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BEFORE THE EUROPEANS CAME

The United States spans the entire width of the North American continent—“from sea to shining sea.” It includes deserts and mountains, plains and forests, ocean beaches and rolling fields. The American West in particular has diverse **environments**, such as the **arid** deserts of Nevada, the mountainous regions of Wyoming and Montana, the rain forests of Oregon and Washington, and the plains of Colorado, Wyoming, and Montana.

Such a vast region, covering so many thousands of square miles, has many different landscapes and many different peoples. The Native Americans in the American West have lived there for thousands of years. There are many different tribes throughout the West, and we will learn more about some of them later in this book.

You may have heard the term “the Wild West.” This usually refers to the western portion of the United States during the second half of the 1800s, when many people were moving across the country to Oregon, California, Wyoming, Nevada, and other western states. These were not yet states but wild, untamed regions of wilderness. There was almost no government, almost no police or sheriffs, and people sort of had to figure things out for themselves.

The West was wild in another sense. Whether in the expansive deserts of Nevada with its herds of wild horses, or the flat, windy plains of Wyoming with their unimaginably large herds of buffalo, or the massive forests of Oregon, or the frozen **tundra** of Alaska with its polar bears—the West was wild because it was untamed.

environment: the natural world surrounding us
arid: very dry, having little rain or water
tundra: an area of flat land in the northern parts of the earth where the ground is always frozen and no trees grow



Indians hunting buffalo in the “Wild West,” painted by Karl Bodmer in the early 1840s

The Regions of the Northwest

In the first part of this book, we will not discuss all those regions that make up the American West but only those that are called the Northwest and Mountain states. Today, this region is made up of the states of Alaska, Washington, Oregon, Idaho, Nevada, Montana, and Wyoming. The second part of this book discusses the distant island state of Hawai'i.

This book is, of course, a history book—but history has to do with more than the stories of what people have done. To understand these stories, we must understand their background—the lands and environments in which the stories took place. Let us then look at the different Northwestern and Mountain states to get a sense of their **geography** and the people who first lived in them.

geography: the natural features of the land (rivers, mountains, plains, deserts, etc.); also the study of these natural features

Alaska

The most northwestern American state is Alaska. Alaska is often called the “last frontier,” since so much of it remains unsettled, unexplored, and untar-nished, even today.

Denali (Mt. McKinley)



Alaska has four geographical regions. In the north is the *Arctic Coastal Plain*, which slopes down toward the Arctic Ocean from the Rocky Mountains. In this region, called a tundra, the ground is permanently frozen, and no trees can grow, although in the spring the ground thaws enough for grass and wildflowers to take root. The Central Uplands and Lowlands

feature hills and valleys, **basins** and mountain ranges. The *Rocky Mountains* reach up into Alaska, going north of the *Central Uplands and Lowlands*. The *Pacific Mountains* are made up of several mountain ranges that cover a large portion of Alaska, with basins and vast forests. Denali (Mount McKinley), the highest peak in North America at more than 20,300 feet, sits in the Pacific Mountains.

Alaska is by far the largest state in the United States. It is one-fifth the size of the **contiguous United States**. Alaska is larger than all of Texas, California, and Montana combined.

Many different Native tribes lived in Alaska before the coming of European settlers. These tribes included the Aleuts, Eskimos, Athabascan, Haida, Tlingit, and Tsimishian tribes.



An Alaskan tundra landscape

Idaho

Idaho has three basic geographical regions with many beautiful landscapes throughout the state. One region is the *Columbia Plateau*, in the western and northern portion of the state. This region is arid, a dry grassland that is spread over portions of Oregon, Washington, Idaho, Nevada, and California.



A view of the Rocky Mountains in northern Idaho

basin: a large area that sits lower than the area around it

contiguous United States: the 48 U.S. states that are not separated by the ocean or by a foreign country. Things which are *contiguous* touch one another.

Another geographic region is the *Great Basin desert*, in the southeastern portion of the state. Finally, the *Central Rocky Mountains* region runs from the northern part of the state south to the border with Wyoming.

The tribes who inhabited these regions included the Bannock, Coeur d'Alene, Flathead, Kutenai, Lemhi, Nez Percé, Pend d'Oreille, Sheepeater, and Shoshone.

Montana

Montana is large and sparsely populated. The state's wide lands cover two basic natural land regions. One region is the *Great Plains*, which lie in the eastern portion of the state and have wide grasslands and rolling hills. The western portion of Montana is part of the *Rocky Mountains*, which are snow-capped for most of the year and spotted with clear lakes and large forests.

