

**Excerpt from Speech by SHI President Rosita Worl Titled
*Tlingit Law, American Justice and the Destruction of Tlingit Villages***

The Naval Bombardment of Angoon 1882

This case exemplifies the attempts by the Tlingit to extend their law to the non-Tlingit. Two separate but interrelated events occurred in which Tlingit laws were broken, and the Tlingit fully expected compensation for the damages.

Initially a claim was made by one clan against a business company operating in Angoon. A second claim was initiated collectively by all of the Angoon clans which pursued their grievance against the United States.

On October 26, 1882, the United States Navy bombarded and burned the Tlingit village of Angoon and a nearby hunting and fishing camp.

Commander E.C. Merriman along with 50 sailors and 20 marines aboard the U.S. revenue cutter Corwin and a civilian tug armed with military weapons razed the village destroying the clan houses, canoes and food supplies.

The destruction of Angoon was precipitated by the accidental death of a prominent shaman, Teel' Tlein (Big Dog Salmon), of the Deisheetaan Clan and Goon Hit (Spring Water House) on October 22, 1882.

His death, according to the Tlingit law, required compensation by the party which was responsible for his death.

Teel' Tlein, who was working for the Northwest Trading Company at Killisnoo, died as a result of a harpoon bomb which discharged prematurely during a whale-hunting expedition.

The clan council met and decided to hold the owners of the boat on which the accident occurred responsible.

Morris (1882) wrote "about 100 Indian overpowered the two white men in the boat and took them prisoners...." They also demanded 200 blankets from the company in compensation for the death of the shaman.

Mr. Vanderbilt, the superintendent of the operation, made no attempt to settle the claim, and instead sent his family to Sitka to report that the Tlingit were uprising and threatening the lives of the Whites.

At the time of the bombardment, Angoon was inhabited by the Raven Deisheetaan clan and the Dakl'aweidi, Teikweidi and Wooshkeetaan Eagle clans. The 1880 Census reported 420 residents of Angoon living in 12 clan houses and a number of smaller houses.

The Northwest Trading Company had established a trading post at Killisnoo in 1878 to process herring and whales. The Angoon Tlingit worked for the company earning one to two dollars per day and two dollars per cord of wood.

In a separate incident, a Tlingit, who was working for the Northwest Trading Company at Killisnoo, was also killed by a falling tree. His clan immediately levied a fine against the company, but Merriman informed the Tlingit that White citizens would no longer pay the Tlingit fines, an action which was resoundingly applauded by the Collector of Customs, W.E. Morris (1882:1-2).

After receiving the report of the Tlingit uprising, Commander Merriman and his military forces rushed to Angoon. He summoned the two principal chiefs to the Corwin; demanded they pay 400 blankets; and threatened that their canoes would be destroyed and their village shelled and burned within 24 hours if the fine was not paid.

Merriman (1882:2) reports that the Tlingit intended to kill the two men they had captured, but he makes no mention of rescuing the two captives in his official report except to note that the Tlingit were waiting to replace one captive who had but one eye with another captive or "a whole one, or one with two eyes...."

Lt. Healy (1882:2), however, reports that the White men were released upon their arrival in Angoon.

The Angoon Tlingit were able to gather only 81 blankets of the 400 demanded by the Navy, and Merriman proceeded with the destruction of Angoon.

He indicates that after ascertaining that the women and children were safe in the woods, he opened fire and destroyed the canoes, but spared enough houses to shelter the Angoon population.

Drucker (1972 or 1973), an anthropologist who studied the Angoon bombing, found that the three official reports of the bombardment were at variance on major points except that the village of Angoon was shelled and canoes destroyed.

The accounts, which Drucker suspects were written to justify the Naval action, differ in regards to "the motivations for the action, the intergroup relationships and contacts before and after the incident and the final results of the action."

The official reports also fail to mention that six children died as a result of the bombing.



One brief and detailed statement by a Tlingit who actually witnessed the incident was recorded by de Laguna. The following sentence portrays the anguish of the Tlingit:

Now hear what I am telling.

