

Skidegate

Skidegate, or ^{known} as it has been called since the 1880's Skidegate Mission, is on Graham Island at the north side of the entrance of Skidegate Inlet (IR 1, Skidegate). It is one of the two Haida villages on the islands still occupied, and is the centre to which came the remnants from all the other southern Haida villages as they were depopulated and abandoned.

Skidegate is the name of the chief, not the place. "Sgeeda" is the word for a kind of red stone used as pigment (and also for the ~~med~~ chiton), "geets" means "common". According to the local story, a girl once complained to her sweetheart: "You never give me anything, even a piece of common red stone", and he took "common red stone" as his name. The place name is Hlgagilda (~~l~~gagi'lida), which is said to mean "pool of boulders".

The village and its chief have been of importance throughout the historic period. Bartlett's journal of July 6, 1791 tells of a chief and tribe (location not clear) who were off to war with "Skeitcutes who appeared to be the greatest chief in the Queen Charlotte Islands". (Snow, p. 307) Hoskins listed "Skediates" as one of the chiefs known to him in 1791 (Howay, p. 236). Ingraham mentioned him several times, as "Skeetkiss", and he usually seemed to be embroiled in a war. On August 10 he came to Cumshewa to trade with the ship, and at the end of that month

chief Koyah of Ninstints was seen leading a war party to attack his village. The next July Ingraham met the same chief near Rose Spit, bound to the mainland on war. Bishop's journal of the Ruby for September 1795 (pp. 125-6) has a very interesting account of an attack by Cumshewa on Skidegate, in which the sailor enslaved at Cumshewa participated.

By the 1820's Skidegate had become an important source of potatoes and also of argillite carvings, as described elsewhere. The best description of the village for that period is from the pen of Jonathon Green. His journal for June 24, 1829 describes "Skidegas" as seen from a vessel anchored nearby:

"To me the prospect was almost enchanting, and, more than anything I had seen, reminded me of a civilized country. The houses, of which there are thirty or forty, appeared tolerably good, and before the door of many of them stood a large mast carved in the form of the human countenance, of the dog, wolf, etc., neatly painted. The land about the village appeared to be in a good state of cultivation. The Indians do not raise much, excepting potatoes,..."

This tribe is a small one, probably not numbering five hundred souls.... Their pipes, which they make of a kind of slate stone, are curiously wrought".

The Hudson's Bay men established the name in its present form. John Work was at anchor there, trading and buying potatoes, from May 13-15, 1835, and called it Skidegates harbour (Work, Diary, p. 41). He counted 28 canoes containing 120 men about the ship, and added that 15 more canoes with about ten men each were had gone to the Nass. This would give a total of about 270

men. In his 1841 census, however, he listed "Skiddegeates" with 191 men and a total of 658, in 48 houses.

Francis Poole in 1862 included "Skid-a-gate" in his list of Haida tribes, but did not visit them (Poole, 1872, p. 309). In 1866 Robert Brown visited the area and described its geology and geography (Brown, 1867)¹.

When Swanton did his research there at the turn of the century, his informants were able to list 22 houses at Skidegate; 13 of them belonging to three Eagle lineages and 9 to four Raven lineages. The town chief, Skidegate (formerly Yestakana or Nest-akana), was chief of the leading Eagle lineage, the Gitins (E6).² A Raven lineage owned the village at an earlier time (Swanton, p. 81). The traditional history of the Skidegate lineages is very complex, and many sites were occupied at different times. With the depopulation following European contact, however, these groups moved one after another into Skidegate. One such group was the Ravens of Gathlingskun, just north of Cape Ball (see p.).

2. Gitins is said locally to mean "tribe higher than others".

1. I have never been able to find any basis for Dr. Barbeau's statement that white miners discovered the source of argillite at the beginning of the nineteenth century (1953, p. 2).

Dawson, in 1878, found the village at a low ebb, in numbers and morale. The people, he wrote, "...never cease to dwell on the deplorable decrease of the population and ruin of the town".

"Skit-ei-get, or Skidegate Village as it is ordinarily called, ...is still one of the most populous Haida villages, and has always been a place of great importance. It has suffered more than most places, however, from the habit of its people in resorting to Victoria and other towns to the south. There are many unoccupied and ruinous houses, and fully one-half of those who still claim it as their residence are generally absent....

He estimated that there were about 25 houses still standing, and about 53 carved poles (Dawson, p. 165B).

The first Methodist missionary, George Robinson, arrived in Skidegate in 1883 (Crosby, p. 263). The following year, Chittenden found it an imposing village of 30 houses and 55 carved poles, with a mission, church, and school, but he estimated its population at only 100. The Skidegate Oilworks, which had been established a year or so before two or three miles west of the village "gives employment to Indians from all parts of the island" (Chittenden, pp. 53, 60, 70).

Indian Reserve Commissioner O'Reilly paid his first visit to Skidegate in 1882, and laid off several of the reserves. He enumerated 317 people at Skidegate (also 102 on Maude Island). "Nowhere on the coast are the effects of small-pox, drunkenness, and immorality so apparent as in the decrease of this once power-

ful tribe, formerly many thousands in number, now reduced to about 300". He was particularly struck by the small number of children (O'R, p. 106).

During the 1880's and 90's the people from the southern villages moved to Skidegate; first the Ninstints people, then in 1897 those of New Clew (bringing their houses and church with them), and finally those of New Gold Harbour. In 1882 they numbered 317 at Skidegate and 102 at New Gold Harbour. The next census was in 1889, when Skidegate and Gold Harbour together enumerated 192. By 1900, with the addition of the people of New Clew, they were swelled to 257, and they remained at about the same number until 1930, when they began slowly to increase. By 1939 they reached 283, in 1960 there were 316.

Skidegate today is a modern and progressive village, well integrated with the nearby communities of "white Skidegate" and Queen Charlotte City. Of the Haida past, almost the only visible trace is a single totem pole.

The Indian Reserve Commission visited Skidegate in 1913 and were impressed with their advancement. Their report notes that per

"These Indians pay a white bandmaster 100 a month salary and up spend upwards of 1,000 annually in sending their band to take part in outside competitions" and that this band of 232 (81 heads of families) had a cooperative with a 10,000 capitalization and 1,500 in the bank. (Report, 1916, Vol III, p. 733)