

1001 CURIOUS THINGS

Tales from Ye Olde Curiosity Shop

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For decades throughout the 20th century a visit to Seattle mandated a stop at Ye Olde Curiosity Shop. There, in the reassuring familiarity of a jumble of curios, the inquisitive visitor could encounter the world of people from unfamiliar and exotic places, purchase curios from across the globe, and gaze in amazement at the rare, the exotic, the minuscule, the gigantic. Visitors could stroke the jawbone of a whale and marvel at the entire Lord's Prayer written on the head of a pin. They could imagine arduous life in the Arctic, the mystery of totem poles in a misty Northwest Coast forest, or the terror of encountering headhunters in the jungles of Ecuador. There was even a mermaid.

Although proprietor John E. Standley chose to cite the year 1899—perhaps in an attempt to romantically associate his shop with the previous century—recent genealogical research has clarified that it was 1901 when he opened what became known as Ye Olde Curiosity Shop in the rough, young coastal town of Seattle. The shop quickly became a hallmark tourist destination and over the years provided indelible memories for millions of visitors and, for many, mementos of the experience. Despite vying for space with exotica from all corners of the globe, Native American material quickly became the mainstay of the shop's identity and stock. Timing and location were critical. Positioned on the Seattle waterfront, just steps away from where whalers, traders, government personnel posted to the north, gold seekers, and even an occasional explorer docked, the shop welcomed them all. Of great interest to some was the possibility of receiving quick cash from the shop's proprietor for any Alaskan curiosities they had carried "outside."

Ye Olde Curiosity Shop soon became identified with whale bones displayed out front and "piles of old Eskimo relics" within. One could find grass baskets, ice-tanned moccasins, and recent ivory carvings from north Alaska. There were Tlingit spruce root baskets and hair seal moccasins, Haida "jadeite" totem poles, masks, paddles, and other curiosities from the Northwest Coast. Indians from the Olympic Peninsula brought in baskets, coming up to the back door in their canoes after the shop had moved to Colman Dock. Trading companies supplied Indian curios from the Plains, the Southwest, and California.

Right after he opened his first shop, J. E. Standley began using a tall ledger as a guest book. In it he jotted down memorable events and annotated the signatures of special guests with information about their visits. In the years just before he died in 1940, Standley used the guest book and random pieces of paper to record anecdotes and memories in preparation for writing a book. He also kept dozens of rare postcards and photographs and issued at least ten shop catalogs and brochures during his lifetime. The primary material from Ye Olde Curiosity Shop's first 40 years chronicles little-known aspects of Puget Sound history and its curio trade as seen

from the waterfront through the eyes of a man fascinated with the unusual. Many tales have emerged from photographs that Standley kept, preserving nearly forgotten events of Seattle's past and a record of Standley's influence on the development of Indian curios in the Pacific Northwest.

From the beginning, Indians living in Seattle were an important source of supply for Ye Olde Curiosity Shop. Soon after setting up shop, Standley visited the Indian settlement on the Duwamish flats south of his store. In the fall large numbers of Indians stayed at the camp on their way to the hop fields. At other times the population varied, with some living there year-round and others part-time. Many came and went, visiting friends, trading fish, and selling handicrafts in town.

Standley soon became acquainted with Nuu-chah-nulth and Makah Indians from British Columbia and the Olympic Peninsula who resided on the Duwamish flats periodically. Impressed with the Seattle Totem Pole, which had recently been installed in nearby Pioneer Square, he encouraged them to carve both miniature and full size poles as well as masks that he could sell in his shop. As the major regional source for totem poles for several decades, and through other of his activities, Standley helped cement a growing association of totem poles with Puget Sound, despite their not being a tradition of the region.

