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Snake River Prehistory

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Although a gigantic continental ice sheet interfered with their progress into much of North America, people from a vast area of Siberia, Alaska, and northern Canada followed elephants and other food resources into places like modern Idaho more than 12,000 years ago. At that time, so much ocean water was frozen into enormous ice sheets (that still have not entirely melted) that ocean shore lines differed greatly from those that exist in modern times. As a result, Europe and North America all formed a single continent, connected by a vast Bering plain that eventually was covered by ocean water. All of Snake River remained clear of that ice sheet, which in Idaho extended only to Lake Coeur d'Alene. Snake River had some local high-mountain ice caps, but those glaciers did not compare at all with continental ice sheets found in both hemispheres.

Because of its proximity to continental glaciation, Snake River experienced significant impacts from its ice age location. Continually advancing and receding across North Idaho, an ice border 2,000 feet thick blocked Clark's Fork near Cabinet Gorge often enough to form a series of Montana lakes that reached depths of as much as 950 feet at Missoula. When ice dams got soft and overflowed, they washed out very quickly, releasing enormous deluges that surged across lower Snake River near Pasco, Washington. A series of at least thirty-seven floods gained depth sufficient to splash back from Pasco up Snake River and its Clearwater drainage above Lewiston. This sequence began long before anyone arrived to view it, but persisted long enough that some people may have turned up in time to witness one of those outlandish displays in which large rivers, including Snake and Clearwater torrents, ran backwards. Those sensational events ended no later than about 12,000 years ago, with recent flows coming from British Columbia and Kootenai sources north of Spokane and Coeur d'Alene.

Around 12,000 to 14,500 years ago, another very different kind of flood impressed inhabitants of Snake River's broad plain or deep canyons. With a much greater total volume of water--but spread out over a decidedly longer period of time--an overflow from a vast Utah and Nevada lake affected Snake River below Blackfoot. Lake Bonneville--an ancestral Great Basin predecessor of Salt Lake and Utah Lake--overflowed for six months or so into Snake River from Cache Valley. Until about 28,000 years ago, Snake River had a substantially larger drainage. All of Bear River above Soda Springs flowed through Portneuf Canyon into Snake River until a lava eruption diverted that stream into Cache Valley and Lake Bonneville. Eventually, that increment led to an overflow through Red Rock Pass and lower Portneuf Canyon back into Snake River. In its narrow gorge below Hells Canyon Creek, Snake River attained a depth of 410 feet, while below Shoshone Falls, it ran considerably deeper than that. Polished boulders and high gravel bars more than a mile or two long resulted from Snake River's Bonneville flood

phase, which certainly would have impressed anyone who might have been around. [Insert evidence here.]

Aside from dining upon elephants in places like Owl Cave--a Snake plains lava structure--early people in that area depended upon other big game as well. Camels, horses, bears, and sloth joined modern creatures like deer and elk as food sources for Snake River's early hunters. Modern buffalo, along with an antique form of giant bison, also were represented. From their early Snake River beginnings, people followed several differing traditions of hunting, utilizing different kinds of weapons and tools prior to a great drought around 10,800 years ago. Elephants and some other big game varieties left Snake River altogether for greener pastures in northern plains that attracted some of Idaho's early peoples to follow during a warmer era of heat and desert that persisted from 8,000 to 5,000 years ago. Others retained a Salmon River mountain big game tradition that continued into modern times. Important cultures of early Snake River peoples, with weapons also used around Clovis, New Mexico, followed by a later tradition identified with Folsom, New Mexico, extended over a wide western area more than 10,000 years ago. Snake River contemporaries of Clovis people specialized with a still different approach in hunting modern big game, but Folsom people who followed them to Snake River still dined on elephants before a warmer drier climate ended such exotic opportunities.

Subsequent to climatic changes that emerged gradually around 8,000 years ago, new peoples showed up with rock shelters for hunting in Snake River's western plains. Similar to those on Birch Creek, higher up near broad valley border lands, those inhabitants of rock shelters lived in a society intermediate between that of earlier elephant hunters and later mobile users of bows and arrows. By 6,000 years or so ago, yet another assembly of lower Snake and lower Salmon peoples, who ranged as far west as Pasco, developed elaborate large cemeteries in which they placed new kinds of tools for old pursuits in graves of their deceased ancestors. These changes in life around Snake River marked a transition toward new ways of life that emerged in a wetter and colder era beginning some 4,500 years ago.

Prehistoric settlers who spent longer seasons in communities around fishing spots or other subsistence areas incorporated village life into their cultural heritage in places as far apart as Wyoming and Surprise Valley in northeastern California around 6,000 years ago. This interesting new fad revolutionized life in lower Snake River and lower Clearwater strongholds as early as 4,600 years ago and spread upstream to western Snake plains sites by 4,200 years ago. Pit houses, some of them quite large, were dug out and erected in summer or winter village areas. Their Snake River usage continued until about a thousand years ago in some lower Boise and Payette Valley areas. Rock art became prominent during this era, and community hunting sites came with more stable settlements.

During an era of colder, wetter climate and increasing hunting and fishing resources that persisted from around 4,500 years ago until about 1840, Snake River inhabitants decided to use modern weapons like bows and arrows. Riverside pit houses gave them access to superior fishing sites, while natural hot water resources in places such as Given's Springs along Snake River attracted long-term seasonal communities. Fishing at a hot springs offered exceptional natural advantages that made life more enjoyable. Travel to hunting and camas areas also became more pleasant when pack dogs could be employed to help haul supplies and equipment. By about 2,500 years ago, lower Salmon River pit houses had grown relatively large in size near fishing sites, but with increased Indian mobility, pole houses (more temporary in nature) were

coming into fashion about 1,000 years ago. Pottery also became more of a feature of life in more recent times, along with improved baskets suitable for carrying water. Snake River's historic Indian peoples emerged from later prehistoric communities, and by 1598, when Spanish settlement reached New Mexico, Snake River Indians were ready to adjust to new ways of life that radiated from that expansion.

Information provided by Tom Green.

(This information had not been edited.)