

# The Rogue River Takelma: bands of warriors at rest

By Oscar Johnson, Staff Reporter

Once it was Jackrabbit's custom to go out and cut down bushes which he regarded as trees, so it is said. Pleased with his work, he would say to himself, "had it been anyone else he would have had it fall on top of him." One day Coyote overheard the busy rabbit and began spreading rumors about him.

"He says about you, 'I've been killing people,'" Coyote told the people. "In the water it is that I always throw them."

Now the warriors assembled for war and Coyote showed them where Jackrabbit felled trees. As they searched, one warrior found him first and Coyote shouted "that one it is! That one it is!" But the warrior said "it is not that one. This is a play thing for my child."

He picked up Jackrabbit and put him in his quiver but he later escaped. This same thing happened over and over when each warrior found Jackrabbit. They would not believe Coyote but only tried to take Jackrabbit home for their children but he always escaped.

But after all the warriors went home Jackrabbit donned war feathers and let out a battle cry. First he killed Coyote for lying. Then he annihilated all the people. Indeed, Coyote got himself and all the people in trouble.

So says an old Rogue River Takelma story. Perhaps it is a story that offers insight into a people who, for better or for worse, are best known for their attitude about warfare and their historic role in the Rogue River Wars.

A people said to be as rough as the southwest Oregon environment they lived in.

Independent bands of these Upper Rogue Takelma consisted of about 80 to 100 members each. They occupied the rugged interior between Table Rock and the Cascades in the neighborhood of present day Jacksonville.

(Other Takelma communities clustered around the northern banks of the Rogue River centered in the Siskiyou National Forest; Cow Creek near Canyonville; and within the southwestern valley towards California.)

Tying back their hair and donning white face paint was the traditional Takelma sign for battle. This practice was such a part of Takelma culture that instead of saying 'I am ready to fight' a warrior was more likely to make the statement by tightly synching back his hair.

Even Takelma women played a part in warfare.

They not only joined in war dances but also accompanied warriors into battle to mind slaves and cook meals.

Takelma warriors wore frontal armor made of sticks, layered with undressed elk or deer hide and bedecked with symbols.

The flint tipped arrows they used were sometimes dipped in rattlesnake blood and, unlike any of their neighbors, they held their bows horizontally when shooting, often with the next arrow to be fired clenched between their teeth.

Their tenacity in battle and tactics in warfare were so advanced that seasoned U.S. military commanders known as "Indian fighters" who fought in the Rogue Wars found themselves ill-prepared for Takelma warfare.

"The campaign did tell us a great deal," wrote one military author about an early 1851 battle. "The Rogue River Indians were skillful campaigners and good fighters, and that Major (Philip) Kearney gained no superiority over them."

## TAKELMA (D ^GELMÁ N):

### 'THOSE LIVING ALONGSIDE THE RIVER'

Takelma culture also put a high value on wealth and beauty.

The village chief was determined mostly by wealth except in times of war when another leader might rise up for the occasion.

In addition to pride in an abundance of dentalium shells (used by many northwest tribes for money) and the high price a man might pay for his wife, attire was also a popular way to display prosperity.

Bright red woodpecker scalps — with beak in place — were attached to buckskin and often worn as head pieces. They were sometimes decorated with dentalium shells.

Takelma men wore buckskin shirts and pants or leggings and hats made of bear skin or deer scalp. Deer skin blankets were also occasionally worn.

Knee-length buckskin dresses with white grass tassels and Chasta-made basket hats were worn by the women.

Facial charcoal tattoos in the form of two downward stripes on the chin were common for the

women. Men used tattoo markings on their left arms to measure dentalium and display wealth.

Takelma men and women frequently used red face paint. Black face paint was also used but white paint was reserved only for times of war.

Shamans, the only Takelmas said to possess Spirit Powers, adorned themselves in otter skins, eagle and yellow hammer feathers with occasional grass or porcupine quills attached.

Salmon and acorns were perhaps the most important foods for Takelma people of the Cascade foothills.

Seasonal fishing trips to favored rocks or banks on nearby rivers were important both for gathering food and Takelma tradition.

The event usually involved the entire band, including women and children. Grass line and bone hooks were used to catch the fish.

Women and children gathered acorns and it was customary for men to hold a ceremonial observance before the bounty could be enjoyed by all.

Women used stone pestle and mortars to pound dry acorns into flour. It was cooked by boiling away the bitter tannic acid in woven basket pots. It was either eaten as mush or baked on coals into sand bread.

In addition to digging for camas bulbs for food, women also collected hazel shoots, spruce roots, grasses and ferns to weave cradle boards, storage baskets and boiling pots.

Grass seeds, pine nuts, deer and elk were also regular food staples while grasshoppers, caterpillars, yellow jacket larvae and snails were a supplement to the Takelma diet.

Takelma made dugout canoes from split logs that could carry up to 10 men while bands to the far east of Rogue Country used log rafts.

Winter villages consisted of rectangular slab houses made from split sugar pine with stamped earthen floors.

A similarly shaped sweat-house with a covered 'fire hole' for passing through hot stones was used by up to six men at a time for traditional overnight sweats.

Shinny, a game still popular in the early days of the Grand Ronde Reservation, was a favorite

**Table Rock stands in the heart of Rogue Country just north of present day Medford. It served as a temporary reservation during the Rogue River War era and is the site where Toquahear and other chiefs negotiated treaties with U.S. officials.**

