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MAKING A BIRD OR CHIEF'S RATTLE

Viola E. Garfield

Much has been written on the art of woodcarving of the Northwest Coast Indians yet there are very few descriptions of the techniques of carving. It is difficult to learn how a carver planned, laid out and proceeded to finish a given piece or how he conceived and developed a design.

In the fall of 1934 the writer hired a Tsimshian carver to make a bird or chief's rattle. Detailed notes were taken, not only on the carving of the rattle from beginning to end, but on the making of a mask and drawing of a design to be used on a tall bentwood box of native manufacture. Some information about the training of a carver was also obtained.

The carver, Bryan Peel, was a member of the Nisqa division of the Tsimshian, living at Aiyansh on the Nass River. He belonged to the Blackfish clan and was born about 1875 at Port Simpson, while his parents were there on a trading trip. He spoke very little English and William Beynon interpreted for him. He was in Port Simpson visiting the Beynon home, and extended his visit to do the carving.

Mr. Peel's training and most of his experience were acquired in his home town. His father was a shaman, but it was his desire that Bryan and his younger brother become artists. The boys were apprenticed to Sqadin, a chief of Aiyansh, who was a noted carver. Bryan went to live in the chief's house when a small boy and his father paid a large sum for his training. Under Sqadin's tutelage the preliminary steps for making him an artist were begun.

Sqadin procured wood boring grubs, together with borings from their holes. The grubs were crushed on the finger tips of the boy and the borings placed in a pile. The crushed grubs were placed on the pile and the boy told to urinate on it. This was then buried at the roots of the tree from which the borer had been taken.

Sqadin next dried a small spring salmon until the skin was dry and hard. He chewed salmon eggs and ground them with red ochre in his grinding bowl. With this paint he drew designs of various kinds on the salmon skin, making designs that he would use in his own carving. The boy was not allowed to watch him do this. When the painting was finished the fish was roasted by the fire. During the roasting the boy was kept in the house. When the fish was done he was called to

eat it. Sqadin put it in a small dish, set it before him and instructed him to eat all of the fish, including the skin, and to lay all of the bones in a separate dish. When he finished Sqadin took the dishes away, but Mr. Peel did not know what was done with the bones. He was told that this was medicine that would make him skillful in anything that he wanted to do. After this the boy watched carvers living in the house and accompanied them wherever they were working. He was given his own small adze and knife and allowed to practice on bits of wood and on the house posts.

As he grew older he associated with the gifted carvers who formed the inner circle of the chief's ceremonial council. It was they who planned and made masks, rattles and mechanical devices used by the chief on any ceremonial occasion, and especially those used in his secret society performances. The boy was apprenticed to this group and helped make masks until he could plan and make them alone. His brother specialized in rattles.

His apprenticeship ended he was free to receive commissions from men who were giving dances of their own. The person desiring the carving invited the artist, fed him well and then explained what he wanted. The host told him the names of the supernatural powers he wanted to use and the stories connected with them. He sang the songs to accompany them and gave an outline of the kind of dramatization he wished to perform. Then the artist, using his own imagination and skill, constructed the masks and other devices required.

While the artists were at work in a house a cedar bark ring was hung over the doorway to warn away non-initiates who were not allowed to see any of the preparations for a ceremonial dance. When a mask, rattle or any other device was finished the maker fasted for two days to prevent disaster to the carving or to the dancer who would use it. The maker, responsible for the proper working of any mechanical device, such as a model of a bird with movable wings and beak, took every precaution to insure the success of his work.

About 1910, when large ceremonials were still being given on the Nass, Mr. Peel specialized in mechanical devices like supernatural bows and masks with movable parts. His younger brother made rattles. After his brother's death Mr. Peel began to make rattles to sell commercially when there was no demand for them at home.

Mr. Peel also helped carve many totem poles during his apprenticeship, and later served as head carver in the making of one pole. He was also commissioned to replace the top figure on a pole that was taken to Prince Rupert.

The two rattles that Mr. Peel had with him were almost identical in size, proportions and detail. He said that he copied the design from one made by a specialist and used it as a basic pattern, varying new ones according to specifications. However, chief's rattles had not been used in ceremonial dances since about 1910. When they were in demand carvers were cautioned not to make more than one a year, as they were the prerogative of chiefs and other secret society leaders. Younger secret society members did not have their own rattles.

A carver received forty blankets of the four point white Hudson's Bay variety, valued at \$1.50 each, for a fine rattle. Since Mr. Peel was neither a chief nor a member of a secret society, he could not own a rattle. But he could make one.