Standley was clearly fascinated with Indian and Eskimo people. His written observations about them are usually brief, anecdotal, and objective. Critical remarks and derogatory words, common in accounts of the time, are extremely rare in Standley's writings. A *Seattle Star* reporter commented in 1936: "'Daddy' likes the Indians and their objects of art, and doesn't care who knows it." He enjoyed talking with them, but for the most part his friendship with them was played out in the context of the shop rather than in social settings.

With the most varied and visible Indian collection in the city, Ye Olde Curiosity Shop became a stop for visiting Indians and Eskimos, as it remains today. Standley wrote about some of them in his guest book and sometimes included a postcard or photograph of those who were famous. His most vivid memory was of Chief Joseph, about whom he wrote: "The greatest Indian in America visited Ye Olde Curiosity Shop 1902 with Red Thunder his nephew." In the evening he sat with Joseph for three hours in the dark at the Lincoln Hotel because the elderly Nez Perce Chief did not like modern lights. In later years, performing Indians and Indian heroes would stop in at the shop, among them tenor Chief War Eagle (aka War Cloud) and Navajo prizefighter Joe Cortez. Standley purchased special articles that had belonged to well-known Indians such as Chief Sealth (Seattle) and his daughter Angeline, and Miss Columbia, a Labrador Eskimo who was born at the Chicago World Columbian Exposition.

On October 21, 1908, the evening *Seattle Daily Times* reported that earlier that day patrons had rushed the doors of the elegant New Washington Hotel, even before its official noon opening, vying to be first in line to buy a cigar or curio, or to eat in the largest and most elaborately decorated dining room in the Northwest. In addition to picturing the hotel's front desk and marble staircase, the article showed the "Lounging Room" and its focal point—an elaborate fireplace with flanking totem poles and a tile mural of Mount Rainier, made by the famous Rookwood Pottery. As both the totem pole and Mount Rainier had come to represent Seattle and the Pacific Northwest in civic consciousness, what better way to create a regional ambiance in the new hotel than to combine the two symbols?

Standley wrote on the back of this photograph of the new hotel's fireplace that the totem poles were based on ones lent by Ye Olde Curiosity Shop. Although we don't know for sure, it is easy to imagine that Standley himself could have enthusiastically suggested the Mount Rainier-totem pole tableau, offering his poles to be copied. Could the New Washington's architects have concurred, having heard of the elaborate tile work that Cincinnati's Rookwood Pottery had recently created for fashionable hotels, banks, and railway stations in the East? Perhaps they had seen its new 1907 catalog of architectural embellishments. An installation by Rookwood could place Seattle's new hotel in league with those elsewhere that it hoped to emulate.

Rookwood Pottery built an international reputation for art pottery in the years after Mrs. Maria Nichols founded it in 1880, a time when china painting was a popular and acceptable occupation for women. The company grew steadily, experimenting with special vase forms and glazes, and won top prizes at expositions in Buffalo, Chicago, Paris, St. Louis, and Turin. It would again in 1909 at the Alaska-Yukon-Pacific Exposition in Seattle.

The Rookwood architectural department, which worked directly with architects to produce interior and exterior embellishments of faience—an opaque, glazed earthenware—expanded in 1901. Hotels, businesses, theaters, and a host of public and private buildings across the country ordered mantel facings, large tile murals, and even entire rooms. Rookwood fabricated fountains for department stores, designed garden installations, and produced moldings and decorative panels for 23 New York subway stations. The years 1907 to 1913 were the most successful for the architectural department, but it was never as profitable as hoped. The hand-tailored design and double-fired process were intensive and expensive. No wonder that the order from Seattle's New Washington Hotel for an elaborate faience fireplace—14 and a half feet by 12 and a half feet, of special design and framed in totem poles—was noted in Rookwood records with care. Its \$1,250 price tag was significant.

After consultation with a client, a Rookwood artist made watercolor sketches of all of a project's details. For murals the sketches were then photographically enlarged to actual size to serve as full-scale blueprints. The Mount Rainier mural at the New Washington Hotel would have been created in this way. How the design of the totem poles was handled is not recorded. Although Standley may have shipped the poles so that drawings could be made, it definitely appears that he sent photographs that Rookwood designers worked from rather than from actual poles.

