

Tribal Council Members Follow The Trail To Our Past

■ Leaders, staff visit Obsidian Cliffs in Willamette National Forest.

**By Chris Mercier,
Tribal Council member**

Again this year, Tribal Council members and Natural Resources staffers joined a group from the McKenzie Ranger District of the Willamette National Forest to rediscover pathways of our past.

This year, the group headed to the Obsidian Cliffs where Natives from across the area came for this incredible material from which tools and weapons were made.

I imagine our ancestors in leather or hide moccasins making this exact same hike, at probably twice the speed too and with half the food and water. True endurance, I am reminded, is working through more than my sore heels on a moderate hike.

If you've never been to Obsidian Cliffs, stuffed deeply away near the Three Sisters Wilderness, I highly recommend penciling in a visit sometime. The State only issues thirty permits per day to visit the area, which raises some conflicting issues. Shouldn't something this gorgeous be free for all to enjoy? But then again, shouldn't the use of something this breathtaking be curbed to prevent overcrowding, litter, erosion and the general side effects that humans tend to inflict on natural areas? I can see both points of view.

Even though the McKenzie River District is located within the forest, and a good share of wildlife abound, the whole area feels like a neighborhood. Driving down the highway, there are few breaks in the civilization. I don't blame people though. Serene, clean, sparsely populated, with the Willamette National Forest in your backyard, what is not to like? This is heaven for a forest lover. If there is single television in my lodge, I don't see it. Nor hear it.

I awaken the next morning to the McKenzie's graceful churning. Mist floats over Eagle Rock. I head off to the McKenzie Ranger District, where we, meaning fellow council member Jack Giffen, Jr., Natural Resources Division Manager Pete Wakeland, and Tribal firefighter Alex Drake, will ditch our vehicles for one large green suburban. That in turn will take us to the trailhead that leads finally to the Obsidian Cliffs.

Other members of our crew include Eric Bergland, an archaeologist (not of the Indiana Jones variety, no whip), Sandra Ratliff the District Recreation Assistant, Monty Ramp the vintage mountain man a.k.a. Animal Packer, and Mary Allison, a real forest ranger, McKenzie River District. There is also Betty Applebaker, who will ditch us the next day with her beasts of burden, three horses. Lastly, there is Baby, Mac, and about five other mules whose names I forget.

We are doing this trip as part of a growing relationship the Tribe has

with Willamette National Forest. Officials informed us of Obsidian Cliff's significance to Oregon's first people, and extended an invitation to take council directly to the area for a tour.

After a few miles in the forest, we reach some of the lava rock fields that many commonly affiliate with these parts. Of course this lava is long dead, having done its share of tree massacring probably before the advent of civilization around here. But the trees have waged a successful revival, dotting the lava fields everywhere, life amidst former desolation. I see an attractive contrast between the two of them, the rocks and the trees. The Middle Sister looks down on all of us, her head patched with some formidable snow that refuses to flee from summer.

Just at the edge of the lava fields, when we are really starting to tread on obsidian country, a clearing opens up before us, and an inviting freshwater stream gurgles across the path. I survey the area, note the flat, even ground, the availability of water, and ask Bergland if some of our ancestors might have found this place suitable to settle for a while. While not possessing any information off hand, he tells me, it's very possible. Cool, I think to myself.

Only a mile or so past that clearing, the purpose of our visitation here begins to be realized. Parts of the ground glitter, as if a treasure trove of jewelry



Ancestral Meaning — A piece of obsidian, probably an arrow head, found in the area of the Obsidian Cliffs in the Willamette National Forest.

natives, who knew the value of the enigmatic black stone. Not only would they make summer treks up here to gather obsidian, the area was a trading point for numerous tribes, on both sides of the mountain. In winter the obsidian fields were inaccessible, so time spent here was spent economically.

Much of the flakes we walk over are their handiwork. Bergland shows us an example. Holding up a large

another long day of hiking, though this one more of a leisurely stroll. At least that's what we're told by Eric Bergland, who by the end of the trip has members of the crew making wisecracks about his underestimating distances.

We head back to the trail intersection, and veer eastward, this time towards Obsidian Falls. The falls are not even a mile up the trail, and not the spectacular variety either. But there is still something attractive, maybe even tantalizing, about the 20 something foot cascade.

As we begin our ascent to the upper Obsidian Cliffs plateau, Mary Allison directs us to a spring. No point in busting out the filter, she says. This is pure spring water in every sense of the word, clear, cool, and when your thirsty, like nectar.

The ascent goes slowly, intentionally because unlike yesterday we aren't racing against time, and because only a few hundred feet up the trail a huge black deposit looms out of one of the cliff faces. At first glance it appears the stone is wet, but further inspection reveals a titanic chunk of obsidian, with smaller offshoots everywhere. This must be one of the mother lodes, I think, but without even any basic understanding of geology. Yet it feels like a mother lode, at the very least like a pleasant discovery, an entire hillside of beautiful, shiny obsidian.

Atop the plateau we rest at Arrowhead Lake (more like pond), and take lunch on one of the cliffs. I attend to my blisters. From this viewpoint one can see the entire forest, with Three Finger Jack further up north, and another one of the Sisters. The hike down, as is often the case, is infinitely easier than the way up. Glacier Creek provides us with more of that spring water that somewhere some people probably pay money for.

Alex Drake and I both conclude that something came through our camp last night, as we both heard it. Other than that, the night went off without incident, just some loud snoring. Leaving, as usual is a little bit anticlimactic, but also a bit of a relief. I vow to return, but with better shoes and a better sleeping bag. Jack Giffen, Jr. and I discuss the possibility of making this trek an annual event. Maybe we could even bring Tribal youth. Whatever the decision, we would like more Tribal members to see this area that was once so important to some of our ancestors. ■



Picture Perfect — With the Middle Sister Mountain in the background, here is a wide angle look where obsidian has been found for centuries. Only 30 permits a day are issued to visit the area.

had been blown up, and gemstones and silver and gold are scattered everywhere. Obsidian. Raw, unpolished, chipped, flaked, sharp, glistening obsidian. If it were worth even one cent a pound, this place would be like the Yukon.

Fortunately, the law prevents people from scooping up armloads of the stone to take home, and from what I can tell, that is for the better. Bergland points out to us that much of the material we see has been incidentally scattered and chipped, from forces of nature like erosion and rain, to people, specifically, our Tribal forefathers. It takes a trained eye to know the difference, an eye like Bergland's.

The stone flakes and shards are naturally sharp, like broken glass.

Bergland explains that the area where we are doing all this frantic perusing was frequented often by regional

chunk, he fingers some missing long slivers. To illustrate, Bergland mimics the technique of striking a flaking stone with another, just at the edge, just at the right angle, and with the right amount of pressure to not break the sliver.

The deeper we hike in, the more the ground glistens with obsidian.

At one point the ground is dominated by the obsidian, so much so that the glint becomes distracting to the eyes. If you've been on a boat during that time of the day the sun is brightest, and with every ripple appears a glitter, then you know what I'm talking about. One field is simply a sea of obsidian.

We wind down the first day right after our path crosses that of the world famous Pacific Crest Trail. Hard to believe that path goes all the way to Mexico.

After a quick breakfast, we are off on