The rattle is in the form of a raven with closed beak, with spread wings and a hawk face on the breast. On the back is a human figure, called a Supernatural Being by Mr. Peel, its mask-like head resting on the raven's ears. A frog has hold of its tongue. In front of the Being is a plaque with a hawk face on the front and the top bent back to rest on the Being's knees. The rattle is fourteen and one-half inches long and four inches deep at the thickest part.

To make the rattle Mr. Peel brought two blocks of vine-maple about eighteen inches long and six inches thick. The tree had been cut the previous November and sawed into eighteen-inch lengths. Each length was split in half; the bark removed and the block trimmed with an adze until smooth. The blocks were stored in an underground root house to season over the winter. They had cured for ten months when the rattle was started.

His tool chest was a cedar bentwood box with a well-fitted lid set with opercula. The four sides were decorated with carved and painted designs representing the blackfish and sea-grizzly, lineage crests belonging to Mr. Peel. The handles were loops of rawhide. His handmade tools consisted of one long-handled adze, three knives and two drills. Purchased commercial equipment included a chisel with a half-inch wide blade, a small claw hammer, a fine file, whetstone, can of oil, pencil, and a ruler that was never used. He also had a curious small tool that he called a chisel and used like a graver's tool. It was made from a section of a cross-cut saw including half of a tooth with one cutting edge. It had no wooden handle. All of his tools were well made and handled with great care. Several boxes of inexpensive watercolors completed his equipment.

The adze was his principal tool, used with great dexterity and versatility. It had a tempered steel blade, fastened to the handle with two heavy bolts. The handle was of vine-maple about a foot and a half long, an inch in diameter and straight. Mr. Peel said that it took some experience to select a limb of just the right angle with the tree trunk to make a well-balanced tool with the proper spring to the handle. The grip was not wrapped, but shaped to fit his hand. He said that there was no tabu against using another man's tools, but that each set was so fitted to individual work habits that it was difficult to use those made by someone else.

His three knives were as well made as the adze. The blade of the straight knife was extremely narrow and thin, about two inches long and sharpened on both edges. The second had a heavier blade made of a ground-down butcher knife, slightly curved and sharpened on the inner edge only. The third knife blade was sharpened on both edges and the curved end had a round point, sharpened for gouging. Each knife was set in a cleft in the end of the wooden handle and bound in place with

fish line. All three of the knives were held in the hand, palm up, and drawn toward the worker.

Mr. Peel had tempered the steel for the tool blades according to an old method he learned from his grandfather. The edge of the blade to be tempered was covered with a thick layer of chewed fresh ulachen, a fish that is very oily. It was then wrapped in blanket cloth and put into a hot bark fire and heated until the edge was bright bluish in color. It was then removed and cooled. Oil tempering was probably learned from early ship's crews. Other Indian men stated that the blade was smeared with chewed salmon eggs and wrapped in a thick layer of shredded cedar bark. Otherwise their directions were the same as Mr. Peel's.

Mr. Peel also made his own drills. He said that he had used a commercial drill but did not like it as well as his own because it could not be so easily controlled. His larger drill was two feet long, with a point of telegraph wire, untempered. The cutting point was an inverted V-shaped notch with opposite beveled edges. It was set in a red cedar stick that tapered from one and one-fourth inches in diameter at the bottom to three-fourths of an inch at the top. He worked it by rotating it between his palms. As his hands slipped down the handle he paused and shifted them up again, the right hand always above the left. The smaller drill had a nail for a point, also filed into a notch. He used the smaller one to drill holes through the hawk beak on the plaque and for the holes carrying the tying thongs. The larger one was used for all other drilling.

Mr. Peel started work by laying his tools in a row by his right side, adze nearest to him, followed by the straight-bladed knife and the curved-bladed one in the order in which they were most used. He laid each tool down carefully when through with it, remarking that if careless the sharpness would go into the ground and the blade would be ruined. He either sat on the floor or on a very low chair, working on a chopping block or with the piece of wood on his knees. The first day he came to work he wore a pair of heavy shoes. They were so uncomfortable that he wore moccasins thereafter.

To start the carving Mr. Peel sat on the floor resting the piece of maple, end down, on a low chopping block. Using the adze exclusively, he started on the upper part, shaping the raven beak first. He then flattened one side of the block where it would join the lower half of the rattle, and shaped the wings, leaving them about a half an inch thick. The wood was loosened by cutting rows of notches along the surface, then adzing off the chips thus raised. Noting the pile of chips that he was making, Mr. Peel remarked that a carver worked near the fire and used his shavings to keep it bright so that he could see well. Soon all parts of the upper half of the rattle were indicated. Using a completed rattle as a model, he measured proportions of beak to body, etc. He measured the length of the raven beak with his forefinger, marking the tip with his pencil. He worked from one part to another, smoothing the beak, working the ends of the wings and then adzing where the handle would be. It was soon clear that the new rattle was to be larger than the models and that raven would have a straighter beak.