The pole at the left of the Rookwood fireplace is a version of a local landmark, the Seattle Totem Pole; the pole on the right, of the famous Chief Shakes Pole at Wrangell, Alaska. Both of these Tlingit poles were among Standley's favorites, and along with the Kwa-kwaka'wakh Alert Bay Pole became the poles most often replicated in miniature over Ye Olde Curiosity Shop's history. The Rookwood poles appear to have been based specifically on two model poles pictured in the shop's 1915 catalog and an early undated shop postcard.

What happened to the Rookwood mantle and mural is not known. In 1964 the New Washington Hotel was purchased by the Catholic Archdiocese of Seattle and remodeled into the Josephinum, now a residence for senior citizens.

In early July 1909 distinguished British anthropologist Alfred Cort Haddon, of Cambridge University, strolled into Ye Olde Curiosity Shop on Colman Dock in Seattle. Afterward, Standley wrote excitedly in his guest book: "Dr Hadden visited the Shop and Bot big lot Indian and Eskimo curios to put in the museum at Haddon Hall. He was elated and yelled out I take my hat off to Mr. Standley's Unique Shop."

Energized by his visits to America, Haddon was known and appreciated for his enthusiasm and generosity of spirit toward everyone. Haddon obviously was a hit with Standley although the shopkeeper was a bit confused about who he was. Another enthusiastic guest book insertion places him at Oxford. Standley had his spelling and affiliations confused—associating his visitor with the wrong university and with Haddon Hall, the celebrated estate of the Duke of Rutland in Derbyshire—but there is no question that he was referring to the famous Albert Cort Haddon.

Like many celebrities and scholars, Haddon was in town to take in Seattle's first world's fair, the Alaska-Yukon-Pacific Exposition. An expert on the indigenous people of Malaysia, he was to lecture at the A-Y-P Exposition on the evolution of culture around the Pacific Rim. He was also the advisory curator for the Horniman Free Museum on the outskirts of London and in his travels sometimes purchased artifacts to enhance the museum's exhibits. It was probably J. E. Standley's display in the Alaska Building at the fair that suggested Ye Olde Curiosity Shop as a likely place to find what he wanted.

In tune with current anthropological thought, Haddon planned for the exhibits at the Horniman to explain the evolution of culture and "suggest the general line of advance in the arts, crafts, and ideas from the time of early man." At that time, indigenous people were viewed as illustrating an early stage of culture, and to represent native peoples of Alaska and the Northwest Coast the museum would require examples of their tools and arts. By 1909 Ye Olde Curiosity Shop had established contacts with whaler-traders, government personnel, and others working in Alaska and offered for sale thousands of such "relics" acquired from them.

Haddon had no success convincing a British university to purchase Standley's Alaska Building exhibit, as he had hoped and suggested to Standley, but he did buy 109 objects from Alaska, the Yukon, and the Northwest Coast for the Horniman Museum. A mask that Haddon purchased documents one of the ways in which J. E. Standley was already influencing the Northwest Coast art and artifacts he sold. Identified in Horniman Museum records as a Haida Raven's head, it is actually a replication of a Kwa-kwaka'wakh mask collected by Johan Adrian Jacobsen for the Royal Ethnographic Museum in Berlin. Standley could have known of the mask only through a line engraving in Franz Boas's 1897 volume, *The Social Organization and the Secret Societies of the Kwakiutl Indians*, a copy of which he owned. The mask Haddon purchased was most likely made by a Nuu-chah-nulth Seattle-area carver after Standley showed him illustrations in Boas's book. The carver made at least two almost identical versions of this mask. George Heye purchased the second one from Standley in 1916 for his new Museum of the American Indian, Heye Foundation, in New York and then sold it in 1927 to the Reading Public Museum, Reading, Pennsylvania. The Reading mask is pictured in one of the earliest postcards Standley created to advertise his shop.

