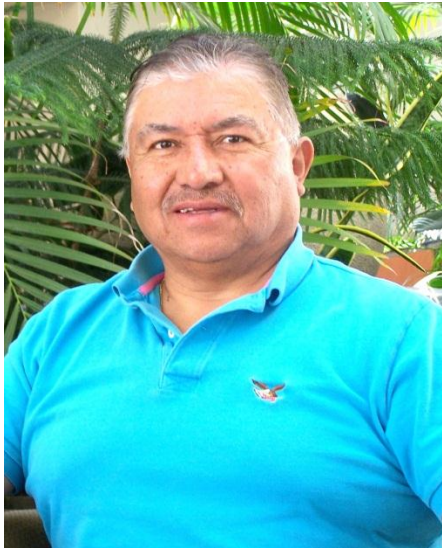


Diet of Ancestral Shoshone

By Larry Hyslop



Norm Cavanaugh is a Shoshone elder

Norm Cavanaugh is descended from the White Knife band around Battle Mountain. He explained to me the diet of the ancestral Shoshone as he remembers it being described. His recollections reflect only the White Knife band's seasonal diet, especially hunting.

"There were lots of animals who migrated like the people did," he said. The term wandering is often used for the activities of these people, but they were not wandering aimlessly. Each food source was available at a specific time and place so the people moved through their lands in tune with these food sources.

Their nomadic year began in late February when the winter groups broke up into smaller family groups and left their winter encampments. After months of eating stored foods, one of the most eagerly sought foods were Sage-grouse. The males were hunted on their leks when they gathered to dance. In March people hunted the newly emerged ground squirrels. March was also time to fish for spawning trout in the streams.

April meant a trip north to the Snake River for the first salmon runs. This important food was smoked and dried so it could be stored for winter. Early May brought out an animal having several names, marmot, ground hog or ground chuck. Norm said the flesh of this animal was so rich the people could only eat a few each year.

By June, currants were ripe. Ground into meat, they added much enjoyed flavoring. July was a time of fishing. Norm's grandmother told him "you become like the animals you eat." She advised him to go after the quick, energetic stream fish rather than the lethargic fish found in still water.

Elderberries are ready in August and chokecherries in September. Wild onions and wild garlic, along with berries, flavored their foods. Much of their foods were stored in underground pits and transported near to next winter's encampment sites.

Norm remembers a woman in Owyhee, perhaps the last person to make a delicious concoction called ant pudding. She gathered ants in the coolness of early morning when the ants were lethargic. She pinched off their abdomens and mixed abdomens with flour to make something like tapioca pudding.

"There was always a variety of foods, you couldn't eat the same thing day after day," said Norm. September was time to hunt mule deer. Bucks and dry does were the targets, leaving does with

accompanying fawns alone. Deer hides, antlers and bones were all used for clothing and tools. Deer meat was dried as jerky to keep for winter food.

After the first frost, black-tail jackrabbits were hunted. Their meat was dried and stored. Their skins were in the best condition from late October through December and used for blankets. After the first snow fall, jackrabbits tended to stay put longer as the hunters advanced with clubs. Cottontail rabbits were not hunted as much due to their spiritual relationship with humans. The annual pine nut harvest took place in areas like today's Austin, Battle Mountain and Lee.

In late fall, they retired to their winter encampments near Rock Creek. All the cached food gathered during the nomadic year was carried into the encampment. The only winter hunting was for some jackrabbits. Winter was a time to stay put, a time for elders to share creation stories with younger family members, and a time to prepare for next summer's food gathering.

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