

BEFORE THE WHITE MAN CAME TO NISQUALLY COUNTRY

THERE WAS ONCE A TIME before the white man came to the shores of southern Puget Sound. The Nisqually Indian people lived in their natural and undisturbed habitat. At that time, the Nisqually people called themselves *Squally-absch*. Grouping together in bands and villages, they lived in houses made from the cedar tree. They built their houses beside the freshwater outlets that flowed into and mixed with the saltwater of Puget Sound. Therein lay the home of the salmon, the mainstay of the Indian diet. Prairie lands bordered both sides of the lower reaches of the Nisqually River and extended far into the forested foothills of *Tacobet*, the mountain now known as Rainier. Tacobet dictated the climate that nourished the lands of the Nisqually River Basin, the homeland of the Nisqually Indian people.

In those days the Squally-absch depended on the warm, wet climate to nurture the foods of the earth. It



Artist John Mix Stanley created this print of Tacobet, known today as Mount Rainier; this view shows how the mountain would have appeared from Steilacoom in about 1854.

ripened the camas on the prairies and the hazelnuts in the lowland meadows. Sunshine in the spring, summer, and fall helped the Squally-absch to dry the assorted foodstuffs they had gathered so they could store them for winter. Each year the Indian people followed the same pattern of gathering and hunting, followed by the winter months spent in giving thanks and addressing their spirit powers

for the gifts provided for them, for there were no stores for making purchases.

The Squally-absch were alone in their effort to clothe, feed, and shelter their families. From their cedar homes—

hewn from giant red cedar trees—and from their warm beds, the Squally-absch enjoyed the winter months. They made clothes out of cedar bark and deer furs gathered during the summer trek. The women wove their baskets from spruce roots and cedar bark and fashioned mats made from carefully prepared dried cattails. Catching salmon in the river and its tributaries was a never-ending job for the menfolk of the village. At almost any time of the year the Squally-absch would go out on the sandy beaches to gather clams, oysters, and geoducks and cook them over the hot rocks found in their cooking fires.

In a constant pursuit of food, the Squally-absch would concentrate first on the food found on the prairies. The vast expanses of prairie land would be burned off in the fall of the year so one could see far across the prairies in those days. To harvest the camas bulb, a steam pit would be dug with an ironwood stick sharpened to a point. The people steamed the camas bulbs for two or three days before drying them and storing them in baskets for winter use. Many of the food items from the meadows and lowlands consisted of roots and leaves of the brake fern, the wood fern, the dandelion, the wild sunflower, and the tiger lily. Some of the roots were eaten raw while others were blanched in a basket of hot water warmed by hot rocks from the family cooking fire.

The foothills yielded berries of all kinds, such as the blackberry, the salmonberry, the elderberry, the salal berry and the blackcap. All of these berries, with



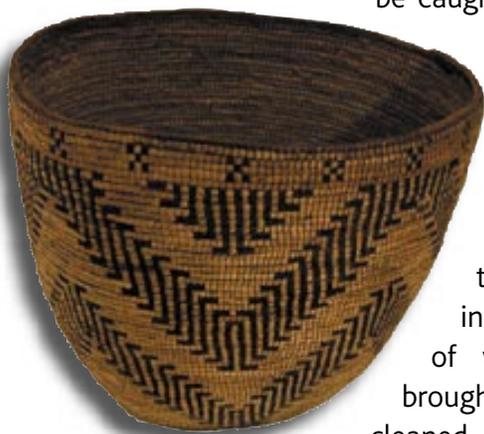
Camas in bloom. The people steamed the camas bulbs for two or three days before drying and storing them in baskets.

the exception of the salmonberry, were placed on racks above a slow-burning fire before packing them away in storage baskets. The salmon berry and the thimble berry contained so much moisture that they would be eaten fresh or mixed with water for juice. Dried berries would be mixed on the grinding rock with animal fat or ground meat to make pemmican.

The Squally-absch hunted deer in the foothills or sometimes on the prairies and in the meadows. They also hunted by digging pits on animal paths. Sometimes a lasso was laid on the ground so that the animal would find itself yanked high in the air. Bows and arrows were also used for hunting the mountain goat, the bear, and the coyote. Every part of the animal was used. The hide was dried on a rack to be tanned and made into clothing items or used for the family bed. The meat was carefully cut into strips and roasted by the cooking fire. The bones were made into necessary tools. Small animals such as the beaver, the rabbit, or the squirrel were roasted for a quick meal. Small bits of their fur were used for decorations. Birds were caught by stringing nets between two trees where the pheasant and the grouse would become entangled and would make a tasty meal.

As members of a hunting party journeyed homeward they would watch for hazelnuts and acorns. The hazelnuts would be laid out in the sun and dried while the acorn would have to be boiled to remove the acid taste. To keep the acorns for later use, they could be buried in the mud next to a stream.

There were five distinct runs of salmon that came into the Nisqually River and any one of the species could be caught at any one time almost all year around. They were caught in wooden weirs built across the river or in the more quiet tributaries that drained into the larger body of water. They were brought in by the basket, cleaned, and spread out in a fillet-style structure and roasted before the cooking fire. No winter dwelling would be without rows of salmon strung from the ceiling rafters where they would hang until the cook cut one down for the evening meal.



RIGHT: In the early 1900s photographer Edward S. Curtis asked members of the Skokomish Tribe to model traditional clothing so he could record how they used to live.

BELOW LEFT: Nisqually basket. More than 100 years ago a Nisqually woman first had to gather and prepare cedar tree roots, beargrass, and horsetail roots before weaving this basket.

Images from the Washington State Historical Society collections.



The Nisqually family was an extended family where grandparents, aunts and uncles, mothers and fathers, as well as children lived together in a winter home. There might be five cooking fires adorning the center of one building to accommodate the many households residing there. Each family had its own sleeping quarters on the sleeping benches built along the sides of the winter dwelling. This extended family ensured that the many families within its structure would have plenty of men to hunt and fish and plenty of women to gather camas bulbs and berries to keep food on the table. That is the way it was before the white men came to Nisqually Country.

—CECILIA SVINTH CARPENTER

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Cecilia Svintth Carpenter has been a prolific and respected American Indian author since 1971. Her many articles and books include *Leschi*, *Last Chief of the Nisqually*; *Fort Nisqually: A Documented History of Indian and British Interaction*, and *The Nisqually, My People*. Carpenter has a master's degree in education from Pacific Lutheran University and nearly 20 years of teaching experience in Tacoma schools.