

## PEELED TREES

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In 1881, Norman B. Willey reported to The Nez Perce News the discovery of several Indians who had escaped and eluded army patrols and scouts after the last major Indian battle in Central Idaho, the Sheepeater Campaign of 1879. Willey noted:

Washington (Warrens), Idaho Territory May 24, 1881

"...A man named Wilson, who traps in that (Long Valley) region, while making his daily round in the lower end of Long Valley, saw a couple of Indian boys near by. He himself was not observed, and he watched their motions; they were endeavoring to catch birds along the river, and when out of sight he made a bee line for the settlement in Little Salmon some 25 miles distant. The family was gathered in the most central place, and the next day the able bodied men of the neighborhood, who had sufficient arms, returned to the scene. They found the camp, but the Indians had left, taking the old Indian trail across the divide that separates Long Valley from Indian Valley, in the direction of the latter settlement. Their intentions were evidently friendly. The party appeared to consist of three bucks, two squaws, and the two boys and a child. A visit to their camp indicated that they are entirely destitute of ammunition. They had peeled bark from a great many trees, and had been scraping and apparently living on the soft portion of it, but there was not a bone or feather to be found, although game was plenty thereabouts."

The article by Willey noting peeled tree use by Idaho Indians provides important historical data about this feature in Idaho's forests. Trees that can be identified today as those used as a food resource by Native Americans are labeled by Archaeologists as "peeled or scarred" trees. Single trees, groups of trees, and groves recorded within the Frank Church--River of No Return Wilderness and surrounding National Forests are being preserved.

One of the most difficult tasks presented to those who are interested in history, particularly American Indian history, is the acceptance and visualization of their complete dependence on the natural world for all food, medicine, clothing, habitation, and spiritual guidance. Its an overwhelming idea, but just as the streets and shops of a familiar city are comfortable in modern times, the meadows, mountains, rivers and streams of the prehistoric landscape were comfortable and familiar to American Indian peoples.

Just as today, the difference between success and starvation was hard work and the development of awareness, mental, physical and technical skills. Anthropologist James F. Downs (1966) pointed out:

"It might be said that fishing and hunting were arts, but gathering approached a primitive applied science...once learned the skills of harvesting are relatively simple. But to be an efficient gatherer requires a vast fund of knowledge about the growth cycle of dozens of plant species, an understanding of the effects of weather on growth and knowledge of soils and growing conditions. These mental skills can be taught in part. Many of them required learning through experience, so it was the oldest of the...women who were the most expert gatherers."

The utilization of inner bark as a food appears to be common throughout the United States and the world, not only as a survival food but as an optional choice. As indicated earlier in the article by Willey, inner tree bark was collected in the spring as a food resource, particularly when needed as survival food. Odd Bjerke (1977) noted, "There is one beautiful thing about plants as a survival food: they are stationary. They do not move like a bear or an elk or a deer."

The ponderosa pine (*Pinus ponderosa*, pine family Pinaceae) tree is often referred to as black pine, yellow pine, punkin pine, and bull pine all denoting differing stages of growth. As pointed out by Wallace Kimball (1996), "The prime peeling trees would be the yellow or punkin pines."

The ponderosa has long needles (5"-8"), in bundles of three. Another characteristic of mature trees is the vanilla scent emanating from the bark on warm days.

Although trees have a variety of recorded uses, the remaining aged, peeled ponderosa pines provide regional evidence of their food-use by American Indians. Their distinctive peeling scars, those not attributable to fire, animals, trail markers, lightning, survey marks and equipment scrapes, can still be seen.

Scars like those found on trees in the Wilderness area indicate the initial cut was generally made on the lower portion of the tree. At the point the cut went through the bark, a flat-tipped stick was inserted and wedged up between the bark and the woody layer of the tree. The prying stick, following the curvature of the tree, was wedged and lifted, wedged and lifted, until a section of bark was removed. The thin cambium layer adhered to the section removed from the ponderosa pine (on cottonwood trees the cambium layer adheres to the woody xylem). A sharp implement, often a sharpened piece of horn or bone, and later a sharpened piece of a tin can, was used to scrape the cambium in strips from the outer bark so it could be eaten.