Haddon's purchase, less than a decade after Standley's arrival in Seattle, demonstrates the reputation that Ye Olde Curiosity Shop had established in a short time. Haddon was just one of many important visitors—politicians, scholars, entertainers, celebrities, and museum representatives—who poked about Ye Olde Curiosity Shop during the A-Y-P Exposition or later and made purchases there. Thousands of ordinary tourists patronized the establishment, too. By 1909 the shop had established a reputation for the variety and quality of its ethnographic artifacts, and, as the encounter with the Haddon documents shows, Standley was even commissioning masks that, despite their transcultural origins, would move into both museums and homes as authentically old. The totem poles he arranged for became even more influential in establishing a hybrid carving style in Seattle that would become mainstream.

Seattle had actively promoted its majestic scenery for some years, and visitors to the A-Y-P Exposition would expect to experience it. For many, an afternoon amid the giant trees and mossy canyons of Ravenna Park would be the closest they came to a natural wilderness. An opportunity to do this easily would be a valuable addition to the exposition, and Reverend W. W. Beck, who owned and operated Ravenna Park just seven blocks from the fair's site, was in a position to provide it.

In 1889 Beck had purchased land along Lake Washington that included a ravine area, designated Ravenna Park by earlier owners. He platted the town of Ravenna, built his home there—in which he ran a private women's college—and began developing the park. He fenced it, brought in exotic plants, and built a roofed picnic shelter and paths to a natural sulfur spring he christened "the Wood Nymph Well." Easily accessible from downtown by trolley car after 1890, the park became a popular destination for Sunday outings.

Even in 1909, Ravenna Park was one of the few areas in Seattle still in its natural state. Descriptions of it in advertising pamphlets are imbued with the rhetoric and expectation of psychological impact that had dominated travel literature for well over a century. Brochures published at the time of the A-Y-P Exposition promoted respite from the crowds within a "forest primeval...Seattle's only forest unshorn by axe... Ravenna Park, with its standing and fallen giant trees; moss and fern-clothed canyons." There were majestic rows of the state flower along Rhododendron Way and "nearly every plant known to Western Washington," but the trees—the giant firs touted to be 300 to 400 feet high and 30 to 60 feet in circumference—were the true marvels. City residents had named the largest ones in 1908—the President Teddy Roosevelt at 44 feet in circumference, the Paderewski (named after the famous pianist), and the Robert E. Lee—and visitors were drawn to view them. Like natural wonders such as Niagara Falls, Yosemite, and the Grand Canyon, Ravenna Park offered a pilgrimage to the sublime, the contemplative, the spiritual, the terrifying. Among the ferns, moss, and virgin trees a teahouse offered refreshment. The pilgrimage was a short and comfortable one, with trolley car service from the exposition every eight minutes at the cost of 25 cents.

Awe-inspiring natural forests with the added allure of totem poles in misty fjords had been the promise of a trip to Alaska since steamship companies began advertising excursions up the Inside Passage in the 1880s. Although visitors to the A-Y-P Exposition would have seen the plaster cast totem poles with light-bulb eyes at the fair's south entrance, encountering real poles standing in a forest would replicate an Alaskan experience more closely. It may have been at the suggestion of University of Washington historian Edmond Meany, who was helping measure and identify Ravenna Park's huge trees and other flora, that Beck decided to introduce an "Indian influence" and install totem poles, a teepee, a wickiup (mat lodge), and an Indian canoe. Or it could have been Standley's idea. The origins of the teepee and wickiup are not known, but Standley supplied the totem poles and the canoe.

