

THE GITKSAN

The Gitksan "people of the ksan (Skeena)" were seven tribes, each with a single winter village, on the upper Skeena River or one of its tributaries. The tribal villages in their order upriver were:

Kitwanga
Kitwancool
Kitsegukla
Kitanmaks
Kispiox
Kisgegas
Kuldo

Population:

The official census figures from 1890 to the present are shown in the table, along with an estimate of the numbers about 1835.

<u>Band</u>	<u>1835</u> <i>(estimate)</i>	<u>1890</u>	<u>1910</u>	<u>1929</u>	<u>1939</u>	<u>1959</u> <i>1963</i>
Kitwanga	400	143	152	225	200	260
Kitwancool	400	85	48	60	90	177
Kitsegukla	350	172	59	200	200	221
Kitanmaks	300	285	249	275	370	526
Kispiox	500	398	219	325	255	372
Kisgegas	450	280	235	65	25	-
Kuldo	200	46	37	6	-	-
Andimaul			86	46	25	-
Glen Vowell			98	106	130	144
	2600	1409	1183	1308	1295	1700 <i>1969</i>

In estimating the 1835 figures we do not have the usual help of a Hudson's Bay Company census. Two or three of the other ancient villages may still have been occupied at that time. However these estimates are in accord with those made for neighbouring tribes, and are probably quite accurate. It is not likely that the original

population (that is, around 1780) was very much higher than the 2600 estimated for 1835, as these tribes were quite remote from the earliest effects of the white man's presence.

The serious decline after 1835 resulted as usual from smallpox, bullets, whisky, syphilis, measles, influenza and TB. There was not much emigration out of the area, except for about 115 of the Kitwancool who moved to the Nass. From 1890 to about 1939 the total numbers remained about the same, but there was a movement from the outlying villages into Hazelton and the mission settlements. Kuldo and Kisgegas suffered complete abandonment, but all the other villages survived the low years, and once again have healthy and growing populations.

It should be kept in mind in reading the tables that the figures show the totals for the band, whether all of its members actually live in the village or not. Some members of other bands, for example, actually live in Hazelton. Therefore the size of the village is not always the same as that of the band.

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Territories:

The Gitksan villages, especially the first five, were situated fairly close to one another on or near the main stem of the Skeena. ^{The reason was not} It was not that the river was really very much of a highway for travel. While canoe navigation was practical for a good part of the year up to about Kispiox, ^{as far as} most of the visiting back and forth was in connection with the feasts and potlatches of the winter, when ice choked the river, and the people walked. ^{usually} The next village was within a day's travel, except for Kuldo and Kisgegas, and that wasn't very far.

The territories of each of the tribes typically included a section of the main river where they could take a share of the main salmon runs, one or more tributaries with their own salmon runs, and the surrounding mountains and valleys for hunting and trapping. ^{However} The three outlying tribes, Kitwancool, Kuldo, and Kisgegas had ^{also} ^{much larger} territories reaching far to the north and northwest, to the very headwaters of the Nass and the Skeena. The rugged valleys of that part of the Province tend to lie ⁱⁿ parallel, running northwest-southeast ^{lines} and the major rivers tend to run first with them, then across them at right angles. Each of these three tribes claimed a large northwest-southeast slice across the upper parts of the two drainages, but each had its village close to the lower end, near the others on the Skeena.

In earlier times their ownership of these ^{outlying} far northern areas did not go uncontested. There they met several different bands of

nomadic Athapaskans, all of whom they called "Tsetsaut" (roughly, "inlanders"), and usually ^{often} when they met they fought. Control over these areas was always uneasy, and the cost of maintaining it was high.

In their contacts with these inland tribes, the Gitksan have had the role of introducing to them a more settled and ^{complex} complicated way of life. Over many centuries, it would seem, restless bands of interior nomads have been wandering into the upper Nass and Skeena drainages, have discovered in the salmon runs a rich new source of food, have come into contact with Gitksan culture, and have changed their ways of life in imitation. Although the Gitksan called all of these people "Tsetsaut", in fact they must have been of several different tribes. One band, closely related to the bands ~~to~~ the Stikine drainage which have come to be called Tahltan, controlled a large part of the upper Nass, including Bowser and Meziaden lakes, until quite recent times. Fighting with them lasted until about 1860. Another band, known only as Tsetsaut, reached saltwater on Portland Canal and Behm Channel, and came under the sway of the Niska. Also, since about 1800, the Gitksan have been in contact with the Sekani. This tribe was jostled west across the Rockies by others who got guns first, then moved aggressively westward as far as Bear Lake when they got them themselves. It is usually difficult to identify such nomadic bands exactly, because over the years they expanded or broke up, moved to new areas, or changed their identities.

