

Gwa'sala Bighouses at Takush Harbour

The following is a detailed description of Gwa'sala houses from a 1912 report by Indian Agent Halliday to the Department of Indian Affairs in Ottawa.

The buildings at the winter village are large and roomy but very barnlike. The fronts are of milled limber in many cases painted. The frames of these houses are made of huge logs which have been hewed smooth and in many instances carved. The same construction of houses is common to the whole agency and it might be as well to describe them briefly.

The average house is about 40 to 50 feet wide and from 60 to 70 feet long. Two logs about 4 feet in diameter neatly hewed to a circle are set into the ground about 8 or 10 feet apart. One pair of these frames is at each end of the building and in a large building there may be 5 pairs of those. A cap log also dressed and often carved is positioned on the top of these posts crosswise of the building. On the top of these caps running lengthwise of the building the main timbers or plates are put. These are whole trees of cedar all hand worked to a circle and in the large house will be about 3 feet in diameter when dressed and from 69 to 70 feet long. On these 4 or 5 plates the rafters are put with sheeting or poles about a foot apart covered with split cedar boards.

There are no supports of any kind in the centre of the building. No floor is laid and a huge open fire is kept burning in the centre of the building which the inhabitants are free to move all around. In severe weather canvas is sometimes stretched round a space near the fire. All the cooking is done on this fire and the smoke escapes through the inequalities of the roof boards.

There is very little comfort in any of the houses and the eyes of anyone not used to it are irritated by the smoke. In some of the houses small rooms are partitioned off for sleeping apartments, in others the beds are spread on a frame at one side of the house and protected by canvas. All these houses are very drafty but the drafts ventilate the building and prevent the smoke from being too oppressive.