A view of Montana's Rocky Mountains from the Great Plains



Several native tribes once inhabited the vast landscape that became Montana. These tribes included the Arapaho, Assiniboine, Blackfoot, Cheyenne, Crow, Flatheads, and Shoshone.

Nevada

ore: rocks, earth, or other material in which valuable metals are found

Because it has many deposits of valuable **ores** (including gold and silver), Nevada has earned the nickname, the “Silver State.” The state has three basic geographic regions. In the northeastern corner of the state lies the *Columbia Plateau*, an arid grassland that runs through parts of Oregon, Washington, Idaho, Nevada, and California. Though the *Sierra Nevada* mountain range lies mostly in California, part of it extends into Nevada, as in the Lake Tahoe region. Lastly, the *Great Basin* region covers most of Nevada. It is a hot, arid region broken up by several dozen mountain ranges.

The Bannock, Paiute, Shoshone, and Washoe native tribes inhabited this region prior to European settlement.



A view of Wheeler Peak in east-central Nevada as seen across an expanse of Great Basin desert

Oregon

Oregon produces about one-tenth of the timber in the United States. This timber comes from the mammoth forests which cover the state. The geography of Oregon is quite varied and can be broken up into six regions. The region of the *Columbia Plateau*, which we have seen in several other states, is an arid grassland and lava plain that covers most of eastern Oregon. The *Great Basin* covers part of southeastern Oregon. Southwestern Oregon features the densely forested *Klamath Mountains*. The *Cascade Mountains* run north to south and divide the state. The Cascades include Crater Lake, an ancient volcanic crater that is the deepest lake in the United States. The *Coast Range* is a mountain range that runs along the Pacific coast. The *Willamette Valley*, which lies between the Coast and Cascade ranges, features a mild climate and rich farmland.



A view of the Willamette Valley



Crater Lake

The Bannock, Cayuse, Chinook, Klamath, Modoc, Nez Percé, Paiute, Tillamook, and Umatilla native tribes were among the original inhabitants of the region.



"Deception Pass" on Puget Sound

Washington

Because of the dense forests that cover much of its landscape, Washington is known as the "Evergreen State." There are six geographic regions in the state. The *Columbia Plateau*, which we have seen in other states, covers most of central and southern Washington. The *Coast Range* continues from Oregon along the Pacific coast, as does the *Cascade Range* to the east. The *Rocky Mountains* rise farther east. The *Olympic Peninsula* in the northwest corner of the state features mountains and forests that today remain largely unexplored.

The *Puget Sound Lowlands*, which lie between the Olympic Mountains and the Cascade Range, are home to most of Washington's population today.



A view of the arid Columbia Plateau in eastern Washington

The original inhabitants of this far northwest corner of the United States included the Cayuse, Nez Percé, Okinaga, Spokane, and Yakama native tribes.

Wyoming

Geographically, Wyoming does not have as much variety as some of its western cousins. This large state has three basic geographic regions. The *Great Plains* in the eastern portion of the state are largely flat, wind-swept grasslands. The *Wyoming Basin* in the state's southern and central region is covered by small mountains and basins, with valleys between them. The *Rocky Mountains* run through western Wyoming.



The Wind River Range, part of the Rocky Mountains, in west-central Wyoming

The rugged mountains and vast grasslands of Wyoming were inhabited by the Arapaho, Blackfoot, Cheyenne, Flathead, Kiowa, Shoshone, and Sioux tribes before the arrival of European settlers.

The First Peoples

As we have just seen, the geography of the western states varies greatly. As a result, many different groups of Native Americans developed over time in the West, with cultures distinct from one another.

It is believed that Native Americans had been living in North America for some 15,000 years before European explorers began arriving there in the 1500s. The abundant natural resources in the West allowed these tribes to thrive. Fertile soil, rivers, lakes filled with fish, wild game, large forests, and other resources sustained the native peoples.

Most of the tribes in the West fished, hunted, and gathered their food. The rivers and lakes were full of salmon and other fish. Huge herds of bison roamed the land, covering the grasslands. Abundant fruit and nuts from trees and bushes helped provide a healthy diet without farming.

Having tremendous forests in the Northwest meant that many of the native tribes in that region did not live in the cone-shaped tents called tipis or thatch huts but in wood plank longhouses. In many cases, the villages were permanent, not the temporary settlements of **migratory** people, as found in other parts of America. This was especially true in Oregon and Washington, where salmon was the main source of food and tribes did not have to move to follow their food source.

