**NATIVE AMERICANS**

*CHAPTER 4*

For millions of years, the Western Hemisphere was unknown, undiscovered, unexplored, and uninhabited. There were no humans in North America, the United States of America, or the area that now makes up the state of Washington.

**The Original Inhabitants**

The Native Americans were the first human beings to move into the Western Hemisphere. They came from central Asia about 30,000 years ago. It was not until 14,000 years ago that the first Native Americans settled in the present state of Washington. Why did they leave Asia? No one knows for sure. There were a few possible reasons. The people may have been searching for food. Perhaps they sought a milder climate and safer environment. It may have been for

adventure. Still another explanation is that they

may have been driven out of Asia.

How did these Native Americans get to Washington from central Asia? Somehow, they traveled from Asia to the North American continent. They had to cross the Bering Strait.

The 50 mile wide Bering Strait separates Asia from North America. The Native Americans probably either walked or sailed across the Bering Strait to Alaska from present day Siberia.

During the last ice age, the ocean level was several hundred feet lower than it is today. A land bridge may have once connected Siberia and Alaska. If true, then Native Americans could have walked into North America. Even if the Bering Strait was frozen or covered with an ice sheet, the Native Americans could still walk across the ice bridge to Alaska. If the Bering Strait was unfrozen, they could have sailed across the narrow body of water.

Once the Native Americans migrated into North America, they slowly traveled southward.

They sought a warmer and milder climate. They

needed more reliable sources of food. Some

moved south along the coast. Others moved

inland traveling south along the vast interior

plain east of the Rocky Mountains.

**Native Americans**

About 14,000 years ago, the earliest Native Americans moved into the present day state of

Washington. Native Americans were the only

humans living in the area we now call Washington until about 500 years ago.

Native Americans formed two contrasting cultural groups. These two groups were the coastal and the plateau Indians. The coastal Indians lived west of the Cascade Mountains. Coastal tribes lived in permanent villages near the rivers and along the shorelines of the Pacific Ocean and Puget Sound.

The region’s climate was ideal for these people. It provided mild temperatures and an abundant source of food. In contrast, food and water were scarce for the interior people. These factors forced them to move often for their food and water. People who have to move constantly are called nomads.

Nomadic tribes moved often because their primary source of food and water was much more difficult to find. The harsh climate east of the mountains created hardships for the plateau Indians. Their daily lives were much more difficult than life was for the coastal Indians.

The coastal Indians were organized into many tribes. Each tribe had only a few hundred members. These coastal tribes were separated from each other by dense forests, mountains, and water.

The plateau tribes were much larger, but fewer in number. A plateau tribe had hundreds of members. A single tribe could control a large area of grasslands east of the Cascades.

They competed for grazing, hunting, and fishing areas. Contrasting natural environments affected the way of life for both the coastal and plateau

people. Each had a different life style and formed

a unique culture.

**Coastal Indians**

The coastal Indians lived west of the Cascade

Mountains. Many villages were located along

the coastlines of the Pacific Ocean, Strait of Juan

de Fuca, the San Juan Islands, and the Puget

Sound area. They also lived along the shores of

lakes and the banks of major rivers. The coastal

Indians lived in small, isolated villages. Contact

with other villagers was rare, except in times of

trade or war. Seldom did the coastal Indian have

reason to travel through the dense forests.

**Tribal Organization**

In western Washington, there were many

tribal units among the coastal Indians. Some of

the coastal tribes were the Makah, Quinault,

Hoh, Chinook, Clallam, Chehalis, Puyallup,

Lummi, Suquamish, Nisqually, Nooksack,

Salish, and Muckleshoot. Normally the number

of tribal members was less than a few hundred.

The tribe represented several families or

villages located in a rather small area. Within

each village or tribe, the leader was the chief. The

tribe shaman, or medicine man, was its spiritual

leader and healer.

