



# CHAPTER ONE

## LIVING TOGETHER — VILLAGES AND FAMILIES



A scene showing Nuu-chah-nulth family members inside their house.

### Looking Ahead

1. Each Nation was made up of a number of villages. Each village had its own chief or chiefs and customs.
2. People were divided into three social classes.
3. Ancestry had a large influence in the lives of First Nations people.
4. Marriages were often arranged by the bride and groom's parents.
5. First Nations children were raised in extended families.

### Before You Read

1. Discuss what is meant by a class society. Do you live in a society divided into classes? Do you know of other places in the world where people's lives are influenced by their class in society?
2. Why do you think parents arranged marriages in the First Nations' culture? What value might there be in arranged marriages? What problems might there be?

### Social Organization

First Nations people of the Pacific Northwest lived in small villages along the coast. Each village had its own customs and many different languages were spoken. (The map on page 2 shows only some of the languages spoken.)

Each person had a rank or position in society and was a member of a class, according to his/her rank.

Society was divided into three classes:

- Chiefs and Nobles;
- Commoners;
- Slaves.

The chiefs and nobles were the largest class. They were the caretakers of family



treasures which included property and the rights to crests, songs and dances.

Each family had its chief. The chief would make decisions with family members and would represent them in territorial and ceremonial gatherings. The chief was the family's official speaker.

A chief might display his wealth by tearing a piece off a valuable copper at a potlatch. Coppers were shields made from beaten copper used as a form of currency. They were up to 90 centimetres (3 feet) high.



Kwakwaka'wakw, Willy Seaweed holding ceremonial coppers. The copper on the left has a piece missing.

Commoners were often family members who supported the chief. They did much of the daily work in the villages. If a commoner became a good canoe maker or warrior, his social standing could go up.

Slaves were people who had been captured in war, and were at the bottom level of society. They were not allowed to

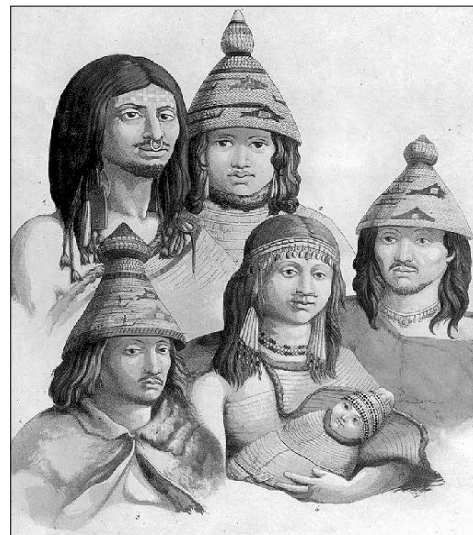
marry anyone except another slave. They ate the same food as other people and slept in a corner of the longhouse. The slaves did the jobs other people did not want to do.

## Ancestry

Ancestry was important to the people of the Pacific Northwest. People's status in society as well as rights and privileges were handed down within families or transferred during marriage ceremonies.

The clan system in the north was highly organized. In the south, it was less structured. Rank and the rights to songs, names, crests and fishing grounds were passed down to future generations.

In the north, ancestry was traced through the mother. Elsewhere in the Pacific Northwest, ancestry was passed down through the father or from both the mother and father.



Nuu-chah-nulth people.



## Marriage

Marriage customs varied from group to group. People of high rank usually married someone of equal or higher rank. In this way, they kept the privileges they had and gained new ones. Privileges included crests, songs, names, dances and hunting and gathering grounds.

Marriages were usually arranged by the bride and groom's parents. The social standing of both families could be increased by the marriage. The marriage of a bride from one village and the groom from another also made useful alliances in times of war and for trading.

## Families

Children were raised in an extended family. An extended family included the children, their parents, grandparents, aunts, uncles and cousins. The upbringing of the children was the job of the whole family. The children learned by watching and copying what the adults were doing. Everyone shared in the work, including the children. The children learned adult skills as soon as they were able. The entire community served as the children's guardians and teachers. Their "classroom" was made up of everything around them.

## Laws

Each village governed its own members. Children were taught the difference between right and wrong at an early age. Stories with a moral were told to teach valuable lessons.

Each person knew what was expected of him. If rules were broken, it would bring shame not only on the individual but on his family as well.

The village did not punish people who behaved badly, but instead, used social disapproval to encourage good behaviour.

The elders were often consulted in such matters. Sometimes people were isolated from the villagers for a period of time. In extreme cases, such as witchcraft or murder, a person could be banned from the village.



Haida village, Haida Gwaii.

## What Do You Think?

*Grandparents, uncles and aunts helped "parent" children. Do you think this is a good way to raise children? How would this way of living benefit the children?*





## The Training of Tano

Tano had trouble falling asleep, he was so excited. His uncle had just returned from hunting goats high up in the mountains. Uncle had promised to teach Tano to carve a goat horn the next day. Tano was drifting off to sleep when he heard his uncle and mother talking.

"How was the hunt, brother?"

"Good, my sister, we will have enough meat for the winter," said her brother.

"I will prepare the hide for tanning tomorrow," she said.

"Has Tano trained each morning while I was gone?" he asked hopefully. Tano's mother took a few minutes before she answered. She recalled how Tano usually rolled over and went back to sleep after she called him.