Let's learn a little more about some of the tribes in the Pacific Northwest and Mountain states. We will hear a lot more about many of these tribes later in this book.

migratory: moving from one place to another

Nez Percé: Nehz Payr-SAY (French) or Nez PURS

A 1905 photograph of Nez Percé tipis



The Nez Percé

The *Nez Percé* lived throughout the Pacific Northwest, in what is today Washington, Oregon, and Idaho. The life of the Nez Percé changed a great deal around 1720, when horses were first introduced to the region. (Horses did not live in North America until the Spanish brought them from Europe in the **16th century**.) As with many tribes in North America, the Nez Percé quickly became master horsemen, and much of their daily lives centered around horses.

How to Number Centuries

We count time in different ways. We count from year to year (2010, 2011, 2012, etc.). We count by ten-year periods (1980 to 1990, 1990 to 2000, 2000 to 2010). These ten-year periods are called *decades*. We count by 100-year periods (1700 to 1800, 1800 to 1900, 1900 to 2000). These 100-year periods are called centuries.

Historians speak about centuries in different ways. For instance, the century from 1500 to 1600 is sometimes called the “fifteen-hundreds” (1500s) because all the years of the century count up from 1500. The same century, however, is also called the 16th century, because it ends with 1600. So, when we use the term 16th century, we are referring to the years between 1500 and 1600. When we speak of the fifth century, we are referring to the years between 400 and 500. We are now living in the 21st century, because we are living in the time between 2000 and 2100.

During the winter, the Nez Percé lived in wooden longhouses with floors dug deeply into the ground to provide warmth. During the summer months, many Nez Percé lived in tipis so that they could move around, following the bison herds. The Nez Percé were mostly a peaceful people and only rarely fought with other tribes.

“Pierced Noses” and Other Names

When we speak of Native American tribes, we sometimes call them by their Indian names (such as Chinook, Shoshone, or Yakama). Other times, we use names Europeans gave them. One such name is *Nez Percé*, a French phrase that means “Pierced Nose.” They were so named because at least some of this people pierced their noses, hanging **pendants** from them. The Flathead tribe was so called because of its practice of pressing the heads of infants with boards to give them a flattened shape. These tribes, of course, named themselves dif-

pendant: a piece of jewelry that hangs by a chord

Nimi’ipuu: NEE-mee-poooh

ferently. The Nez Percé, for instance, called themselves *Nimi’ipuu*, which means “the people.”



An illustration made between 1836 and 1844 of a Flathead boy named Stum-ma-nu

The Chinook

The Chinook Indians of Oregon and Washington were very similar to many other tribes in that region. They mostly lived in areas surrounding

A Chinook plank house



extended family: a family group that includes not only a father and a mother and their children but other relatives, such as grandparents, uncles, aunts, and cousins

the Columbia River, and they were mainly salmon fishermen. They also hunted deer, elk, and other animals, and gathered berries, nuts, and other plant foods. The men did most of the hunting, and the women did most of the gathering, as well as caring for and raising the children. The Chinook villages were led by a chief.

The Chinook lived in wood plank houses, which were very large and held entire **extended families**. These houses were designed to protect against the wind and rain of the Pacific coast. The Chinook traveled the waters in canoes that were made from dugout logs.

The Chinook believed in guardian spirits that would protect them, as well as give them guidance.

Natives of the Far North

Though many native groups lived in what is today Alaska, we often divide them into three main language groups. One of these groups, called Athabaskan, lived in the interior parts of Alaska. In the spring, the Athabascans left their winter camps and went out to hunt moose and caribou, whose meat they used for food and whose hides for clothing. In winter, these native people traveled by sled (often pulled by dogs) or on foot using snowshoes.

Many natives lived by the sea in what is now western Alaska. In canoes made of animal skins stretched over frames, they hunted seals, walruses, and even whales. Salmon and other kinds of fish formed part of their diet. These peoples, called *Yup'ik*, *Cup'ik*, and *Iñupiaq* (or Eskimos) kept out the winter's cold by building their houses partially underground. Like the Athabascans, they traveled by sled or using snowshoes when going overland.

Farther south, the *Aleuts* lived and hunted in many ways like their northern neighbors. The Aleuts are an interesting and somewhat sad case, as we

Yup'ik: YOOH-pik
Cup'ik: KOOH-pik
Iñupiaq: Ih-NYOO-pee-ahk
Aleut: AH-loot

know very little about their native culture. This is because Russia once controlled Alaska. The Aleuts very readily converted to the **Russian Orthodox Church** and adopted aspects of Russian culture. In this way, they lost much of their own culture.