The coastal Indians had a well-defined class

system. Each individual’s class ranking was

based upon either their social class at birth, their

wealth, or both. The wealthiest member of the

tribe was usually selected as the tribe’s chief. The

noble, or upper, class included either the wealthy

or the close relatives to the chief, depending on

the tribe. Most members were commoners. The

lowest class consisted of slaves.

Slaves were usually women and children

captured during war. Adult males were usually

killed rather than taken as prisoners. Owning

slaves was an important status symbol within the

tribe. Each slave owned by the slave owner

increased his wealth and position within the tribe.

Tribal chiefs continued to hold their leadership position as long as they maintained wealth and respect. Loss of either could result in the loss of power. The shaman had much more to lose if he lost his spiritual powers. A shaman unable to heal the sick or injured members of his tribe could lose his life.

**Communication**

Any form of communication was very difficult between coastal tribes. None of the Native American tribes living in Washington had an alphabet or written language. Each tribe had its own spoken language. Coastal Indian oral languages are divided into three groups:

Nootka, Coastal Salish, and Chinook. Tribal

history, legends, and ideas were passed orally

from generation to generation.

Coastal Indians also used sign language, smoke signals, pictorial drawings, designs, totem

poles, dances, chants, songs, and story telling to

pass their cultural history on to others.

**Clothing**

The coastal Indian used available materials to make this clothing. During the mild summers, they wore little clothing. Males wore breechcloths and went barefoot. A few wore leggings and moccasins. Females wore skirts and dresses made from dog hair, grass, cattails, animal skins, and shredded cedar bark. The most important materials used by the coastal Indians to fashion clothing was cedar bark. They frequently wore cedar bark capes, skirts, and ponchos.

The cool, rainy winter climate caused both

men and women to wear more clothing. They

wore capes, ponchos, robes, blankets, and other

clothing made from dog hair and cedar bark.

Leather was not usually worn during the rainy

season because it shrank. In the rain they wore

cone shaped hats to help keep them dry.

Protective mats were made from reeds, moss,

and cattails. It was important to keep dry and

warm during the stormy, wet winters of western

Washington.

The coastal Indians also designed colorful

blankets and special ceremonial clothing. They

made elaborately designed ceremonial masks.

These masks were worn while attending potlatches and for burial and marriage ceremonies.

**Diet**

The coastal Indians were excellent whalers,

fishers, food gatherers, and hunters. Food was

abundant. Sufficient food and water allowed the

coastal Indians to build permanent shelters and

villages. These were located along either

saltwater or freshwater.

The Pacific Ocean and Puget Sound provided

the coastal people with a variety of foods. These

food sources included: whale, salmon, otter,

seal, razor clams, oysters, smelt, abalone, halibut,

cod, shellfish, crabs, and many other kinds or

seafood. Western Washington rivers yielded

salmon, trout, and other fish.

Coastal Indians also ate meat from sea and

land mammals, as well as berries and other wild

fruit. Frequently they dried food to be eaten

later. The coastal Indian also ate waterfowl, small

birds, deer, bear, elk, sheep, and mountain goats.

While the men hunted, the children and women

gathered berries and roots.

Coastal Indians used smoke houses, open pit fires, and hot rocks to cook their food. They baked or smoked salmon, steamed clams, and cooked meat. Salmon was the coastal Indians’ most important food.

Coastal Indians made cooking and eating utensils from natural materials. They used materials such as reeds, cedar bark, wood, stone, and metal to form bowls, baskets, containers, and ladles.

**Shelter**

Most coastal Indians lived in a longhouse or plank house. A longhouse was a permanent structure made from cedar logs or planks. Longhouses were 40 to 100 feet long and 20 to 30 feet wide. A longhouse had a shed-like roof, no windows, a few doors, and a narrow opening in the ceiling to let out smoke.

Several related families usually lived in the same longhouse. Several longhouses and other house forms would exist in a village. Woven mats or cattails covered the shelters.