Their contacts with the Gitksan were of two kinds: warlike clashes, and peaceful intermingling and assimilation. Most of the

"wars" were actually small scale raids and counter raids, but enough *such skirmishes* of these can lead to the extinction of whole bands. The Kitwancool and their "Tsetsaut" enemies at Meziaden Lake succeeded in decimating each other quite effectively, and the unfortunate Tsetsaut of Portland Canal were almost completely exterminated by raid after raid before the last dozen or so joined the Niske at Kincolith in 1885.

The intermittent fighting did not prevent trade and inter-marriage from taking place, and the arrival of the white man on the coast, with his demand for furs, increased the incentive to trade. To conduct trading, it was best to have relatives in the other tribe; if not by marriage, then at least by having people who could be regarded as relatives because they belonged to a related clan. The inland tribes adopted a clan system to conform with that of the Gitksan, then copied more and more customs associated with the system. In the end some groups became so altered (as the Hagwilgate Carriers were becoming in recent times), that they needed only to change their language to be Gitksan. From the traditions it is apparent that some Gitksan families were just such immigrants. Already similar in culture, they simply gave up their Athapaskan language and became Gitksan.

It could almost be said that the habitat of the Gitksan was like the mouth of a great funnel, gathering in roving Athapaskan nomads and converting them ^{into} ~~to~~ semi-sedentary river dwellers.

That the funnelling action continued down the Skeena to the coast is another suggestion which will be examined elsewhere.

The seasonal round of activities did not permit the Gitksan much time in their "permanent" villages; for most of the year they were away, utilizing other parts of their territories. In mid-February, while it was still winter, large numbers of them journeyed to the Nass River, joining the great annual congregation of Tsimshian and other tribes at the eulachon fisheries. The other tribes got there by canoe, but the Gitksan walked, using the well-travelled routes known as "grease trails". One of these trails led north from Kitwanga, through Kitwancool, to the Cranberry River, curved west down the Cranberry to the Nass and the head of canoe navigation at Grease Harbour, a few miles above Gitlakdamiks. Another trail led north from Hazelton, up the Kispiox River, then west over the divide to the Cranberry. Still other branches came in from Kuldo and Kisgegas and joined the Cranberry trail.

Going to the Nass, the people could travel parts of the way on the ice of the rivers, and could use sledges to carry their belongings. They might even continue on the ice to the mouth of the Nass, but usually they waited in the upper villages with the Niska friends or relatives whose canoes and fishing equipment they shared. When the ice went out they went down with their hosts by canoe.

March and April were spent in catching the little fish with

rakes and nets, rendering them into oil, and making new boxes of cedar boards in which to carry the grease home.

Returned to the head of canoe navigation by their Niska friends, The Gitksan started home on foot. The ice was now gone. They ~~st~~ained with their heavy loads along the well-worn trail^s and over the native-made bridges which spanned the swollen rivers along the way. Each adult usually took two boxes of oil, carrying them forward one at a time in relays. It was hard work, but they had to get home to prepare for salmon fishing, which started in June or July. Sometimes they cached boxes of grease along the trail, to be picked up later when there was more time.

The summer salmon runs were the major single source of food. Each family ("house") chief owned fishing stations on the rivers, where the fish could be caught with basket traps or harpoons. The best locations were often at some distance from the village, and the large plank smokehouses where the fish were cured also served as dwellings for the season. As the different kinds of salmon followed each other throughout the summer, they were caught, split, dried with smoke, and stored in bark-lined cache pits until a full winter's supply was secured. Time off was taken to gather berries from the special areas owned by the family or the tribe, and dry them in cakes to add to the winter's food.

Fall and early winter was the time for hunting and trapping in the remote mountains and valleys owned by the house chiefs.

The groundhog or marmot was of much importance, both for its meat and its fur, and large numbers were caught with ingenious snares. Caribou, beavers, bears, rabbits and other mammals were caught in snares or pitfalls or were stalked with bows and arrows. Mountain goats were also important, as they provided meat, horn (for spoons), and wool, and ^{the} mountains where they could be cornered by the dogs and then speared were valued properties of the highest chiefs.

All these activities left only the late winter for the whole tribe to spend together in the village. This was the time for the feasts, potlatches, masked dances, and other occasions on which the chiefs furthered their social ambitions. The large, well built houses were made with such gatherings in mind, and the totem poles were erected in front of them to impress the assembled people with the wealth and history of the family. The winter village was the tribe's showplace and social centre, and it was while the people were together there that ^{the} social system achieved its fullest expression.