Tall Wooden Story Poles

We are all probably familiar with totem poles—tall columns of red cedar wood, carved from top to bottom and painted with images of animal faces and, sometimes, human faces. Though many people think that such totem poles were common among all Native Americans, it was only the tribes living on the Pacific coast of southern Alaska, British Columbia, and northern Washington who made them.

The Northwest tribes did not worship totem poles. Instead, images on a totem pole tell the history of the family who had the pole made. The animal images represent a family's ancestors and supernatural beings with whom one's ancestors had dealings.

Totem poles had different uses. Sometimes they served as doorposts to native houses or as interior posts to hold up the roof. Totem poles could mark graves, or they were just set up outside of a house. Then there were ridicule polls—basically, totem poles that made fun of some person or group. Faces on ridicule polls could be carved upside down in mockery.

One had to be wealthy to have a totem pole made, for a pole carver had to be paid, and a pole took a very long time to carve. This is probably why the tallest totem poles were made in the mid 19th century, when the fur trade brought wealth to many native chiefs.



A totem pole

Russian Orthodox Church: the Christian church of Russia that has mostly the same beliefs and sacraments as the Catholic Church but is not under the pope

Peoples of the Great Basin and the Plains

Native peoples adapted to the difficult living conditions in the arid Great Basin. Tribes such as the Southern Paiute and the Western Shoshone had to travel from place to place to find food—nuts from the piñon pine tree, various kinds of seeds, and roots. Though these sources provided most of their food, these native people used bow and arrow to hunt mostly small game. They also ate fish and insects. Because they were a wandering people, their houses had to be easily built—simple dome-shaped structures, covered with brush.

Conditions differed farther north in what is now Idaho and western Wyoming. There lived such groups as the Northern Shoshone, Eastern Shoshone, and the Northern Paiute. These groups lived in villages in tipis or grass-covered structures called wickiups. Tribes in this region early on began using horses, which made it easier for them to hunt buffalo and other

nomadic: a word that signifies people who do not live in fixed villages but move from place to place, usually following food sources

large game. Like the Southern Paiute and Western Shoshone, these tribes traveled from place to place in search of food.

Tribes on the Great Plains also were **nomadic**. In many ways, their life ways were similar to those of the tribes of Idaho and western Wyoming. Great Plains tribes such as the Blackfoot and the *Sioux* very early on began using horses. They lived in villages, in tipis, moving frequently from place to place, hunting buffalo for the skins and meat. They were mighty warriors, as we shall see in later chapters of this book. The Sioux at one time made pottery, but they gave it up for horse trading.

Native Religious Beliefs

Though tribes had many similarities, no two tribes were exactly the same. This was true, too, of tribal religious beliefs.

In the Northwest, many of the Native Americans, such as the Chinook, believed in guardian spirits that watched over all living things. These tribes often had a ceremony to mark when boys became men. A boy was sent into the wilderness to try to find a sign or make some sort of contact with his own guardian spirit. Once he had this experience with his guardian spirit, he would return, and his people would recognize him as a man.

The religion of the Shoshone and Bannock Indians was based very much in nature. Many of their religious **myths** centered around the figures of Wolf and Coyote. Wolf was the creator, and Coyote a sort of devil figure who

tried to harm what Wolf had created. The Shoshone and Bannock held ceremonial dances to bring back the salmon each year or to ask for something in prayer.

Recreation

It took a lot of hard work for the Indians just to survive. They had no modern conveniences like supermarkets, ovens, microwaves, or refrigerators. To get food, prepare it, and store it, if needed, took a lot of work. But this does not mean that the Indians did not have fun! Every tribe enjoyed games of all

myth: a kind of story that seeks to explain beliefs about the world, how it came to be, etc.

***Aleut in Festival Dress*, an 1818 watercolor by Russian artist Mikhail T. Tikhanov**



Sioux: Soo

sorts. Sometimes they even played team sports, including a game similar to lacrosse. They had gambling games, many different children's games, and much more.

Music and dance have always been an important part of Native American tradition. Every culture around the world has its own unique music and dance, and Native Americans are no exception. The dances often told stories. Sometimes they were a form of prayer.

It is important to have a sense of who these Native American people were. They were the first to come to the lands of the Northwest, and they have lived there for thousands and thousands of years. They shaped the land as much as it shaped them. But beginning in the 18th century, another force began to shape native life—the coming of European settlers into the West.

