

# Native Americans of the Plateau and Great Basin Area

By Jennifer Kenny

The area where Native Americans settled east of the Northwest Coast Area and west of the Plains is considered the cultural area of the Plateau and Great Basin. The Plateau section had more water available. The Great Basin portion had huge stretches of barren desert. All in all, it was a tough environment in which to settle. Native Americans faced many obstacles there.

In the northern portion of the area between the Cascade Range and the Rocky Mountains, the Native Americans had very simple social, political, and religious systems. Art was almost nonexistent. They fished for salmon with nets and spears. They also gathered camas bulbs. They gathered bugs, including ants, to eat. They hunted small game and later, buffalo. When they settled in their winter villages, they had lodges with cone-shaped roofs.

Around 1730, these Native Americans received horses, tepees, and deerskin clothes from the Plains Indians. They also learned dances from them. This changed them culturally. The Plateau and Great Basin Indians became famous for breeding and trading horses. They were, therefore, able to migrate more and trade into California and the Plains.

In the southern portion of the area, the Pomo were sedentary people. They lived in permanent villages and gathered edible plants, roots, and fruit. They hunted small game too. They lived in brush shelters or lean-tos. The Pomo were famous for the acorn bread they made. They pounded the acorns into a meal, leached it with hot water, and cooked it in baskets heated by hot stones. Their basketry skills were also highly developed. These and other tribes further south in the Great Basin Area often had meager resources. They lived on wild food such as insects, seeds, lizards, and deer. They often migrated with the seasons. There was no agriculture. The mothers used cradleboards made of thick twigs and soft animal skins to carry the babies on their backs or sometimes tied to saddles. Grandmothers carried cooking tools and baskets. The male adults carried bows and arrows. They had a huge respect for nature, believed all living things had spirits.

The Paiute men wore cloth around their waists. The women wore thin aprons around their waists. Sometimes they were lucky enough to wear stiff sandals woven from sagebrush.

In fall, the Paiute set up camp. They settled into a pinion grove. They were able to stay put for a bit and relax. From the cones found in the grove, women cracked nuts, pounded the kernels inside, and made a rich, oily soup. In November, the Paiute returned to the flatlands knowing rabbits were fat from the summer and, therefore, it was a great time to hunt them. The men set nets on the lands. The families drove the rabbits toward the nets. The rabbits were killed with clubs, bows, and arrows. The rabbits were a huge part of the diet and provided the skin with which winter clothing was made.

In the winter, rain and snow made marshes, which attracted ducks. The Paiute made fake ducks out of tule plants, yucca, and cattail leaves and put them in the wetlands. This attracted live ducks. The men hunted ducks, and in the spring, the women gathered their eggs. The men also speared fish. In the summers, the waters dried up, but fruit ripened. Chokeberries, yucca, and cactus were eaten by the Paiute, who also ate gathered rice.



There were several unique customs to the various Native Americans living in this area. In many of the tribes, the women made parfleches, which were folding containers made of animal skin. They were hung from a saddle and could carry buffalo meat and clothing.

The Nez Perce were famous for their cornhusk bags. They were made of twisted hemp fiber and decorated with cords made from cornhusk parts. When the cords were dyed, patterns could be produced. Cornhusk bags carried food, roots, and berries. After horses, cornhusk bags were the most important trade goods of the Nez Perce.

To the Indians in this area, sickness meant something was out of order, not only within the tribe, but also in the world of the spirits. A healer would draw on the power of the spirit to restore order and health. The healer would bring himself and his spiritual advisor to the patient. He would visit and sing songs to heal the patient. Many of these Native Americans in the Plateau and Great Basin Area were left alone until settlers moved west. Wars followed. Many of the people were forced to settle on reservations.