

First inhabitants of the valley made use of it all

Written by Lucie Cox;
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Long before white trappers first traveled up through the Coquille Valley, these green and verdant shores were settled by a hearty and carefree people. Their huge mounds of shells provided the name given by the French trappers. "Coquille" is a French word meaning shell.

The Coquilles fished in the river that now bears their name, hunted in the mountains and gathered seafood from the ocean, and picked and dried berries, nuts and acorns.

The land supplied their needs for food, clothing and shelter. The Indians believed that the land belonged to no one and willingly shared what they had with settlers who came through the valley. But the settlers had other ideas. At the end of the Rogue Indian Wars, even though the Coquilles had not participated in those wars, they were removed to reservation life on the Siletz River.

On the trek up to the reservation on the Siletz, many people died and still others ran away from the fort to return to their homeland.

The territorial boundaries of the Coquille Tribe range from the Coast range to Whiskey Run Beach and from the Coquille River to Four Mile Creek. Smaller villages dotted the area built to serve as summer homes as a base for gathering food during the summer and fall.

The Coquilles lived in plank houses built of cedar by splitting slabs from trees with elkhorn wedges driven by stone mauls. A stone adz was sometimes used to plane or smooth the planks. The houses were small in size ranging from 12 to 14 feet square, with a fire pit in the center. Planks were placed vertically and often driven into the ground to give the house stability and better protection from the weather.

The Indians entered feet first through a small rounded door on the

right front side of the house. Animal skins or wooden pieces were used to cover the front entrance to prevent the cold winter winds from blowing in. Mats of cattail rushes covered the hard-packed dirt floors and tanned animal skins were used as blankets. Baskets of camas root were used to hold the food drying from the central pole of the lodge.

Houses were placed as near the river as possible because the Coquilles had no means of transportation and wanted to be near their source of food. Their principal source of food came from the ocean and rivers in the form of seafood, fish and mussel. Acorns gathered in the fall and ground into meal was the staple food. Delicacies for variety were wild bird eggs, seaweed and berries gathered in season.

Ceremonies and festivals often accompanied many of the food gathering expeditions. During July and August, when smelt came up on the beaches to spawn, the entire tribe would gather to dry, smoke and store these fish.

Smelt-gathering time was an occasion for fun and merriment. It provided an occasion for distant friends and relatives to get together and renew friendships.

At the time of removal to the Siletz Reservation, only those Indian women married to white men were allowed to remain. These women did not practice their culture for fear of being removed from their families.

The hardship caused by forced removal and the fear of expulsion from their homes causes a loss of identity with the earth and a breakdown of tribal culture.

Those Coquilles who remained on the land and those who returned when the reservation at Siletz was closed found a world totally different from the one that they had left behind. The city of Coquille had been incorporated and was the county seat. White-owned stores and business establishments covered the quiet forests that had been their homeland. However, the descendants of the once-hearty and carefree people still maintained their

tribal council and met regularly to try to meet the needs of their people.

During the termination period of the 1950's, the Coquille tribe lost the services that had been provided by the federal government in their treaties. Educational assistance and medical care were no longer provided as they had been in the past.

"We were not informed of the impact of termination," said Bud Chase, vice-chairman of the Coquille Tribe. "We were told that the government was going to give us some money and since we were poor people, we thought that would be a good thing."

Now the Coquille Tribe is trying to re-organize and stimulate their people to return to tribal recognition.

"We want to develop an Indian community center," explained Bud Chase, "a place where we can gather to share with others."

Editor's note: the Coquille Tribe's federally-recognized status has since been restored.

Coquille Hotel

The Coquille Hotel, constructed in 1895 on Front Street near the city docks, was a popular stopping point for travelers passing through the Coquille Valley. Rooms were comfortable and dinners were served in the main dining room for 35 cents. This famous old Coquille landmark burned to the ground a fire which hit downtown Coquille on March 17, 1918.



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