Chapter 1 Review

Summary

- Alaska has four geographical regions: the *Arctic Coastal Plain*, the *Central Uplands and Lowlands*, the *Rocky Mountains*, and the *Pacific Mountains*. Alaska is by far the largest state in the United States.
- Idaho has three geographic regions: the *Columbia Plateau*, the *Great Basin*, and the *Central Rocky Mountains*.
- Montana covers two natural land regions: the *Great Plains* and the *Rocky Mountains*.
- Most of Nevada lies within the *Great Basin*. The northwestern corner of the state lies in the *Columbia Plateau*. Part of the *Sierra Nevada* extends into Nevada.
- Oregon can be broken up into six regions: the *Columbia Plateau*, the *Great Basin*, the *Klamath Mountains*, the *Cascade Mountains*, the *Coast Range*, and the *Willamette Valley*.
- Washington has six geographical regions: the *Columbia Plateau*, the *Coast Range*, the *Cascade Range*, the *Rocky Mountains*, the *Olympic Peninsula*, and the *Puget Sound Lowlands*.
- Wyoming has three basic geographical regions: the *Great Plains*, the *Wyoming Basin*, and the *Rocky Mountains*.
- For over 15,000 years, many different groups of Native Americans developed in the West, with cultures distinct from one another. The abundant natural resources in the West allowed these tribes to thrive.
- The tremendous forests in the Northwest meant that many of the native tribes in that region lived, not in the cone-shaped tents called tipis or thatch huts, but in wood plank longhouses. In many cases, the villages were permanent, rather than the temporary settlements of migratory people, as found in other parts of America. The native peoples of the Northwest, however, included the migratory Nez Percé and the Flathead, along with the more settled Chinook.
- The Athabascans in Alaska hunted moose and caribou and traveled by sled in winter. Groups like the Yup'ik, Cup'ik, and Iñupiaq fished for salmon and hunted seals, walruses, and even whales. The Aleuts became Russian Orthodox and adopted much of Russian culture.
- Native peoples adapted to the difficult living conditions in the arid Great Basin. Tribes had to travel from place to place to find food. These native people used bow and arrow to hunt mostly small game. They also ate fish and insects. Farther north in what is now Idaho and western Wyoming, tribal

Chapter 1 Review (continued)

groups lived in villages in tipis or grass-covered wickiups. Tribes in this region early on began using horses, which made it easier for them to hunt buffalo and other large game.

- Tribes on the Great Plains were nomadic. Great Plains tribes such as the Blackfoot and the Sioux very early on began using horses. They lived in villages, in tipis, moving frequently from place to place, hunting buffalo for the skins and meat. They were mighty warriors.
- Religious beliefs varied among the Indian nations. Many Native Americans, such as the Chinook, believed in guardian spirits that watched over all living things. Many Shoshone and Bannock religious myths centered around the figures of the creator Wolf and the trickster Coyote. Native Americans had various ceremonies to mark important events in human life.
- It took a lot of hard work for the Indians just to survive. Nevertheless, every tribe enjoyed games of all sorts. Music and dance have always been an important part of Native American tradition. The dances often told stories. Sometimes they were a form of prayer.

Chapter Checkpoint

1. List the four geographical regions of Alaska.
2. List the three geographical regions of Idaho.
3. List the two geographical regions of Montana.
4. List the three geographical regions of Nevada.
5. List the six geographical regions of Oregon.
6. List the five geographical regions of Washington.
7. List the three geographical regions of Wyoming.
8. Why were Native American villages in Oregon more permanent than in other places?
9. Identify:
 - a. The tribe whose name means “pierced nose”
 - b. The tribe that lived by the Columbia River and lived mainly by fishing for salmon

- c. The Alaskan people who became Russian Orthodox and adopted much of Russian culture
- d. The region where native peoples lived mostly off of such foods as piñon pine nuts, seeds, and roots
- e. The large animal hunted by such Great Plains tribes as the Sioux and Blackfoot
- f. The mythical creature Native Americans said created the world

Geography Challenge

Use the text and the map on the page facing page 3 as reference.

1. Name the Northwest and Mountain states through which the Rocky Mountains do not pass.
2. Name the Northwest and Mountain states that each have a part of the Great Basin.
3. Name the Northwest and Mountain states that each have a part of the Columbia Plateau.
4. Through which Northwest and Mountain states do the Great Plains run?
5. In what state is the tallest mountain in the United States found? What is the name of this mountain?

Vocabulary

Give the proper vocabulary term to match the following definitions:

1. All the U.S. states except Alaska and Hawai'i that are not separated by the ocean or by a foreign country
2. A family group that includes not only a father and a mother and their children but other relatives, such as grandparents, uncles, and cousins
3. A large area that sits lower than the area around it
4. The natural features of the land; also the study of these natural features
5. An area of land in the northern parts of the earth where the ground is always frozen and no trees grow