After about two hours work he laid the top piece aside and began adzing on the block for the lower half. He first leveled the flat, split side of the block where it would join the top half and then began to shape the belly of the rattle with the hawk face on it. He laid it against the flat side of the top half after a few strokes to insure against cutting too much off of it. During the above work he sat on the floor, part of the time with his right leg stretched out straight in front of him and part of the time with it folded back and to the right. He usually sat with the sole of his left shoe against the inside of his right knee.

Having roughly shaped the lower section he turned again to the upper half of the rattle, skillfully shaping the plaque with the adze even to indicating the tiny hawk beak. He used the adze with methodical strokes, leaving a satiny surface behind it, without rough spots or splinters. He then turned again to the handle, reducing it to almost its finished size. He then started on the face of the Being on top of the rattle, first marking the length with pencil after reference to the completed rattle which he kept on the floor by his side. He then marked leg and foot outlines on the side of the block. He compared the proportions with the finished rattle and decided they were too large. He reduced the length by adzing the small hawk face, retaining the beak shape as he worked. He pencilled the outline for the frog figure and cut back the wood with the adze to the frog's shoulders, proceeding slowly and examining the results between each few strokes. The head of the frog soon took shape, including the ridge over the eyes. Nine hours of labor were spent blocking out forms with the adze. Mr. Peel was then ready to begin detail carving.

With the straight knife he began to cut away wood between raven's ears and to form the back of the Being's head and shoulders. He then turned the piece over and drew a triangle under raven's throat. Working with the straight knife on the long sides of the triangle he cut a deep triangle. He then drilled holes near each angle of the triangle holding the rattle between his knees and against the chopping block. He also drilled a hole under the body of the Being. He finished removing the wood with the straight knife. He then blocked out the legs and arms of the Being, using the edge of a small pocket knife as a ruler. After roughly blocking them out with the knife he turned his attention to the wings of raven. Using the adze and pencilled marks he shaped raven's shoulder line and the tips of the wings, finishing the latter with the straight knife.

Picking up the chisel he then worked on the Being's body, further delineating the limbs. The chisel was held upright against the wood and struck light blows with the hammer. The carving was held between his knees as he sat on the floor. Holding the piece up for observation he shaved the raven wings with the straight knife and adzed a row of fine chips from the handle.

Turning again to the figure of the Being he began to work on the limbs to carve them free of the back of raven. He first drilled holes through from side to side, enlarging them with the heavy knife and the graver's tool. Further progress was made with the chisel and hammer,

working with great care. He commented that he had come to the hardest part of the work, carving the frog's body and working under and around the limbs of the Being and the frog. He said that in carving the Being with raised shoulders he was trying to show the fright of the Being at finding the frog sucking his tongue. The work of carving the frog progressed very slowly, with frequent pauses to observe the progress and to rest. After awhile he laid it aside and took up the lower half of the rattle. He laid it, flat side down, on the chopping block and adzed the edge. He frequently fitted it against the flat side of the top section, to be sure that the shape and size were correct. He started to hollow the inside of the rattle with the adze, but soon abandoned that. He cut a hole in the chopping block large enough to hold the end of the rattle handle, then bracing the piece upright he began to smooth the flat side with the adze, working alternately with the top and bottom halves and fitting them together to see where and how much needed to be cut. He soon gave that up and laid the top part of the rattle on the chopping block, flat side down. He drilled the two holes in the handle that would later hold the pegs. Using the larger drill he bored the first hole in just under two minutes. He sharpened the drill point before beginning on the second hole and put a drop of oil in it when it was about half way through. He commented that oil from the head of a salmon is very good for such a purpose. He then bound the two halves of the handle tightly together with twine and bored holes in the lower part of the handle. He made pegs from a broken knife handle, also of maple. For this he first split the piece with the adze, then, bringing the chopping block up at an angle in front of him, put the end of the peg against it and shaved it to size with the straight knife. He put the pegs in, leaving an inch on either end, and fastened the rattle together by looping string over the ends of the pegs. He remarked that from this point he would hold the rattle on his knees because they give. There would be danger of splitting it if he rested it on the chopping block.

He then turned to the large hawk face and drew the outline of the mouth in pencil. This he engraved with the tip of the straight bladed knife. After carving for a short time he laid the rattle down and studied it, then picked it up and worked on the small hawk face.

