



THE COMING OF THE HORSE

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The moccasin tracks of "the walking" Indians have been hidden by the wind, but the memory of Idaho's early peoples should not be forgotten. Following Indian roads and trails that crisscrossed the Snake River Plain and wound north and south into the mountains, "the walking" Indians moved through the seasons. Within that ancient circle they traveled great distances, carrying little.

In the spring, bands left winter camps located along the Snake and Salmon Rivers and their tributaries to dig camas bulbs and other roots in wet meadows. After quantities of camas had been collected and roasted the bulbs were shaped into cakes and dried in the sun. Leaving the camas harvest, small family bands moved over the land to hunt and gather, hoping to find plenty so the excess could also be dried, cached. As leaves began to fall, stored goods were collected and taken to supply winter villages.

Some cache sites held not only food, but locally specific medicine/basketry plants, or leather pouches of chipping stone for making arrowheads, scrapers and knives. Locations of these caches, hunting camps, gathering sites, and stone quarries were retained in tribal memory, for it was a life without writing. Tribal strength and knowledge lay in remembering and recounting.

From ancient times dogs had been used by "the walking people" to transport goods: meat from a kill, provisions, furs, leather, or extra moccasins on the trail. But a dog could carry a pack of 50 pounds or less and only for a few hours, limiting their use.

By the mid-1500's Spanish explorers arrived in the Rio Grande Valley and Texas Panhandle with the first horses. But, as writer Francis Haines points out, early Spanish military expeditions did not travel with even one mare in their remudas. It would be late 1600 before the tribes had horse herds of their own; only after the Spanish established ranches in New Mexico and the Pueblo Revolt (1680) did various Indian tribes secure breeding stock.

According to Haines, the Comanche were among the first to become mounted hunters and warriors on the Southern Plains. The Northern Shoshone traded often with their Comanche relatives and not long after the Comanche had the horse, the Shoshone were riding north toward the Snake River on mounts of their own.

Horses, often referred to as "big dogs" by early Indians, transformed the newly mounted people's lifeway. Small bands could move easily. By joining together for safety, large groups began traveling east into the "grass Plains" to hunt buffalo.

An excellent food resource, the male buffalo stands as much as seven feet high at the shoulders and weighs as much as 2,000 pounds; buffalo cows average five feet at the shoulder and weigh from 700 to 900 pounds. With a horse trained to run with the buffalo, a skilled hunter could bring down several animals.

Buffalo also supplied robes for warmth, hides for lodges, and skins for clothing; horn, bone, and hooves for utensils; sinew for sewing and bow strings; hair for padding; fat and tallow. But, the most important resource was meat that could be dried and stored. Dried meat, pounded then mixed with melted fat and poured into hide containers made pemmican. The high calorie, nutritious food could be carried, eaten on horseback, or stored for times when snow covered the earth and bitter winds closed the land.

The first buffalo hunting bands traveling east encountered unfamiliar tribes on the Great Plains. At trading fairs westerners were exposed to different foods, clothing styles, religions, medical plants, horse gear, weapons, decorative items, and, etc. Returning to the Plains the next season their pack horses were loaded with dried salmon, camas, baskets, skins, bows, and obsidian for bartering. They later returned to the Snake River country with meat and an array of goods and ideas that would alter the traditions and lives of "the walking people," forever.

Following the Plains Indians the Northern Shoshone, Bannock and Nez Perce tribes were quick to adopt leather lodge covers that could be carried by a pack horse from camp to camp and set up quickly in any location. Clothing of the tribes soon became more tailored following eastern styles. The first white traders with goods like iron kettles, steel needles, knives, guns and ammunition were encountered at eastern trading fairs and later at trading posts.

With sufficient meat carried by the horse to winter camps people became healthier and more children lived to adulthood. Tribal populations had started to increase when waves of European diseases slipped like dark mists through camps and villages. Smallpox often wiped out whole bands, leaving tribes decimated.

Indian populations had no resistance to foreign germs. In 1781 and again in the 1830's, smallpox epidemics swept across the Americas. Smallpox was not the only illness that threatened Indian populations; mumps, measles, cholera, diphtheria--killing sicknesses for which healers had no medicine or cure.

The horse had carried the American Indian across an ocean of grass into great change leaving behind some of the ways of the ancient tribes who had walked across the land for thousands of years. On the horse, the future expanded ideas, but it also held mysteries to be wary of. In transition the old ways might be forgotten, but the circle of the seasons lies deep within a people and the land. Today in our search for the future we need to recognize the moccasin prints of a past hidden in the dust by the wind. It is a past to be recognized, remembered, to learn again.

YOUR ROLE IN PROTECTING ARCHAEOLOGICAL SITES

Wilderness Archaeologists are currently working to preserve, protect and understand the prehistory of the ancient peoples who lived in the Frank Church-River of No Return Wilderness. As this prehistory is discovered and understood, they will share it with the public through educational monographs and other publications. You can help in this effort by leaving artifacts where they lie, and informing Forest Service Wilderness managers of your discovery. Take pride in our American heritage.

Take nothing but photographs.