When the fall was coming, when the winter was beginning, the people of Angoon nearly starved to death, all of them. How much we suffered! You who are listening to me are listening to the voice of one who is talking about himself [his own experiences]....

Oral accounts collected by Drucker (1972 or 1973) from elderly persons who heard about the events from relatives who had been first-hand observers offer additional insight from the Tlingit perspective.

All uniformly deny that any White men were taken captive, and de Laguna's and Drucker's analyses support the Tlingit's position that no captives were taken.

One of the elders noted that the White men from the boat became frightened when the Tlingit began to paint their faces black as they do in mourning and assumed it was "war paint."

Merriman suggests that he spared some houses and the houses of friendly Indians for humanitarian reasons. The Tlingit dispute this assertion and report that the entire village was destroyed.

During a Congressional debate on the establishment of a civil government in Alaska, Representative James H. Budd of California cited a San Francisco Chronicle account of the events at Angoon and the Naval Commander Merriman's demand of 400 blankets as an argument supporting the need for a government in Alaska:

The Indians did not comply with this pre-emptory order of this royal dictator. I understand that they did not have the blankets. The commander of this United States vessel was a law unto himself, and in the morning he, a United States officer, judge, jury and sheriff, fulfilled his threat and shelled the Indian village.

The Angoon clans brought the bombardment case to the Indian Claims Commission; but on June 18, 1973, nine days before the trial was to begin, the government attorneys offered to settle the case out of court.

The Congressional law permitting the suit to be brought to the Indians Claims Commission restricted the scope of damages that Angoon could claim. The law allowed the court to consider damages only for clan property that was destroyed and at the 1882 value of the property.



The Angoon Tlingit considered withdrawing from the court proceedings and returning to Congress to amend the legislation to allow them to seek damages for the loss of life and property and their emotional and social costs resulting from the bombardment.

They, however, accepted the \$90,000 settlement offer realizing the difficulty of successfully pressing a ninety year old case.

As part of the 100th anniversary of the attack, Angoon sent a delegation to Washington, D.C. to meet with the Navy to request that an apology be extended to them for the dishonor they experienced as a result of the Naval action (George 1983:1).

After months of silence and a follow-up letter to the Navy, a response was sent to Charlie Jim, one of the clan leaders who had gone to Washington, stating simply, "the destruction of Angoon should never have happened, and it was an unfortunate event in our history."

The Angoon Tlingit continue to press the Navy for an apology to erase the dishonor to them.

Recently discovered historical documents offer intriguing evidence that other motives may have precipitated the bombing of Angoon and the possible relocation of the resident Tlingit.

This idea is not implausible considering the prevailing social evolutionary theory and the Manifest Destiny policy that were in force at that time as well as the actual cases of forced relocation of the Tlingits based on the claims of progress brought by the non-Natives and development.

As reported earlier, Drucker found that the official reports were at variance on major points. He also suggested differences in regards to the motivation of the bombing of Angoon.

It was well known that Angoon was the location of rich coal beds. Recall that the USS Saginaw went to Angoon in 1869 to obtain coal before it destroyed the four Kake sites.

In the summer of 1882 prior to the bombing of Angoon, several non-Native residents of Alaska formally filed their intentions to purchase 160 acres each of coal lands situated near Angoon when land laws were extended to Alaska.

Two of the claimants, who held prominent positions and played different roles in the bombing, provided disputed accounts of the Tlingit action.

One, who served as the Collector of Customs, reported that 100 Tlingit overpowered two White men and took them captives. The Tlingit dispute that they took captives. He also opposed the previous military practice of compensating the Tlingit for claims for violation of their law.

The other claimant served as the superintendent of the commercial operations. He could have avoided the conflict by settling the claim made by the Tlingit. His contested report that the Tlingit were uprising and threatening the lives of the Whites justified the bombardment of Angoon.



These are intriguing and plausible arguments, and we will need to do more research to verify the actual motivations for the bombing of Angoon.