15. Kitwanga

The Kitwanga (KIT-wun-gah) "people of the place of rabbits" have their village on the north bank of the Skeena a mile above the mouth of Kitwanga River (on IR 1). It has always been a fairly large village, and is now a growing community of about ²⁰⁰ 250 people. *(another 70 live off reserve)* The dozen or so totem poles which still stand along the road make *a well known* it something of a tourist attraction.

This is the farthest downriver of the Gitksan tribes, and the only one which includes members of the Eagle phratry, which is *exclusive* common among the other Tsimshian divisions. *Heika and Coast Tsimshian* The tribe is also the only one to include families of all four Tsimshian phratries. Their ranking is as follows: Eagles first, with their first chief Gauk being of highest rank in the village; *tribe* the more numerous Frogs, with their chief Hlengwah, ranking second; then the few families of Wolves, and finally the few Fireweeds, who really belonged across the river in Kitsegukla.

Their territories (Map) were along the main river and its tributaries from Andimaul down to the *boundary of Kitlas territory* Kitselas boundary at Pacific Station. North of the river they reached across to include some of the Kiteen headwaters, and to the south they included the spectacular Seven Sisters Mountain. *wiskanis*

According to their traditions the Kitwanga have not lived on their present site for very long. The Eagles trace their origin downriver to a large ancient village called Gitangat *git'ang.ε't* "people of place of cane", on the Skeena just above the mouth of Fiddler Creek. From there they moved to Antkees *'antki'is* across the river from the present village. The Frogs also had an ancient village down the river opposite Cedarvale Station, called Gitlusek *gitlu'sεk* "people pulling in (trout nets)".

Two or three generations before white men came to this area, a famous warrior named Naekth *nekt* made raids on Kitimat and the Nass River villages which provoked reprisals. He built a fortified village on the top of Battle Hill, a high knoll in the valley of the Kitwanga River. The people of Gitlusek and Antkees soon joined him here on the Taudzap *to's'dzap* or Fortress. They defended themselves by rolling logs down on attackers as they ~~tried~~ to climb the hill, an idea which they were later to take as a crest, and depict on totem poles at Kitwanga and Kitsegukla. After the raiding and counter-raiding had run its course, the people moved back to the edge of the Skeena, at *Kitwanga* "place of rabbits". Trading posts on the coast had caused an increase in the native trade along the river, and they wanted to be on the main avenue of trade. They stayed for a while a short distance upriver, but there the river was cutting away the banks, and they moved down to the present site.

Kitwanga has long been well known for its totem poles.

Barbeau described and illustrated the 24 which were there in 1924.

In 1925 the Canadian National Railway and the Canadian Government restored 16 of these and reerected them along the road through the

village. Since that time three new poles have been erected, but a fire in 1956 destroyed those on north side of road, and ~~storm~~ and decay have

destroyed many of them, so that now only a ^{toppled several more} dozen still stand and 6 more lie on the ground.

1962 11 standing and several more, including some of those restored in 1925 have fallen and be shattered and rotting

16
17. Kitwancool

The Kitwancool (kit- "people of", wan- "where", lithkool- "small" or "narrow") ^{interrupt their} say that the name means "people of the little place". They say it was chosen to contrast with the name of their earlier village, Kitanyow "people of the biggest place", which stood on the same site before their destructive wars with the "Tsetsaut". Different translations of both names have been recorded, however. The first has been said to mean "people of the narrow valley", and the second has been said to derive from Kitanyamekw "people where deceived (by salmon)".

The village is about 15 miles up the Kitwanga River, a northern tributary of the Skeena (on IR 1). Such a location, in the white man's era of steamboats and trains, is definitely out of the way, but in earlier days, when travel was by foot, it was on an very important thoroughfare, the main "grease trail" between the Skeena and the Nass. The Kitwancool are the Gitksan tribe closest to the Nass, and the greater part of their history and their territories is centred in the upper parts of the Nass valley. It is even said that they formerly spoke in the Niska dialect.

The tribe is made up of about equal numbers of the Wolf and Frog phratries, ^{along} with a few Fireweeds who actually belonged to ~~the~~ Kitsegukla. ^(Frog somewhat outnumbered wolf) The leading Wolf chief Gwasslam (or in recent years Weeha) ranks above the leading Frog chief Gamlakyelk. According to the

traditions, some of the Wolf families came from the sea-coast near the mouth of the Skeena, and others came from Hazelton by way of Kispiox. The leading Frog families are said to have come from the village of Tsemanlusgeks, far to the north near the headwaters of the Nass, where in the beginning they were "Tsetsaut" people.

