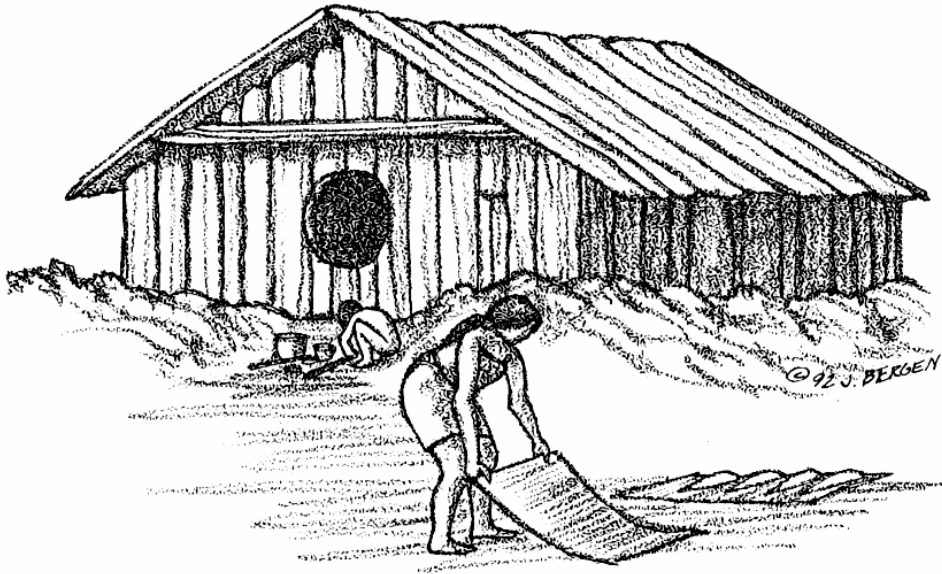


Indian Settlement on Coos Bay

by Kenn Oberrecht



During the centuries preceding American expansion and pioneer settlement of the western frontier, there was no written record of Indian life along the Oregon coast. Much of what we know is

pieced together from various sources, augmented by the lore Indians passed on verbally from one generation to the next. For the time being, we have to fill in the blanks with reasoned assumptions (educated guesses).

British and American fur traders were probably the first to make regular contacts with Indians of Oregon's south coast. We know, for example, that Alexander McLeod of the Hudson's Bay Company explored the south coast, including Coos Bay, in 1826 and 1827.

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In 1828, the Jedediah Smith Expedition reached the south coast and camped at various spots near and on Coos Bay: Whiskey Run on July 3, Cape Arago on July 4, Shore Acres on July 5, Sunset Bay on July 6 and 7, Charleston on July 8, lower Coos Bay near Empire on July 9, and the North Spit on July 10. Of course, none of these places went by those names then. There was no community called Empire, and in place of Charleston, as we know it today, was a large Indian village--probably the largest on the bay.

On June 30, 1851, a bedraggled band of nine white men, fleeing from Ewing Harbor (now Port Orford) and a skirmish at Battle Rock broke through the brush on lower Coos Bay to be greeted by local Indians. John Kirkpatrick, leader of the band, later described the Indians as friendly, generous, and hospitable hosts--a report that's consistent with those of the early explorers and traders.

The Coos Indians, or Coosans, spoke two different languages. Those who spoke Miluk lived on the lower Coquille River, northward along the coast to Coos Bay, on the lower bay, and on South Slough. Those who lived along the main and upper part of the bay spoke Hanis.

Because of the rich bounty of the bay and adjacent lands, the Coosans were a self-sufficient people who lived in relative peace and tranquility.

No one knows for sure how many Indians lived on Coos Bay, but it was a popular and populated area that was also visited regularly by Indians that normally resided farther inland. The best estimates are that 1,500 to 2,000 Coosans lived in plank houses along the bay shore in as many as 40 to 50 villages.

They relied on the estuary to provide most of their necessities. They were hunters and gatherers, taking fish, shellfish, and marine mammals from the bay and its many tributaries. In the bordering forests, meadows, and marshes, they hunted deer and waterfowl, pit-trapped elk, picked berries, and harvested edible plants. They gathered reeds and grasses to make mats and baskets. They used logs to fashion their dugout canoes and build their plank houses and huts.

Because of the rich bounty of the bay and adjacent lands, the Coosans were a self-sufficient people who lived in relative peace and tranquility. They were variously described as robust and healthy in appearance, good-natured and generous in demeanor. And why shouldn't they have been? Theirs was a temperate paradise.

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