"He has missed three mornings out of five while you were gone," she said sadly. Then she hung her head in shame. It was becoming well known throughout the village how lazy her son was.

Tano's uncle remembered his own training many seasons ago. Each morning before sunrise, a couple of the older men would gather the older boys in the village together. The boys were made to run barefoot to the lake at dawn each morning, just as their ancestors before them had done. When they reached the lake, they plunged into the frigid waters. After swimming, they stood waist deep in the cold water as they beat their bodies with hemlock branches. This

rigorous training was to help them become strong and disciplined men.

Tano needed to train all the harder because he was of noble birth. As the son of a chief, he would be expected to take a leadership role one day. It was important for him to possess the qualities of a good man. Tano's uncle sighed. Until now, their house had always been well respected. They had been known far and wide as a house of great hunters. Tano's uncle recalled a story that had been entrusted to him when he was very young. He grinned to himself. This might be just the time to share the story with his nephew.

The next day, Tano and his uncle spent the whole day preparing the meat for the smoke house. Usually Tano's uncle shared exciting tales of the hunt with Tano but he remained quiet all day. Tano became anxious. Perhaps his uncle wouldn't teach him to carve if he was too cross.

As Uncle finished cutting the meat into sections, the children from the village sat around watching him.

"Help me put the meat into the smoke house, Tano, and then we will begin carving," Uncle said. Tano's heart suddenly felt lighter. Perhaps he wasn't in trouble after all. Uncle started by explaining to Tano how to use the blade properly so he wouldn't cut himself. Tano watched intently as his uncle's strong hands carved away pieces of the horn. Tano copied what his uncle was doing, carefully cutting out his own design. He felt a deep sense of pride at being able to do a



man's work.

His mother called them for supper and they sat down and ate quietly. After supper, the children asked uncle to tell them one of his hunting stories. Uncle had another story in mind that his grandmother had told him.

*Long ago, the Little Earths lived in a tiny village. Their village was located at the edge of the woods just a short distance from our village. Only the pure of heart and the young could see the Little Earths.*

*Their whole village was abuzz with the excitement of the upcoming potlatch. Brother chipmunk was painting the big house ready for the occasion. Brother Muskrat was gathering reeds for extra bedding for the guests. Sister Raccoon was busy preparing clams for the feast, while Sister Mouse was steaming tea leaves mixed with licorice fern. Everyone was doing their share—everyone that is, except Sister Mouse's brother. Her youngest brother danced and sang as everyone else worked. Poor Sister Mouse had to work harder to try and lessen the shame her brother brought to their house. With no intention of helping in the work, he continued dancing and singing as he imagined the upcoming potlatch. He really disliked work of any kind. After all, he muttered to himself, there are plenty of workers. Why should I help?*

*He really loved a good feast though. His mouth watered as he pictured barbecued salmon, berry cakes, herring eggs, seaweed and his special favourite—eulachon oil.*

*The day of the feast arrived and the young mouse stopped dancing long enough to gorge himself on the food. He helped himself to seconds and thirds of everything. Stuffed to the point of bursting, the young mouse fell into a deep slumber. He didn't awake until late the next afternoon.*

*When he awoke, everything was quiet. Not a single sound met his ears. He lazily got up and wandered outside. To his amazement, the entire village was deserted. During the night the villagers had left, never to return.*

Tano got up and said good night to his mother and uncle.

"Why are you going to bed so early son?" his mother asked anxiously.

"I need to get a good night's sleep, mother, so that I will be ready to train in the morning," he replied humbly. His uncle waved him good night, grinning to himself.

Perhaps a little dancing mouse never did learn a lesson until it was too late, but a favourite little sleeping mouse had wisely heeded the message.

*Diane Silvey*

*The stories, while incorporating traditional elements or events from First Nations culture, are written by the author.*





The late Peter Webster at Ahousat, B.C. teaching young students about their native language and dances.

## First Nations Today

Elders are still using stories to teach values to young children.

Sometimes people are taken to the big house to learn acceptable behaviour.

First Nations leaders are working to develop a justice system for their people that is more like their traditional way of dealing with offenders.

First Nations people have worked with governments to develop a curriculum for schools that will encourage understanding between people.

## Looking Back

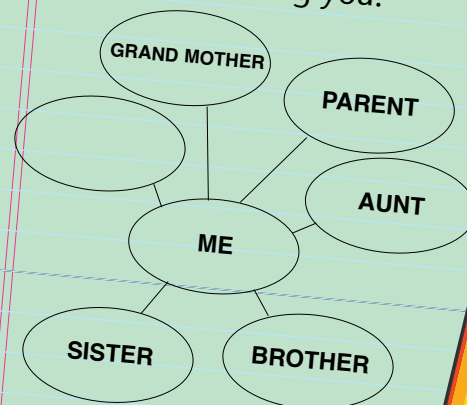
1. People in the Pacific Northwest lived in independent villages.
2. Marriages between villages were useful for trading and in times of war.
3. Ancestry and rank played a large part in the social life of the people.
4. Everyone in the extended family helped raise the children.
5. Children were taught the difference between right and wrong at an early age.

### Ask the Elders

What First Nations group lived in this area?  
Where were the village sites?

### After You Read

1. Make a web with you in the centre. Show your extended family surrounding you.



2. Discuss why there is need to have laws. How did First Nations villages operate without a police force, judges and juries? Could this system work today?