Kitwancool hunting territories and fishing stations were ^{much} more in the Nass than the Skeena drainage. They claim the entire Cranberry River to its junction with the Nass, and also the Nass itself ~~from~~ a short distance below this point ^{and} to a long distance above it. It was on the Cranberry and the Nass that they had their summer fishing camps, and lived a good part of the year. They also claim the Kinskuch and Kiteen valleys as their territories, but the Kitlakdamiks also make claims, ^{perhaps of} of at least equal validity, to these two areas. Farther up the Nass, the territories around White River, Meziaden Lake, and the lower part of Bell-Irving River (to Surveyors Creek), have in recent times been claimed by the Kitwancool Wolf families. It is acknowledged that in earlier times these areas were owned by the "Tsetsaut" (in this case Tahltan from the Stikine). After a series of wars with the Kitwancool and their Gitksan allies, and with the Niska, the Tsetsaut who survived moved north. The Kitwancool Wolf families moved into the vacated areas, claiming them as compensation for the losses they had suffered.

In the Skeena drainage, the Kitwancool had territories around Kitwancool Lake and along the upper Kispiox valley. These provided access to the Skeena salmon runs. On Kitwanga

River, the southern boundary was a small creek nine miles above Kitwanga. On the Kispiox they claimed all the tributaries from Sweetin Creek to the headwaters, but parts of this area were apparently shared with the Kispiox.

Kitwancool (or Kitanyow) must have been a large village, especially before the ^{Tsetsaut} wars, but by the 1880's it was down to little over 200 people. In 1890 only 85 lived there; about 115 others had moved to the Nass to live at Aiyansh and Kincolith. These people were accepted into the Niska bands and did not return. The population of the old village continued to fall, to ^{a low point of} 46 in 1915. Every summer the people went to the coast to work at the canneries, and the village was deserted for a large part of the year. By the 1940's however, it was growing again rapidly, and in ¹⁹⁶² 1959 it was a healthy community of 177. ^{159 (plus 24 living off reserve, total 183)}

Over these years the people of the ~~old~~ village earned a reputation of conservatism, ^{with hostility to outsiders} and independence. They owned the most magnificent array of totem poles on the Skeena, but sometimes would not permit visitors to photograph them. They did not permit surveyors to lay out ~~their~~ Indian Reserves until 1927, when six of ^{for them} their men were already in jail for obstructing the surveyors. In 1924 they arrested a timber cruiser who was going into their territories, gave him a formal trial, and sent him back to Hazelton. They maintained (as they still maintain) that they have never ^{agreed to give} given up any of their rights of ownership to the lands they owned. In ^{their extensive territories}

order to present a united front on the land question, they have formally united the two phratries in the village, and have established the office of President. The office is now held by a Fireweed man who succeeded to it from his father.

The famous totem poles are quickly falling into decay, but are still the finest group to be seen in any of our Indian villages. Barbeau illustrated all but three of the 29 which were standing in the village in 1924. Since that time three new ones have been erected and two old ones restored by the Kitwancool. Also, in 1958, as a result of a unique agreement with the Provincial Museum, three old poles were removed from the village and replaced with new copies. In 1960 only 19 poles were still standing, and another 12 were lying where they had fallen.

1962 17 standing a dozen on ground in various stages of
disintegration

17
16. Kitsegukla

The village of the "people of Segukla (the mountain)" is on the south bank of the Skeena just below Kitsequecla Creek (on IR 1). Before 1872, eleven old style lodges stood side by side along the high bank just below the present village, on the site of the present graveyard. A fire destroyed this old village, and the people rebuilt on the low flat along the river bank. In more recent years they have moved up on top of the bank again, and all that remains today on the flat is a smokehouse and a couple of totem poles. The community numbers about 200 today, higher than it has been since about 1880.

250

plus 22 off reserve = 272

Basically this tribe consisted of members of two phratries: Fireweed and Frog. The Fireweed chief Weeget "Great Man" (wige't) ranked highest, with the Frog chief Malkan next. The traditions of most families in both phratries trace their origins to Temlaham, a few miles up the river.

The territories of the tribe centred around the Kitsequecla River. They owned its entire watershed, and beyond, to include parts of the upper Zymoetz. On the Skeena itself they owned fishing stations and adjacent territories from above Skeena Crossing to Andimaul (Map).

Although there are now only about ten totem poles still standing in the village, it formerly made a much more impressive showing of the carved columns. Barbeau illustrated 19 standing in 1924.

15, scattered