At this stage of the carving he moved from part to part and from detail to detail, so that the main sculptured designs emerged as a part of the whole. He delineated the ridge down the center of the lower part of the rattle, using the hawk's beak as a guide. This ended the sculpturing of the main forms of the rattle. Detail carving and hollowing of the inside remained.

He took the halves of the rattle apart again and concentrated on the hollowing process. The lower half had been started with the adze; he continued with the curved bladed knife, working from right to left in a methodical and rhythmic manner, first on one side and then the other with an even twist of the wrist that took a half circular shaving each time. When it was partly done he marked the wall thickness, a scarce fourth of an inch, and continued to work around the circumference. His knife was held with the curved point toward himself and was drawn from right to left across the bowl and ended with an upward

movement toward himself. Infrequently he worked away from himself at the very edge to thin it, where it would be difficult to start the stroke in an upward movement. He turned his hand over, palm down, when the stroke of the knife was away from himself. When he finished the walls of the hollowed rattle were between a fourth and an eighth of an inch thick.

When the interior was thinned to his satisfaction he turned his attention to the outside again. He carved the mouth on the large hawk face, using the straight knife and the small graver. He said that he liked to leave knife mark facets as it was his training to do so; on the finished rattles paint obscured much of this textured surface.

He spent a great deal of time on the frog figure, commenting that this is the type of work that is time consuming. He trimmed the curves around the legs and body of the frog using the chisel, leaving the eyebrows in high relief. Mr. Peel ran his fingers over the frog and commented on a Nass carver he knew who had gone blind. After he was blind he made a specialty of carving wooden spoons, doing it completely by touch. Then he said, "This may not look like a frog, but it is my idea of a frog. I don't know what some of the old carvers would say about it." He worked nearly the whole morning on the frog and it then looked finished to me. He did not carve the eyeball, but used a pencil mark to represent it.

In the afternoon when he returned from lunch he picked up the rattle and sat contemplating it, holding it on his knees. I asked if he was pleased with this rattle, if it would be a good one. He replied that he did not know yet, although he had told the interpreter that this was to be one of the best rattles he had ever done. I do not like it as well as the models he brought with him. The raven beak is too large and heavy for the rest of the rattle and it turns down at the tip instead of tilting upward as though the bird had its head raised. The plaque, frog and Being figures are in the same proportions as on the models. He spent most of the afternoon thinning the wings, and finishing details over the whole surface to his final satisfaction. He was then ready to fill in the engraved designs.

Mr. Peel remarked that he had complete sets of cedar bark patterns at home. These were made of inner bark from which the outer bark was stripped after it was thoroughly dry, to prevent warping of the patterns. Patterns for the rattle were cut from light weight cardboard and paper. The first pattern (fig. 1) was used for the eyeball on the large hawk

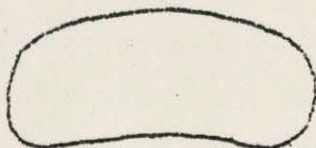


Figure 1.
Eye pattern

face. He placed the pattern and drew in the eyes with pencil. Taking another piece of paper he cut and fitted it to make the design bounded by the outer line of the eyebrow and the area under the eye. When it suited him he used part of it to cut the eyebrow pattern (fig. 2) from cardboard, which he then drew on the wood. When he engraved the design he made the eyebrow narrower than the drawn pattern.

He cut a third pattern (fig. 3) for the upper lid of the hawk's eye, the eyes being represented as closed. The dotted line represents the engraved revision of the pencilled pattern on the rattle. Mr. Peel constantly turned the rattle, observing the effect after each part of a design was finished. Once an engraved line was done it was not removed or done over. He proceeded cautiously and methodically from element to element. When he had completed the eye he drew in the designs on either side of the mouth under the

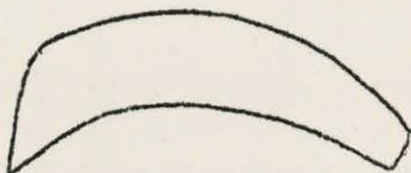


Figure 2.
Eyebrow

eyes and carved them in, using no patterns. These do not have separate names but are merely called 'patterns.' Most patterns are named for the part of the anatomy they represent as inner eye, nose, cheek, nostril, outer eye, eyebrow, etc.

Having completed the cheek design he held the rattle, hawk face up, for some moments, then laid it down and began to cut a pattern. It did not suit him so he picked up his pencil and drew in the feathers over hawk's eyes. He commented that he was making some changes in the decoration of this rattle, that improved it over the models. There is a difference in feather arrangement over the hawk's face. There are three wide

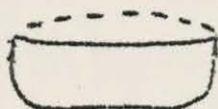


Figure 3.
Upper eyebrow

feathers on either side and one in the center, instead of six narrow ones with spacing between as there are on the finished models.