**Transportation**

Before the arrival of the Europeans in 1542, Washington Indians either walked or canoed

when traveling. It was not until much later that

the Spanish brought the horse. Even then, the

coastal Indians rarely used the horse. In fact,

they did not use a sail or the wheel. The coastal

people usually traveled by dugout canoe. They

were excellent canoe builders. To make a dugout

canoe took months of hard labor and special

talent.

The process of making a canoe was simple, but involved much effort and special craftsmanship. A tall cedar tree was selected and cut to a desired length. The bark and limbs were removed. The craftsman used an adze, or ax, to dig out the wood. They would burn the inside portion of the emerging canoe. Then the dugout would be filled with water. Hot rocks were placed in the dugout to heat the water. Bark fires would heat the outside of the dugout. Braces

would help mold its shape. Workers would

smooth the bottom, apply decorative paint, and

carve the bow of the finished canoe.

The coastal Indians were superior canoe

builders. The dugouts they built were used on

rivers, lakes, and ocean waters. Dugout canoes

transported people, hauled goods and supplies,

were used to hunt and fish, and to wage war.

These canoes came in all sizes. Some canoes

were over 30 feet long. Whaling and war canoes

were usually the largest.

**Barter**

The coastal Indian loved to negotiate and barter for goods and services. They were experienced and skilled traders. They hunted, fished, gathered, and made what they needed. Coastal males were the hunters, fishers, and warriors. Coastal females raised the children, gathered berries, nuts, and roots. They also cooked the meals. Women made utensils,

ornaments, and clothing items.

**Tools**

Coastal Indians did not use metal tools until

after the Europeans came to present day

Washington. Instead, they used horns, animal

bone, hair, wood, rock, grasses, and shells. From

these materials, they made woven baskets,

blankets, adzes, hammers, chisels, knives,

fishhooks, harpoons, spears, clubs, bows and

arrows, spoons, ladles, and many other items.

**Recreation**

Coastal Indians enjoyed many recreational

activities. Individuals could show their athletic

skills and bravery during competitive contests.

These included canoe racing, foot races, tug-ofwar,

wrestling, spear toss, horsemanship, and

gambling.

Gambling has always been a favorite social and economic activity. The popular stick and bone game are favorite gambling activities. Today most of Washington’s gambling casinos are located on Indian reservations.

**Ceremonies**

Each coastal tribe had different puberty,

marriage, and burial ceremonies. Upon reaching

puberty, a youth was sent by the tribal elders into the wilderness. He went alone to seek a meeting with the spirits. This was called the Spirit Dance. Usually boys around 15 years old would fast during January. This was a rite of passage into adulthood. A young man's success in dealing with these difficult experiences often determined his role in the tribe.

It was common for a young girl to seek marriage to a male of greater wealth and/or social status than her own family. Marriage ceremonies varied greatly. In some tribes a young couple simply received permission to share the same shelter. In other tribes, especially the coastal tribes, there was an elaborate potlatch ceremony for the couple.

***The Potlatch***

A unique ceremony practiced by the coastal Indians was the potlatch. Potlatch was a Chinook word meaning, “to give.” The host of the potlatch and his relatives lavishly distributed gifts to invited guests. The guests were expected to accept any gifts offered with the understanding that at a future time they were to return the favor. Guests were showered with lavish gifts.

The object was to show generosity, as well as to

display the host’s wealth. The potlatch ceremony

also involved dancing, feasting, and ritual boasting, often lasting for several days. In return, the host received status in direct proportion to his expenses.

Any number of events could result in a potlatch. Marriage, funerals, the coming of age of upper-class youth, or the completion of a new longhouse could be considered a good occasion for a potlatch. Potlatches were outlawed in 1884 by the United States government until the ban was lifted in 1954.

***Burial Rites***

Life was difficult and often hazardous for

European settlers, the Indians were exposed to

new diseases. Small pox, chicken pox, cholera,

and measles devastated the Indians. They had

no natural immunities to these deadly diseases.

