passed it to the next highest ranking noble in the house. It was passed successively to the next highest ranking persons until all the Coyote noblemen and invited nobles had partaken of the sacred ritual. The house workers then busied themselves in serving salmon bone and lily root soups, smoke-dried deer meat, the best fillets of dried chinook salmon, pieces of deer backfat, salmon oil to dip dried meats in, pounded salmon flour mixed with oil and dried berries, melted deer grease, dried Saskatoon and other berries, and lily roots roasted in the earth oven outside. The nobles ate their fill of the best of all these delicious servings in carefully made bowls and trays of birch bark. Afterward, the non-noble guests were served the smaller sockeye salmon and smaller portions of dried meat and soup. Water was provided liberally in birch bark cups to all who requested it.

In an hour or so, as the feasting began to subside, the Firstman and his mouthpiece servant once again stood at the center of the house to address the guests. He once again expounded the virtues of the Great House and the necessity of proper upbringing of children to carry on the traditions and the success of the house. Without spiritual and physical training, no proper or beneficial marriages were possible. No success in any occupation could be attained. Therefore, the nobles of the house had trained and paid for the proper education of the three children being honored this night. Tonight, two of them were to receive a second piercing of their ears and one was to receive several tattoo marks. Dressed in especially handsome fringed white buckskin clothes, the children were presented to the entire assembly. They were then led to the sacred men and women of the house where the piercing and tattooing operations took place during the next hour using special sharpened bone awls. When this was done, the now elevated children were presented once again to the crowd, and they were given valuable gifts of dentalium shells, packages of dried meat, dressed deer skins, and eagle feathers. Similar presents were given to noble guests who were considered as potential providers of marriage partners for the children and as close allies of Coyote's House. Lesser gifts such as bark cups and decorative feathers were given to other supportive families. Designated witnesses duly recorded in their memories all the major gifts and the increased

worth of each child. The value of all the presents distributed was a measure of the increased worth of the children.

The Firstman again called for silence. He announced a surprise special event in honor of the richness that the House had accumulated that year, in honor of the children being elevated, and in honor of the guests that were being repaid for their previous gifts. In order to make the ceremony even more spectacular than expected, the Great House had paid the Wolf Dance society to perform its renowned Wolf Dance ceremony. His mouthpiece servant used a bone whistle to signal the beginning of the event. The drumming and singing began at once with a vigorous rhythm. Whistles made the air bristle.

Unexpectedly, five young men with blackened faces jumped down from the entrance landing to the floor. They wore only loincloths and their appearance was wild. They danced in a frenetic fashion to the rapid drumbeats. Their looks became more and more strained as they whirled and jumped in movements that seemed to defy normal physical possibilities. After dancing for some time nearly to exhaustion, one of the men put on a wolf skin and immediately began to act like a wolf, snapping at guests and even biting some of them and drawing their blood. Several other men brought in a packdog that was no longer very useful. The wolf dancers seized the dog, which began howling as they danced with it, and began pulling its legs and throwing it in the air or flinging it to the ground. The drumming became louder and louder. At the climax of the dance the main wolf dancer began to bite the legs of the dog and froth at the mouth until he was in such a state of frenzy that he strangled the dog with his bare hands and bit into the dog's flesh, tearing pieces off and eating them. He ferociously disemboweled the dog with a stone knife. The dance continued for a few minutes longer, until a Coyote sacred man finally stepped forward with his sacred magical staff crowned by the sun and held it up above the dancers (Teit, 1898, pp. 81, 93, 110, 261 fn; 1912a, pp. 207, 312). He called to the coyote dancers and touched them with his staff, one by one. As he did this, the drumming subsided and the dancers became calmer although the main dancer was having difficulty calming himself and never stopped his jerky spasms. The sacred man then led them away through the smoke hole to another house where they would be purified for several days and would recover from their ordeal.

Amidst the excited chatter of the guests, the Firstman stepped forward again and thanked the noble guests for their past gifts and for inviting the Coyote House to previous feasts. The Firstman stated that Coyote's Great House always paid its debts and was without shame or dishonor. Coyote's House held vast resources along the Great River and in the mountains. It was wealthy with powerful leaders, fertile women, and productive workers. Therefore, they would not merely return what had been given to them in years past, but they would augment the value of those gifts by a third again of their value. While Bear House had given Coyote House 10 strings of dentalium shells at the Sun's Turning five winters ago, Coyote House was now giving them 13 strings of dentalium shells. And the Firstman motioned his slaves to display the strings of shells to all the guests and to present them to the Firstman of Bear House (Teit, 1912a, p. 384). The Coyote Firstman took several puffs from the sacred pipe and gestured to the skies. His servant transferred the pipe to the Bear Firstman who also took several

puffs and made similar gestures. This sealed a pact between them with a sacred vow. The members of Bear House were now obligated to return at least an equal amount of wealth at a future feast.

