

Linda S. Thibodeau

Director

Division of Libraries, Archives,  
& Museums

lam.alaska.gov

STATE OF ALASKA

DEPARTMENT OF EDUCATION  
AND EARLY DEVELOPMENT

Robert C. Banghart

Chief Curator

Alaska State Museums

395 Whittier St.

Juneau, Alaska 99801-1718

907.465.2901

## Press Release

SHELDON JACKSON MUSEUM

FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE

DATE: **May 25, 2011**

### **June Artifact of the Month: Athabascan Gift Stick**



June's artifact of the month at the Sheldon Jackson Museum is an Athabascan gift stick purchased by museum employees Esther Billman and Alice Postell while in Tok, Alaska in 1972. At the time, Billman and Postell were traveling into the interior and to Bethel with a traveling exhibit of baskets and masks from the Sheldon Jackson Museum. Written in their trip report, "on several occasions, the objects were shown from the back of the car to interested Native people." Esther Billman was the museum's curator and Alice Postell served as the registrar. National recognition had come earlier that year when Sheldon Jackson Museum was added to the National Register of Historic Places in February.

Research of the Athabascan gift stick suggests it could be called a "rattle" or a "winter festival stick." This is an Athabascan replica of the sticks that were used by the natives of Tanacross until 1902. The stick was used for one week every Christmas or at what was called the "winter festival" when a person would go from door to door shaking the rattle. A present was then fastened on the hook.

Formerly an integral part of Native social life was the "winter moon," corresponding to our month of December. In the Native calendar, this month was called "ticitiumasa," meaning "moon of the hook game." The month was almost entirely devoted to playing games and telling stories. The winter festival came at the conclusion of the winter caribou season – a period when meat was plentiful and food worries were temporarily absent. The first few days were devoted to telling stories followed by two days of playing the hook game where the "gift stick" would have been used. Both men and women played. The wooden hook suspended from a pole by a piece of babiche was dangled in the door of a lodge, the player remaining hidden. The owner of the lodge would attempt to guess the visitor's name. The right answer brought forth an affirmative jerk of the hook. The lodge owner would attempt to guess what gift the visitor wanted and again a jerk of the hook indicated the correct answer. Clues were put on the hook to help the guesser, like a bit of fish, caribou skin or fur. When the guess was correct, the gift was placed on the hook and the player went his way. The end result was an exchange of presents between every family in the camp. After this game was played, many others were played as well.

The gift stick will be on exhibit at Sheldon Jackson Museum from June 1 through June 30. An image of the stick can also be viewed on our website at [http://www.museums.state.ak.us/sheldon\\_jackson/artifact\\_of\\_month.html](http://www.museums.state.ak.us/sheldon_jackson/artifact_of_month.html).

Summer hours are from 9:00 am to 5:00 pm daily except holidays. Summer admission is \$4. No admission is charged for those 18 and under. The Sheldon Jackson Museum is located at 104 College Drive.

#### **FOR MORE INFORMATION:**

Phone (907) 747-8981 Fax (907) 465-3004

[www.museums.state.ak.us](http://www.museums.state.ak.us)

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