Therefore, the Indian’s population sharply

declined after the arrival of whites.

A tribal member’s death was honored with a

burial ceremony. The body was taken to the

tribe’s sacred burial grounds. Some tribes buried

the body in the ground, while other tribes placed

the body on a platform above the ground or in a

tree. This action was done out of concern that

wild animals might disturb the body. During

warfare, every effort was made to remove the

dead from the battlefield so that they could be

honored with a proper burial.

**The Shaman**

The most spiritually powerful person within

the tribe was the shaman, or medicine man. He

was the spiritual leader of the tribe. Each shaman

was personally responsible for the secrecy of

tribal customs and use of herbs to heal the ill. The

shaman performed healing ceremonies for the

ill. Tribal custom frequently placed the

responsibility for a person’s death directly upon

the shaman. If a patient died, other members of

the tribe, village, or family might seek revenge

by taking the life of the shaman.

**The Plateau Indian**

The plateau Indians lived east of the Cascade

Mountains. They existed in a harsh natural

environment. It was hot and dry in the summer.

Winters were windy, snowy, and very cold.

Food and water were very scarce. Therefore, the

plateau Indians were nomadic. They had to move

often in search of water and food. Life was

difficult. The plateau tribes competed for

survival. The most important plateau tribes in

eastern Washington were the Nez Perce,

Spokane, Yakama, Palouse, Walla Walla, Cayuse,

Colville, Wenatchi, and Klickitat. The lack of

safety and permanent shelter kept these plateau

people in constant movement.

**Tribal Organization**

The plateau tribes were few in number, but

each tribe covered a large area of eastern

Washington. Each tribe had several hundred or

as many as a few thousand members.

The plateau tribal organization included

chiefs, tribal council, and a council of elders.

Individuals who showed courage and bravery

in battle were respected. Those who displayed

wisdom and decision making skills were

honored. The most respected and honored

became tribal leaders and chiefs.

The tribal chief was to keep peace among the

tribe and provide security from attack. The chief

acted as a judge in disputes. He received guests

and sought adequate food, water, and grazing

areas for the livestock. In times of war, the chief

was a military leader. The larger tribes, such as

the Nez Perce and Yakama, had several chiefs,

each with different responsibilities.

The plateau Indians had a group social system.

Together they sought the necessities of life —

shelter, food, water, and security. They did not

Plateau Indians of eastern Washington had a challenging life.

value material goods or slaves. They did value

their horses, though. Life was a community effort;

every member had responsibilities to the tribe.

The tribe contained many families. The family

was made up of parents, children, and extended

relatives. Family members shared food,

transportation, and shelter. The male was

dominant. He was provider and protector of his

family and tribe. He hunted, fished, conducted

business, and served as a warrior in battle. The

female cared for the children and took care of the

household. Women dug roots, gathered fruits

and berries, prepared food, and made clothing

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**Clothing**

The plateau people wore clothing made from animal skins, fur pelts, dog hair, and grass. These materials reflect their environment. Their clothing was simple.

During the dry, hot summer months, the plateau Indians wore light clothing. Males wore skimpy breechcloths, leather moccasins, and leather leggings to protect the leg from thorny plants. Females wore decorative dresses made from animal skins, woven grass, and/or dog hair. They wore moccasins to protect their feet.

In winter, they wore heavy garments made from

animal skins and fur pelts. These protected them

from snow, long cold spells, and the strong,

bitter-cold winds. Tough leather moccasins,

heavy leggings, and thick clothing designed to

help keep them warm and dry were necessary

during the cold winters.

The plateau Indians made brightly colored

feather headdresses, clothing, and blankets.

These were worn at tribal ceremonies, special

celebrations, and during times of war. They

wore jewelry such as feathers, bear claws,

necklaces, earrings, nose rings, bones, scalps,

and very colorful stones, shells, and beads. They

also wore hair ornaments made from wood,

bone, shells, copper, and other metals.