Acquiring large totem poles was not a simple task, but Mr. Beck could turn to Standley who by at least 1907 had advertised that he could provide poles up to 20 feet tall. At Beck's request, Standley arranged for a group of poles to stand in Ravenna Park during the exposition. Photographs and information about five Ravenna Park totem poles still exist. The tallest was photographed in front of the Seattle *Post-Intelligencer* Building while on its way to the park and again for use on a postcard. A skinny 40-foot column crudely carved with figures loosely based on parts of the Seattle Totem Pole, it was the earliest pole known to have been commissioned by Standley from a carver living locally. Standley identified him as Siwash, the term then

common for Salish Indians. Standley also provided Beck with a composition titled, "Tradition of the Whale, Eagle, Family of Kasaan, Alaska, East Coast of Prince of Wales Island," to accompany the pole.

The pole had nothing to do with Kasaan, a Kaigani Haida village, but if the same creatures were on both, Standley saw no reason not to use the story. Such careless and ignorant transfer of tribal and family-owned information associated with specific totem poles to other unrelated poles contributed to an increasingly muddled body of information on Northwest Coast customs and art that dominated public perceptions.

The four shorter totem poles—actually two pairs of somewhat similar ones installed together in Ravenna Park—are pictured on a small advertising brochure that W. W. Beck put out during the exposition. Two poles with beavers at the bottom stand on the left and two with frogs at the bottom, on the right, each set into a niche cut into a living tree. The pole third from the left is less skillfully carved and painted with less precision and detail than the others. It appears that after the poles for Beck were carved, Standley decided he would like one of them to stand in front of his shop during the exposition and arranged for a local carver to quickly duplicate it for the park grouping. The original pole is recorded in a photograph that Standley had made for advertising purposes during the exposition.

The origin of this group of poles remains unclear. Although Standley formally identified them as Tlingit, on a photo picturing two of them he wrote, "Made by the Bella Bella of Vancouver Island" (his name for the Nuuchahnulth of British Columbia living in the Seattle area). Although carvers in both Alaska and British Columbia were producing large poles for sale at the time, the Ravenna Park poles are unlike them. The figures on Beck's poles, now in Seattle's Burke Museum, are more visually similar to those on poles from Alaskan Kaigani Haida communities than to those on the Tlingit poles. Even so, they relate stylistically to several Nuuchahnulth figural posts photographed early in the century at Sarita, Barkley Sound. It is likely that Standley's carvers worked from black and white photographs of northern poles in which they could see neither the figures nor the painted details very well.

One may argue that, being unfamiliar with the exact identity of the figures on the poles in context of the stories they represented and with the specifics of the northern Northwest Coast carving system, Standley's local carvers created interpretations of what they saw, seen through their own very limited tradition of poles. The resulting Ravenna Park poles were hybrids, as would be thousands of totem poles, large and small, later made by Nuuchahnulth carvers for sale in Seattle. The Ravenna Park totem poles were the work of at least three carvers. In creating them, they established an economic relationship with tourist shops and tourists that is still critical to Nuuchahnulth carvers, Ye Olde Curiosity Shop, and other shops in the Pacific Northwest.

Even before the A-Y-P Exposition, Beck was hoping that Ravenna Park could become a part of Seattle's city park system. The Olmsted Brothers' park plan, which had been commissioned by the city, recommended it, and souvenir booklets and local newspapers encouraged it. Beck was unsuccessful in selling the park to the city in 1904, but its popularity during the exposition helped Beck's cause, and Seattle purchased Ravenna Park in 1911. To the dismay of many, the giant trees were "quietly felled" over the next several years, as city engineers installed a new trunk sewer that destroyed the park's stream and its fish runs. The group of four totem poles and the canoe were saved when Mrs. Beck placed them on loan in the State Museum at the University of Washington in 1913. The canoe, which was left outside, eventually decayed and

was discarded in 1940. The pole that Standley had kept at his shop left Seattle sometime after the exposition. In 1951 Nelson Rockefeller purchased it from a New York gallery and installed it on the lawn at his estate in Kykuit, New York, where it remains the only Native American sculpture in the collection.

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