While Frog House had given three suits of fine buckskin clothes and three long nephrite adzes to Coyote House at the Sun's Turning seven winters ago, they would now receive four suits of new buckskin clothes and three long nephrite adzes, plus a shorter one. They, too, shared the sacred pipe. And so the distribution of wealth continued for over an hour until all the debts had been paid, the increases duly noted by all present and committed to memory by the special witnesses of the House. During the public distribution of wealth, the hearts of the members of Coyote House filled with pride as well as eager expectations for even greater returns of wealth in the years to come.

After this lavish distribution of wealth, the drumming, singing, and dancing resumed. The nobles began playing *lahal*, the "bone game" of cunning, chance, and spiritual knowledge in which much wealth could be won or lost including valuable buckskin clothes and even one's wives, children, or one's own freedom (Teit, 1912a, p. 375; 1912b, pp. 338–339). The Coyote team played against other teams far into the night and into the next day. Coyote's Firstman experienced one of the most intense feelings of power and spiritual exaltation that he was ever to know in his entire lifetime. He would strive for years to try to achieve another comparable experience: the magical sound of his words; the hushed silence and attention of everyone; the entrancing drumming, singing, and dancing; the expansive feeling of power and prestige. All this made the years of preparation, work, and headaches worthwhile. Once he had experienced this intense elation, he could never stop his involvement (Polly Wiessner, personal communication). Besides, even if he wanted to, he could not. He owed far too much to all the people that he had borrowed from in order to give away all the wealth distributed at this feast. He had to pay them back or he would have to declare himself bankrupt and be reduced to rubbish status.irate creditors might even try to kill him. He could never get out of the obligations into which he and the rest of Coyote's House had entered. It was an endless sequence of exchanges that he was passing on to his children. Only death would ultimately deliver him from the vicious cycle, the pressures, and the headaches that accompanied these reciprocal and competitive feasts.

EPILOGUE

After another day of dancing, feasting, distributing minor gifts, and playing *lahal*, the feast at Coyote's Great House ended. On the last day of the feast, a sacred man of the house collected all of the sacrificed dog remains from the poles and the ground underneath the poles. He placed these and the body of the packdog that had been sacrificed in the Wolf Dance ceremony in one of the storage pits within the house that had been emptied of its salmon and roots for the feast. He buried the dog bones and bodies in that pit. Being present under the living floor, the bones would forever be messengers to the spirits on behalf of Coyote's Great House. The nobles and supporters of the

House would not hold another such feast for eight more years, for it took that long to accumulate enough wealth for a great feast. In the intervening years, they would be guests at repayment feasts held by other great houses and some of the lesser houses in their turns.

The hunter and his family envied the nobles of Coyote's Great House for their wealth, power, and high status. He continued to be successful in hunting and would be invited to become part of the workforce of Coyote's House five winters later when there was a vacant common hearth in the house. His children would eventually be elevated to near noble status and sponsored in marriage by the Great House.

However, only three generations later an unexpected catastrophe struck the entire region. Everyone had felt the ground shake, and the roofs of several old houses had even partially collapsed. No one had suspected that the shaking had broken off the entire side of a mountain that came crashing down into the Great River two days' walk downstream from their winter village at the place shown in Figure 1.3. It was thus two days before they learned of the catastrophe. The landslide had dammed the Great River almost completely, creating a huge lake behind it. For days, the riverbed below the landslide was dry as the lake filled up. Then the water topped the dam and continued flowing; but in the late summer of that year only a few of the most powerful chinook salmon managed to swim up the falls created by the slide. None of the scores of millions of sockeye salmon could swim past the landslide dam (see Hayden & Ryder, 1991).

The once lucrative fishing sites that provided wealth and nourishment for the Classic Lillooet communities had become barren. The people used up all of their stored foods. They exchanged their wealth for food from distant bands. Many people began to starve that year. The following years were no better. The dam held for almost a generation. By the time that it was finally worn down by the river, the cycle of salmon returning to spawn in the fresh streams and lakes above Lillooet had been completely broken. It would take centuries for the fabulous salmon runs to become reestablished above the landslide.

In the meantime, the occupants of once mighty villages, the most sophisticated and complex villages of the northern Plateau, had abandoned their homeland to live with families allied to them through exchange and marriage. The poor had no allies to fall back upon, nowhere to go, and no food left to procure. Many of them perished from starvation. The hunter and his wife, as well as the Coyote Firstman who organized the memorable feast, had all died before the great catastrophe. Only their great-grandchildren were left to pick up the broken pieces of their long heritage and continue on as best as possible, one day hoping to reestablish the greatness of their ancestors when abundant resources were again part of their domain.

Winter Solstice
Vancouver 1994