**Diet**

The plateau Indians were not as fortunate as

the coastal Indians. Food and water were

generally scarce and difficult to find. Plateau

tribes often found themselves competing for

food at the same fishing and hunting spots.

Moving from place to place, they sought adequate

food and water for their families and livestock.

Living between the Cascade and Rocky

mountains, all plateau Indians had a harsh life

style. Control of those places where life’s

necessities existed was fiercely competitive.

The plateau Indians were nomadic because

they had little choice. They would hunt deer,

bear, elk, buffalo, birds, rabbits, mountain goat,

sheep, beaver, and other meat sources. When

wild animals were scarce, they ate dog, horse,

snakes, grasshoppers, crickets, and other insects.

Buffalo hunting parties had to cross the Rocky

Mountains to reach the Great Plains. This was a

very dangerous venture.

Plateau Indians were food gatherers. They picked berries such as blackberries, huckleberries, and chokeberries. They collected nuts and seeds — especially the sunflower seed.

They dug camas bulbs and bitterroots that were

later cooked in earthen ovens, mashed, boiled,

and then dried into flat cakes. Bitterroots were

cooked and dried into square cakes. Bitterroots

were peeled and boiled before being eaten. The

plateau Indians also made pemmican from

processed animal fat, berries, camas root, and

fish. Pemmican was baked, boiled, or eaten raw.

Salmon was a very important food source

for the plateau people. Salmon was abundant

during the spawning season. Salmon migrated

upstream in the autumn to spawn. Driven by

instinct, the salmon struggled against swift

mountain stream currents in their quest to reach

their original spawning grounds. The struggling

salmon were easy to catch. Three favorite fishing

sites of the plateau Indians were Willamette

Falls, Kettle Falls, and Celilo Falls. Kettle and

Celilo falls were magnificent fishing spots until

they were permanently flooded by rising waters

behind Grand Coulee and The Dalles dams in

the mid-20th century.

**Communication**

Any communication between tribes was very

difficult for the plateau Indians. Each tribe had

its own spoken language and no written

languages. As many as 100 dialects, or languages,

were spoken in the Washington area alone! How,

then, did plateau Indians communicate between

tribes? Many of the plateau tribes spoke Interior

Salish, Sahaptin, or Chinook. They also used a

variety of sign languages and Chinook jargon to

communicate.

Chinook jargon was a mixture of English,

French, and Chinook words. This mixed

language was very important because it helped

white settlers and fur traders communicate with

the plateau Indians.

**Shelter**

Since they were always on the move, plateau

people required a form of shelter that was quick

and easy to put up and take down. The majority

of the plateau Indians lived in tepees for much of

the year.

The tepee is a cone shaped shelter formed by

several long poles. Woven mats or animal hides

were usually used to cover the poles. The tepee

has no windows and usually one flap of animal

hide for an entrance. Tepees were heated with

fires usually built in the middle of the structure.

Smoke escaped through an opening at the top.

During the cold winters, the plateau Indians

lived in caves or built pit houses to escape the

snow and extreme winds. A pit house was usually

five to six feet deep and perhaps 30 feet in

diameter. The framework above the pit was

covered with animal skins, hides, and earthen

materials. Normally, a pit house would be

constructed on the leeward slope of hills away

from the cold winter winds. The pit house was

an excellent structure to protect the plateau

Indians from the harsh winter weather.

**Transportation**

Before the arrival of the horse in the early 18th

century, the plateau Indians relied on walking

and running to travel, hunt, and gather food.

The horse greatly increased their ability to do all

of their tasks much more quickly. The horse, or

pony, became their most prized possession. Some

plateau Indian tribes, such as the Klickitat, Nez

Perce, and Cayuse, were excellent horsemen.

The Nez Perce tribe developed the popular

Appaloosa breed of horse.

