

Spokan

The Spokans were a Plateau tribe having three geographic divisions: upper, lower, and middle. They have also been known as Muddy People, as well as Sun People, probably after a faulty translation of their name. Their self-designation was *Spoqe'ind*, "round head." The Spokans lived along the Spokane River in the mid-18th century, in eastern Washington and northern Idaho. Today they live on reservations in Washington and Idaho as well as in regional cities and towns. Spokan is a dialect of the interior division of the Salishan language family.

The Spokans probably originated in British Columbia along with other Salish groups. Each division of Spokans was composed of a number of bands, which were in turn composed of groups of related families. Bands were led by a chief and an assistant chief, who were selected on the basis of leadership qualities. The office of band chief may once have been hereditary. Several bands might winter together in a village and at that time select an ad hoc village chief. Decisions were made by consensus. In the historic period, as authority became more centralized, there was also a tribal chief.

The Spokans were seminomadic for nine months a year; during the other three they lived in permanent winter villages. The men's realm consisted of toolmaking, warring, hunting, fishing, and, later, caring for horses. The dead were covered with skins and robes and buried after spending some time on a scaffold. A pole marked the grave site.

The Spokans built typical Plateau-style, semiexcavated, cone-shaped wood-frame houses covered with woven matting and/or grass. Longer, lodge-style structures of similar construction were used for communal activities. Villages also contained mat-covered sweat lodges. Temporary brush shelters served as summertime houses. Later, skin teepees replaced the aboriginal structures.

Fish, especially salmon, was the staple. Trout and whitefish were also important. These were mostly smoked, dried, and stored for the winter. Men hunted local big game and, later, buffalo on the Plains. A favorite hunting technique was for many men to surround the animal. Important plant foods included camas, bitterroot and other roots, bulbs, seeds, and berries.

Men caught fish with nets, weirs, traps, and hook and line. Women made coiled baskets of birch-bark and/or cedar root; they also wove wallets and bags of woven strips of skin, and they sewed tule mats and other items.

After they acquired horses from Kalispel Indians, around the mid-18th century, they began hunting buffalo on the Great Plains. This was especially true of the upper division. By the time they encountered the Meriwether Lewis and William Clark expedition in 1805, their population had already declined significantly as a result of smallpox epidemics.

Following the Lewis and Clark visit, the North West, Hudson's Bay, and American Fur Companies quickly established themselves in the area. Missionaries

arrived in the 1830s: They found the Spokans to be reluctant converts, and the influence of Christianity acted to create factionalism within the tribe. Interracial relations declined sharply in the late 1840s with the Whitman massacre and the closing of the Protestant mission. Severe smallpox epidemics in 1846 and again in 1852 and 1853 helped spur the rise of the Prophet Dance and the Dreamer Cult.

After miners had effectively dispossessed the Spokans from their territory, they joined with Coeur d'Alenes, Yakimas, Palouses, and Paiutes in the short-lived 1858 Coeur d'Alene, or Spokane, War. Spokane Indians then remained on their land as best they could or settled on various reservations. Despite pleas from Chief Joseph, they remained neutral in the 1877 Nez Percé War. In that year, the lower division agreed to move to the Spokane Reservation (officially declared a reservation in 1881, 154,898 acres). Ten years later, the other two divisions, as well as some remaining lower Spokans, agreed to move to either the Flathead, Colville, or Coeur d'Alene Reservation. The local fort, Fort Spokane, became an Indian boarding school from 1898 to 1906. There were also conflicts over land with non-Natives in and around the city of Spokane at this time.

In the early 20th century, much tribal land was lost to the allotment process as well as to "surplus" land sales to non-Indians. Dams built in 1908 (Little Falls) and 1935 (Grand Coulee) ruined the local fishery. Uranium mining began in the 1950s. The Spokane tribe successfully fought off termination proceedings begun in 1955. In 1966, the tribe received a land claims settlement of \$6.7 million.

Further Reading

Lamar, Howard. *The New Encyclopedia of the American West*. New Haven, CT.: Yale University Press, 1998; Ruby, Robert H. and John A. Brown. *The Spokane Indians : Children of the Sun*. Norman : University of Oklahoma Press, 2006; Sturtevant, William C., ed. *Handbook of North American Indians*. Vol. 12, *Plateau*. Washington: Smithsonian Institution, 1998.

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