

Welcome to "History on the Fly" a podcast series offered by the Washington State Historical Society. This episode is titled: "A Modern Day Plank House," by Maria Pascualy, Curator for the Washington State Historical Society. This episode is one of four gallery talks describing the Hall of History gallery at the Washington State History Museum, in Tacoma, Washington.

The city of Tacoma was built on the ancestral lands of the Puyallap tribe. Puyallup plank houses dotted Pacific Avenue. Village sites were located at Pacific and 24th three blocks South of the museum and 15th and Pacific, nine blocks north of the museum.

Today downtown Tacoma is all brick and concrete but during those long ago days it was a swampy land bursting with skunk cabbage whose nutritious roots were baked and eaten. The tide flats below were the Indian larder. Fish and other edible sea life were gathered there as well as tasty waterfowl. In 1991 when we began planning the Hall of Washington History our Indian advisors wanted to see a plank house at the entrance of the permanent exhibit so as to honor the original stewards of Tacoma.

How does an 18th century traditional plank house get built and installed inside a 20th century building? It took around three years from start to finish to get this plank house built. We had to do some research. Wayne Suttles, an anthropologist who spent his life researching Smallish country said there were three basic house types found in the South Sound and that the most appropriate to represent the time before the arrival of outsiders was the gable roofed house. Cecelia Carpenter, Nisqually historian, put together a research packet on the house and we set out to find an Indian builder who could work in the traditional style.

I sent a letter to Lance Wilkie, a plank house builder I had heard about up North in Neah Bay. He was hard to find and my letters were returned more than once. Desperate I finally called the Makah Museum and the receptionist kindly agreed to walk down the road and tell Lance to come to the phone.

Lance had never made a gable roofed house but after much persuasion agreed to do the job as long as Cecelia, our South Sound historian promised to remain just a phone call away.

I took several months to locate logs large enough to build a house traditional style. Finally the Quinault tribe sold us logs that were almost old growth and in the Spring of 1996 were ready to receive the planks for the new exhibit space.

Lance trucked the disassembled plank house to Tacoma. After he got the framework of the house erected he performed a traditional house blessing. It took several weeks to erect the house.

The plank house is as traditional as a plank house can be inside a modern building. An engineer worked with Lance to make sure the house met present day building codes. The floor of the house, which would have been tamped down earth, was hand textured by

artists so the it mimicked an authentic plank house floor but still made it possible for visitors in wheel chairs to navigate inside.

As Lance sorted out the final details of the house, Master Weavers Fran and Bill James delivered the cattail mats that hang on the far walls and helped keep the house warm. Karen Reed, a Puyallup who was just discovering basket making, made a clam basket for the diorama with grandmother.

As Lance drove back to Neah bay we installed the theatrical presentations inside the house. Professional Indian actors recorded the stories that automatically play once you step inside the home. The final touch was the installation of authentic baskets brimming with facsimile foods that would have been found inside a South Sound hone: strings of smoked mussels, fern cakes, dried acorns and baked skunk cabbage roots.

If you're in Tacoma I hope you can take time out and visit the plank house. If you visit the Petroglyph Theater as well, you will see Lance hand adzing the planks.