

Book Reviews

Gathering What the Great Nature Provided: Food Traditions of the Gitksan, by The People of 'Ksan. Vancouver: Douglas & McIntyre, 1980.

In 1971 the people of 'Ksan, an Indian museum and craft village located on the Skeena River, began an oral history aimed at recording their heritage for their young people and the world at large. It is their intention to create a series of books dealing with various aspects of Gitksan culture history. This book is the second in the series. Like the first, which dealt with legends, it represents the collective input of over ninety Gitksan (people of the 'Ksan River) who call themselves the "Book Builders of 'Ksan."

One of the remarkable things about the effort of the "Book Builders" is that they wrote the book by consensus rather than assigning ultimate responsibility to a single editor. First, they recorded the information about Gitksan food traditions from knowledgeable elders. A group of three to eight members then discussed the material, weighing its accuracy and pertinence. Further information was sought when necessary. Acceptable versions were then incorporated into a cohesive whole by the consensus group and then given to at least two informed people to read. These two people made corrections where necessary.

In presenting the material to the reader, the "Book Builders" used the past tense whenever talking about a custom that has been discontinued and the present tense whenever the discussion deals with a practice that is still followed. Also, whenever there appeared to be irreconcilable differences in the opinions of the elders about certain older practices, the alternative views are presented. The end result is a very informative book that provides viewpoints about past and present practices in an unencumbered way. Indeed, *Gathering What the Great Nature Provided* is a pleasure to read. Furthermore, the numerous black-and-white photographs and line drawings provide rich illustrations of the textual material.

Of importance to those who are interested in native history, the book offers the sorts of information about details of material culture and

ecological adaptations that are usually lacking in historical accounts of native people. The opening chapter of the book deals with cooking methods in general as well as food preservation and storage methods. The next chapter deals with foods that were eaten in the past. It is subdivided into sections according to the type of food. This discussion is followed by a chapter entitled "Some Hints for Cooks." As the title suggests, this chapter contains recipes provided by the elders for cooking some of the traditional dishes. Included are recipes for soups, bread, fish, fish eggs, meat and desserts. They are "unedited," and measurements are by the "potful," "handful" and "little bits." Therefore, as the "Book Builders" warn, they are to be used only by the experienced and adventuresome cook.

The closing chapter discusses eating etiquette and the meaning that food had for the Gitksan. Of interest to ethnohistorians, the "Book Builders" point out that food was a central part of gift exchanges. Whenever feasts were held, food served as a "gift-payment" for the guest having been witness to the business transacted at the feast. More food was presented to the guests than they could possibly eat. They were expected to carry the surplus home to distribute among their relatives. Sometimes this surplus, termed the "so'o," was given out by high-ranking chiefs as an advance payment for future hospitality. In this instance, the chief dispensing the "so'o" expected to be billeted by the recipients whenever he visited their villages. Other types of food gifts are also discussed.

The discussion of food legends indicates that food was ceremonially burned to gain favour with the spirit world. In prehistoric times, the quantities of food destroyed in this manner appear to have been rather small. However, in historic times considerable amounts of food were destroyed by those who attempted to "cure" Gitksan possessed by the dreaded Man Eaters' or Dog Eaters' power (these were two of four so-called secret societies). The "Book Builders" raise the interesting question of whether or not this practice developed during the historical period. They suggest that since the Man Eaters and Dog Eaters societies evolved at about the same time that the fur traders appeared, the new-found wealth generated by the fur trade may have served to lessen the value of food to the point that the Gitksan began to waste it.

Gathering What the Great Nature Provided is a model oral history as well as a sensitive and informative addition to native history. Moreover, as the dust jacket claims, it is a singularly beautiful book.