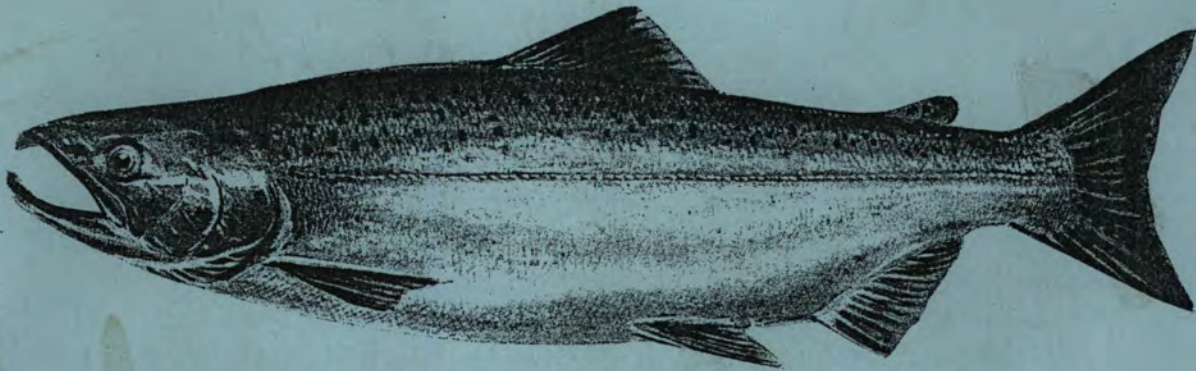


REMEMBERING THE SALMON

by Peter Preston

U.S. Dept of Agriculture, Forest Service
Heritage Program, Payette Natl Forest
September 1999

4



CHINOOK SALMON (*Onchorhynchus tshawytscha*)

It has long been known that the Nez Perce people had been coming to upper Long Valley to fish for Chinook salmon ("na-tsokth" in the Nez Perce language) long before Euro-Americans arrived in the late 1800's. An illustration of that fact is in the 1978 oral history of Herman Blackwell, who arrived in the McCall area in 1905. As a young man Herman notes that the Nez Perce Indians "...use to come here and fish on the [Payette] river, before they put the [Black Canyon] dam in down there [by Emmett]. They used to camp right down there by the stockyards" [on the east side of the Payette River, on the south side of McCall]. ... "They generally came in about the middle of the summer. Some of them would stay ten days, some of them two weeks. They'd catch salmon, they'd hang them up in the trees and let them dry. I don't believe they smoked them here. ... There'd be probably four or five squaws and three or four men. ... They come from over there at Clearwater on that reservation over there. I don't know why they came over here, I guess the salmon didn't run over there, in the Clearwater at that time, but they'd come over here and fish for salmon". Herman said they travelled by "horse and pack horses" and "they'd bring their tipis.... Some of them had blankets wrapped around. Pretty near all the squaws wore blankets wrapped around them. The men wore overalls. My dad [early McCall businessman Clem Blackwell] could talk Indian, and the old ones would come over here, they'd go in the store and they knew dad. The old ones couldn't talk English, and they'd go and get dad to interpret for them. He could talk right along with the Indians." [Clem Blackwell grew up in northeast Oregon in the late 1800's where he learned the Umatilla language which, according to linguist Sven Liljeblad, was closely related to the Nez Perce language and allowed Clem to converse with the visiting Nez perce people]. I knew Herman Blackwell, my wife's cousin, as "Uncle Herman" as he was much older than I. Herman was 96 when died in McCall in 1981.

Herman Blackwell's son-in-law, George Strode, now 85, came to Long Valley at age 10. On September 7, 1999, George related this eyewitness event to me: In what was probably June of 1924, George observed a band of Nez Perce Indians in transit across Long Valley. The band consisted of about thirty people; men, women, and children of all ages. Some were on horses pulling travois, some were on foot, and there was a wagon pulled by a horse. The band had come over West Mountain, apparently from the Council Valley area, following the sheep driveway eastbound for the South Fork of the Salmon. The band passed by Donnelly, went over into Kennally Creek, leaving the wagon at the Earl Pottenger ranch. One of the women was left behind near the Pottenger ranch to give birth to a child and caught up with the band a short time later. The band continued up Kennally Creek, over Blackmare Summit, and down Blackmare Creek to their camp at Poverty Flat, on the South Fork. The band began spearing Chinook salmon which were thick in the river. George was in the presence of an older man, perhaps about sixty years old, who was not fishing and was perhaps the leader of the band. He spoke English reasonably well and said to George, "Son, you will live to see the day when the salmon will not come back here, as they are encountering too many hazards." How prophetic that Nez Perce band leader was!

In recent years I have talked to my contemporaries (I am now 64) about their remembrances of salmon in the area of the Payette National Forest. Val Simpson, who was Ranger at Chamberlain 1952-1957, remembers Chamberlain Creek and its tributaries having heavy runs of salmon (now there are none). Aloha McCoy grew up on a small ranch on Monumental Creek (a tributary of Big Creek) in the 1930's where she would catch big salmon by hand in a small irrigation ditch. Dan LeVan Jr, who grew up at the Big Creek Ranger Station, remembers big salmon in all the streams at the ranger station from the mid-1930's to his departure in 1946. There are many more such recollections of salmon in all the Salmon River tributaries.

In 1956-1957 my wife Sally and I lived at the Forest Service Brush Camp on the Secesh River at its confluence with Lick Creek. Our little Forest Service house was no more than ten feet from the river's edge and sometimes we were kept awake by the sound of the salmon flopping on the rocks as they were making their way upstream. In recent years we have returned to that same spot for a nostalgic visit to the place where our first home stood (long since removed) and sadly observed that there were no salmon to be seen. I told my grandchildren that I could remember during the spawning run the river was so thick with salmon that it looked like I could walk across the river on their backs without getting my feet wet. My grandchildren could not imagine what I was talking about. Remembering the salmon gives me a heavy heart.