The fourth pattern (fig. 4) was cut to make tail feathers for the hawk. They were placed under raven's wings and decorated with eye designs. I picked up the rattle in my left hand and Mr. Peel commented that he had known a left-handed carver who belonged to the Eagle clan. According to folk belief left-handedness is caused by the manner in which the child is taken from the womb. If the midwife grasps the left arm first the child will be left-handed because that is the side first used. Mr.



Figure 4.
Tail feather pattern

Peel noted that there are many left-handed Eagles on the Nass River, both men and women.

The fifth pattern (fig. 5) is called 'edge of eye' or inner eye and was used as the basis for raven's eye. He drew faces in the eyes and the designs which represents nostrils and cheek with a pencil and then carved them in, using the straight knife, the one with slightly curved tip and the chisel.



Figure 5.
Inner eye pattern

The sixth pattern (fig. 6) is called 'butterfly' and is used for purely decorative purposes. It represents the spots on a butterfly's wings. Two of these were drawn under the hawk's mouth and engraved. They do not occur on either of his finished rattles.

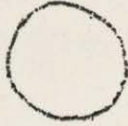


Figure 6.
Butterfly spot pattern

Having completed the large hawk he turned the rattle over and drew details of the hawk face on the plaque without patterns. It is very similar to the large hawk face. He started the corners of the mouth with the small drill and finished the carving with the straight knife and chisel. The chisel was used on curves where the engraved line was very narrow, and in some instances to widen a short line. He then carved the feathers on top of the hawk plaque. He drew and carved the Being's face.

The carving of the wing designs was left until the last. The seventh pattern (fig. 7) represents the shoulder and the eighth (fig. 8)



Figure 7.
Right shoulder pattern

the shoulder joint. Together they are called 'wing bones'. These two patterns were outlined on the wings and joined by carved lines. He engraved the outlines of the wing bones and filled in the decorative designs before doing the two, long, slender feathers. He notched the ends of the feathers.

As the rattle had become dirty from handling Mr. Peel next went over the whole surface with the straight, thin-bladed knife. He held the blade flat and removed very thin shavings, working away from himself as well as drawing the knife toward himself.



Figure 8.
Shoulder joint

When the outside was completed to Mr. Peel's satisfaction he loosened the pegs and took the rattle apart to finish the inside. He tested the sound with bits of wire and with shot. Using the curved knife he removed more wood from the lower part of the rattle, working on both sides and bottom. He tested and trimmed until the rattle felt properly balanced in his hand and he had the correct number of shot to give the tone he liked. Seventeen shot satisfied him. I asked what was in the finished rattles, as they had a different sound from this one. He replied that he had used small stones. The very best sound is produced by bits of iron kettle. He remembered when these were cut into small pieces and put into undecorated rattles for children to play with. The constant use wore off sharp edges and they were then put into chiefs' rattles. Each rattle had its distinctive tone, produced by a combination of size, wall thickness and nature and number of objects enclosed. The smaller the stones or other articles in the rattle, the finer the tone would be. Larger objects were used in shaman's rattles as these had larger chambers than chiefs' rattles. The sound of a chief's rattle at a dance or potlatch was the cue for his singers to begin his song.

When the sound of the new rattle pleased Mr. Peel he poured the shot into a dish and pegged it together preparatory to drilling holes for fastening the body of the rattle together. He first cut a strip of rawhide from the handle of his tool box, split it and pared it thin with a knife. He then chewed it and drew it over the back of his knife alternately until it was soft and pliable.

A pair of holes on each edge of the upper and lower sections of the rattle were drilled with the small drill. Removing the pegs from the handle he cut a groove between each pair of holes to hold the thong and threaded the two sections together. He then replaced the shot and pegs, pulled the thongs tight and tied them. The pegs in the handle were then cut off and smoothed and the rattle was done, after sixty-one and one-half hours of labor.

Mr. Peel had planned to paint the rattle with water colors mixed with salmon eggs. He had brought some dried eggs from the Nass with him but they had disappeared during his visit and he was not able to get more. His own rattles were painted in quite unorthodox colors. The predominating color was pale blue with black around the eyes and on some wing decorations. The Being's body was grayed purple, the frog's light grayed blue. Red, yellow and orange were used on the faces of the Being and hawk. The frog's tongue was red. For a combination of reasons I decided to leave the rattle unpainted.