



Lewis & Clark

in Columbia River Country

TRIBAL CULTURES AND HOMELANDS

Introduction

A complex web of humanity has lived along the Columbia River since time immemorial. If you followed Lewis and Clark on their homeward journey from Fort Clatsop to the headwaters of the Clearwater River, you would pass through three very different areas: the wetlands along the Lower Columbia; the cascades, falls and rapids where the river passes between the Cascade Mountains; and the Columbia Plateau. Each of these areas has different climatic and environmental characteristics which influenced the people who settled there.

Groups of people from many different backgrounds, speaking different languages, established a means to communicate and share the resources of this vast region.

Oral history from many of these tribes documents an age-old relationship with the lands and waters of the Columbia basin. Non-Indians teach that these people crossed a land bridge between Asia and North America - the Bering land bridge - but the people themselves say "we have always been here."

Peoples of the River - The Lower Columbia

The rich resources of the wetlands of the Lower Columbia, from the coast to the mouth of the Sandy River, were controlled by various bands of people who spoke dialects of the Chinookan language.

These bands were made up of extended families, including people from other tribes who had married into the community. These groups followed the lead of a head-person who was selected on the basis of strong and responsible leadership.

Three groups of Lower Chinooks occupied the area from the coast to the Cowlitz River: the Chinook, the Clatsops, and the Cathlamets. The closely allied Tillamooks lived just to the south along the Pacific Coast. Various bands of Upper Chinooks occupied the area between the Cowlitz and Sandy River. These groups include those who lived around Wappato (Sauvie) Island and at the village of Cathloptle, including the Multnomah (Wappato) and Clackamas bands.

People who spoke different languages lived all around these Chinook-speakers. Upland groups, who occupied higher elevations away from the river, and coastal groups, north and south of the Chinooks and Clatsops, had access to different resources. They traded with each other and with Columbia River villages to obtain all the resources they needed. For example, groups who had access to elk, deer and berries traded with those who controlled the salmon runs. These trade relationships were stabilized through intermarriage.

Today, the Chinook Tribe is without any reserved lands. Many Chinook descendants live around Willapa Bay and in scattered communities throughout western Washington and Oregon. The Chinook Tribal headquarters is in Chinook,

Washington. It is a sad irony for them that the people who hosted Lewis and Clark and their party throughout the winter of 1805-06 are not recognized by the U.S. Government. They have been struggling unsuccessfully for such recognition for many years.

Peoples of the River - Along the Rapids and Falls

Seasonal villages occupied every available site near the rapids, cascades and falls of the mid-Columbia during the spectacular salmon runs of this pre-dam river. This stretch of river which cuts through the Cascade Mountains is rich in fish resources, helped by the dry east wind that is crucial to preserving salmon. Some of the village occupants claimed the lands along the river as their territory. Others were visitors who joined their allies during the salmon runs.

Marked on the west by the Cowlitz River and to the east by Celilo Falls, this area was predominantly occupied by extended family bands of people who spoke dialects of the Chinookan language. The northwestern portion of the area included Salishan speakers. The eastern extent of this region was co-occupied by Chinookan and Sahaptin speakers. Some of these villages were mixed groups of multi-lingual occupants, bound together through complex trade relationships and intermarriage. These groups, like the villages downriver, followed the lead of a head-person who was selected on the basis of strong and responsible leadership.

Lewis and Clark recorded dozens of villages along these rapids and cascades. They recognized that some of the villages shared a bond with others, so they named village groups "tribes" and the collective groups "nations." Most of these names the explorers gave to these peoples are not recognizable today.

Through the treaties of 1855, the children and grandchildren of the people met by Lewis and Clark were forcefully relocated onto various reservations. Where they were moved depended upon which

side of the river they occupied and which treaty their ancestors signed. Today they live on the Grande Ronde, Warm Springs and Umatilla Reservations in Oregon and the Yakama Reservation in Washington, as well as in the cities.

Many traditions of the various groups who once lived along the rapids and cascades of the Columbia continue today. Perhaps the most notable is salmon fishing. One place it can be seen is the longhouse at Celilo Village, where the First Salmon Ceremony is conducted each spring. This same ceremony and other celebrations of the first foods of the season are carried out in longhouses throughout the region.



First Salmon Ceremony, salmon preparation and cooking for the feast, Celilo Village. Columbia River Inter-Tribal Fish Commission

Peoples of the River - The Columbia Plateau

Along the rivers of the great Columbia Plateau, seasonal villages were created along the riverbank and on islands wherever there were rapids. Marked on the west by Celilo Falls and on the east by the Rocky Mountains, this area was predominantly occupied by people who spoke various dialects of the Sahaptin language. Upper-Chinookan dialects were spoken around Celilo and The Dalles. The Cayuse spoke their own language but intermarried with Nez Perce and eventually adopted that language as their own.

The most important fisheries supplied foods to large villages of combined groups. All these Sahaptin bands recognized themselves to be related to each other, although their dialects were distinct enough to recognize their differences. They intermarried, traded, traveled, and warred together.



Dip-net fishing at Celilo Falls, pre-dam historical photo, n.d. Washington State Historical Society Collections.

Salish neighbors lived to the north of these Sahaptin groups. Their good relations found them meeting often for trade and intermarriage between these groups was common. Relationships with their southern neighbors, the Shoshones and Bannocks, were not so amicable. Warfare was common between these groups.

Lewis and Clark recorded dozens of villages in this region, although most of the names are not recognizable today. Through the treaties of 1855, the children and grandchildren of the people met by Lewis and Clark on the Columbia Plateau were relocated onto various reservations depending upon which side of the river they occupied and which treaty their ancestors signed.

Today they live on the Umatilla Reservation in Oregon, the Nez Perce Reservation in Idaho, and primarily on the Yakama Reservation in Washington.

Some of the tribes of the Columbia Plateau are better known in American history than most other groups of the Columbia River. Many people have heard of Chief Joseph and the flight of the Nez Perce or of the Appaloosa horses that they raised. Many important traditions continue for the tribes of the Columbia Plateau. Like the peoples of the Columbia rapids and cascades, each spring, first foods feasts are conducted in longhouses throughout the region. As Lewis and Clark traveled back up the river in the spring of 1806, they heard about the return of the salmon and the commemoration of that annual event.

What Endures Today

It is interesting to learn how people once lived. However, to understand these native peoples of Washington and Oregon, other people - non-Indians - need to look for aspects of native cultures that have endured.

In their travels, Lewis and Clark only caught a glimpse of these rich cultures which have continued to grow, change and adapt. More important than how these people once lived is to understand what endures for these native peoples of Washington, Oregon and Idaho. Despite everything they have suffered, the cultural traditions of these groups remain strong.

Article written/adapted by?

(note: I'm not sure who wrote these but we probably need a source?)

Find Out More

Josephy Jr., Alvin M., ed. *Lewis and Clark through Indian Eyes*. Knopf.

Ronda, James P. *Lewis and Clark among the Indians*. Bison Books.