

The Indians of Idaho

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Idaho Indian Peoples are divided into five distinct groups: the Kutenai (sometimes called Kootenai), Coeur d'Alene, and Nez Perce in the North, the Shoshoni and Northern Paiute in the south. The Kutenai--some sixty individuals living in Idaho near Bonners Ferry--are the smallest of the northern groups. The Coeur d'Alene, living near Plummer, are related to the Flatheads of Montana and the Spokane of Washington. The largest group in northern Idaho are the Nez Perce, most of whom live in the lower Clearwater valley.

Southern Idaho Indians differ from the three northern groups both in language and in culture (way of life). The two major southern groups are the Shoshoni and the Northern Paiute. Most southern Idaho Indians live at Fort Hall, where the Shoshoni form the great majority. The name "Bannock" is given to a people of Northern Paiute origin who also live at Fort Hall, and another small Paiute band live at Duck Valley on the southern boundary of this state.

Living conditions among most northern Indians west of the Continental Divide were similar before the white man came. Salmon, plentiful in most rivers, were caught, dried, and stored in the summer. Roots and bulbs--particularly the bulbs of the camas lily, sego, bitterroot, and the kouse or "bisquit root"--chokecherries and serviceberries, were mashed and dried: no edible plant was overlooked. Communal hunts were organized for rabbit, antelope, and buffalo.

The Idaho Shoshoni made more use of the flat grinding stone than did their northern neighbors, who, in turn, were more familiar with the mortar, suitable for pounding bulbs and meat. Likewise, the Shoshoni hunted in groups more often than other Idaho Indians. All, however, were good hunters. The northern groups excelled in house building, developing long gabled structures, covered with mats and housing several families, while the conical grass hut was traditional in the south. The manufactured articles of Idaho Indians, before the white man came, consisted mainly of basketry. The soft and beautifully-designed corn-husk bags of the Nez Perce, still made by a few experts, are Indian basketry at its best. Pottery of a crude kind was made by the Shoshoni. Clothing was scanty, the best being a robe woven from strips of rabbit skin. The best bows were made from the horns of mountain sheep, but the people were poorly equipped for warfare.

Before the coming of the horse, the Indian people of Idaho apparently were not organized

in permanent bands nor did they have formal "chiefs." About the middle of the eighteenth century, drastic changes began to affect their way of life. Horses, introduced to America by the Spaniards, reached the Idaho people from New Mexico, but fish and roots continued to be the staple diet of the western Indians.

However, the Indians of Idaho were among the early North American Indians to possess horses. From their eastern neighbors, Idaho Indians adopted the methods, living habits, patterns of dress and of organization that went with hunting buffalo on horseback. This meant living in tipis; "jerking" meat for preservation; wearing well-made and ornamented skin clothing; feather headdresses; ceremonial dances; and using the "travois"--a carrier suspended from poles and dragged behind a horse--for transportation. Most important, bands were organized under trusted chieftans to cooperate in food-hunting and for safety in hostile territory. Any individual Indian might also change from band to band and from leader to leader as he saw fit; the chiefs were not autocratic, and the political and social band structure was just developing.

Any group of Idaho Indians at this time was highly movable, and there was much coming and going, each group living for the time on food available in the locality. Traditions of the Shoshoni mention journeys to a yearly intertribal meeting where the Boise, Payette, and Weiser rivers empty into the Snake. There they celebrated the opening of the fishing season and traded shells (for ornament), hides, dried meat, and arrowheads.

When white men made direct contact with the Indians of Idaho in the early 1800's, the tribes needed white help. Blackfeet, who had obtained firearms through the Canadian fur trade, were raiding and horse stealing, and guns were needed for defense. These the Idaho people obtained in quantity by trading furs; they also received manufactured goods such as knives, tools, traps, fish hooks, kettles, cloth, glass beads, vermilion, tobacco--and, unfortunately, "firewater" as well.

In 1836, in response to a plea from the Nez Perce, Presbyterian missionary Henry Harmon Spalding came and immediately began instruction not only in Christian doctrine but also in agriculture and industry, soon settling a number of Indian families on irrigated farms which they cultivated with crude white man's equipment. By 1839, the Nez Perce mission had the Northwest's earliest printing press and, soon after, a saw mill and flour mill.

Jesuit missionaries arrived among the Coeur d'Alenes in 1842, and also began to teach the fundamentals of farming and to get the people settled in a broad and fertile valley. This mission, which moved to Desmet in 1877, is still active.

Through the year 1860, living with the advantage of horses and vastly improved tools in a familiar environment, the Indians could still hope to progress indefinitely along their own lines and in their own lands. This ended when a series of gold rushes brought overpowering numbers of whites to the Indian country immediately after 1860, with their demand for the Indian's lands.

Forced onto reservation lands, the Indian people had to accept a new, restricted life. Today, little enough remains of the culture and of the skills which enabled the Idaho Indians to live for a hundred centuries and more in Idaho's mountains and deserts.

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