The plateau Indians often captured and broke

wild horses. Frequently they increased their own

herds by trading, breeding, and stealing from

other Indians and/or settlers. Horses were also

given as special gifts. The number of horses an

individual or tribe owned was an accurate

measure of wealth.

Horses and dogs were used to pull a travois.

It hauled their possessions from place to place. A

travois consisted of two long poles of unequal

length. This helped maintain balance and provide

a smoother ride. These poles were attached to

the shoulders of the animal by leather straps.

Woven mats and/or animal hides covered the

space between the poles behind the animal. Most

of the Indians’ possessions were transported by

the travois. The ill, wounded, elderly, or very

young children could travel this way.

**Barter**

The economic activities of the plateau people

were similar to those of their coastal neighbors.

Barter was the main form of payment for goods

and services. There were some major differences,

however. The plateau Indians were more skilled

in animal husbandry and horsemanship. Their

main barter item was the horse. Horses were

traded to fur traders and explorers for fur and

guns. Woodworking, woodcarving, and seashell

crafts were less important to the plateau Indian.

Plateau Indians were famous for their

beautiful beadwork and leather goods. Since so

many of their trade partners valued these goods,

they often used them as tools for barter. Valuable

weapons and supplies could be obtained from

trade. Many of these supplies were very helpful

in assisting the plateau Indians with simple

survival in the harsh environment.

**Chapter Summary**

Our native people made major contributions

to our cultural history. Arriving from central

Asia, they spread across North America and

South America. The Pacific Northwest tribes

were culturally and geographically divided into

the coastal and plateau peoples. The coastal

Indians lived in permanent villages along rivers,

streams, and ocean waterways. The plateau

Indians were nomadic tribes living in the

semiarid interior.

The Native American culture and life style

was changed forever with the arrival of white

explorers and settlers. In 1846, the United States

government established a reservation system

for all Indians. Reservations are areas of land

specifically set aside for the Native Americans.

The reservation system and the mixing of two

different cultural groups — Native Americans

and settlers — resulted in some serious

differences and conflicts.

Whaling

Perhaps the most dangerous activity associated with food gathering was the whale hunt. Gray whales migrate south along the coastlines of British Columbia, Washington and Oregon, on their way to Baja California.

Coastal tribes such as the Clallam, Hoh, Makah,

Queet, Quileute, and Quinault were the primary whale hunters. However, the tribe most respected for personal courage and whaling skill was the Makah. The Makah lived along the northwest coastline of the Olympic Peninsula near Neah Bay.

The Makah observed the ocean waters from either high vistas or canoes. They looked for pods of migrating whales. Once a pod was spotted, the men of the village paddled their large whaling dugout canoes toward the pod.

When a whale was chosen, the men paddled hard to allow the harpooner a good shot at the whale. They would approach the whale on its left side. Next, the harpooner threw his 20 foot harpoon. A good shot would stick just behind the left fin of their prey. A rope wasconnected to the bow of the canoe. It was

attached to inflated seal floats. The floats were used to exhaust the harpooned whale by pulling it toward the surface. A stricken whale would dive deep into the ocean. Eventually it would leap from the water. The enraged whale could overturn or smash a 40 to 65 foot whaling canoe with its massive tail. Many

courageous Indian whalers met their deaths during their hunts.

Usually after a long struggle, the harpooned whale slowly died. These battles would last anywhere from many hours up to a few days.

Sewing the whale’s mouth shut, plugging the blowhole with blubber, and tying seal skin floats helped prevent the whale from sinking. The victorious whalers towed the dead whale to their village with the help of the incoming tide. All members of the tribe greeted the successful whalers. This was a time for celebration, feasting, and giving thanks! The tribe used nearly every portion of the whale.

The most prized portions were given to the harpooners and those tribal members of status.

Whale blubber, oil, meat, and other body parts were shared among the remaining villagers according to their tribal rank.