

# INDIANS OF THE PACIFIC NORTHWEST

by

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## INDIAN LIFE AND CUSTOMS

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# Indians of the Pacific Northwest

## Chapter I

### WHO AND WHERE

In early days, the richest people in North America were the Indians of the Northwest coast. Not rich in gold and silver! Even had they been able to dig those metals from the rocks where the White man finds them now, the Indians would have thought of them only as another ornament, like bear claws and abalone shell. To them, wealth was more than ornament. Wealth was something a man could eat, wear or use to shelter him from the weather. And it was something he could give to his friends for these purposes. In this sense, the Northwest had everything. There were fish in the streams; game in the forests; berries and roots in the open places. There were trees large enough to build a banquet hall, yet splitting like matchwood. There was a climate so moist that plants grew as if in the tropics, yet so mild that few clothes were necessary.

People who lived in such a climate did not need to plant. They had more berries and roots than they could use, simply by going to the places where nature had spread them. Most of them did not even hunt, unless they felt like a change of diet. Every year, they had only to wait until the salmon came swarming up the streams, "so thick," say the old settlers, "that you could walk across on their backs." In three or four months, a family could get food enough to last a year. The rest of the time they could give to art, to war, to ceremonies and feasting. And so they did. Their basketry is some of the best in North America. Their great houses with the carved beams and entrances were a marvel to White pioneers. Their feasts or "potlatches" have become famous. These were the wealthy, leisured people of the United States in Indian days, and the following pages give some picture of their manufactures and inventions.

By "Northwest coast," we mean here the coast of Washington and Oregon. This is only part of the old Indian Northwest, for the same kind of rocky, wooded shore stretched all the way from northern California to southern Alaska. It is a narrow strip, sometimes only a hundred miles wide, which forms the western shelf of the continent, beyond the great ridge of snow capped mountains called the Cascades in the United States, the Canadian Rockies in British Columbia. In all this country, the way of life was much the same though many different tribes lived there. In fact, the very richest and those who had developed their arts and ceremonies to the utmost, lived at the north of this magnificent country, in British Columbia, southern Alaska and the coastal islands. This narrative is not concerned with the Tsimshian, Tlingit and Haida, with their monstrous totem poles and their ocean-going canoes. Our interest is in the simpler peoples whose "Northwest" ends with the

boundary of the United States. Yet they shared the Northwest culture, famous among students of Indian ways and their land, think many students, was the cradle of many customs which came to their maturity further north.

Look at the map that follows and you will see what a small strip of country this Northwest coast really is and how sharply it is cut off from the rest of the two States, Washington and Oregon. Down through the two, from north to south, goes the sharp ridge of the Cascade mountains, gathering the clouds and turning the coastal side into Wet Country while the inland side is Dry Country. Life in the two was as different as in Florida and Arizona. Yet, even in the Wet Country, all Indians were not alike. The description could hardly go on if it had to treat them all as one, for no people differed more than these Indians, even from village to village.

Suppose you were coming down over the mountains from the Dry Country, as, traders and trappers once used to do. First you would meet the upriver people at the heads of the salmon streams, with their little domed houses and their shallow river canoes. These were the outposts of the wealthy coastal strip and they hardly shared in its riches except when they paddled down once a year, hungry to trade for whale oil and dried clams. Following the streams, you might come to the huge inland waters of Puget Sound. Here the plank houses, longest in the country, were ranged along the beach, their rows of canoes drawn up before them. Out on the rocky islands, the little woolly dogs would be yelping in captivity, waiting to be sheared for the next blanket weaving. Further west, you would reach the actual seashore, where the gabled houses stood at the river mouths and huge whaling canoes went out for hunting and for war. These whalers of northern Washington were the richest in all our coastal strip. Inland people feared to have them as enemies but delighted to give them their daughters in marriage.

You could follow the coast down to the broad mouth of the Columbia, whence the seagoing canoes of Chinook traders went up to British Columbia and down to California. Going south, the coast grows rockier and wilder. You would see no more seagoing canoes and to find the villages you would have to follow the streams inland. Oregon people were not whalers or fighters. You would find them fishing the salmon streams or hunting the deer. If they heard that a canoe from the north was coming, they might vanish in the woods to escape being kidnapped as slaves.

Such a journey would have needed interpreters in many different languages, for the coastal strip has scores of dialects and four or five different language families. A language family, in this sense, means a whole group of tongues, as different sometimes as Russian and English, but all having a common foundation. The list on page 13 gives the tribes or groups of our coastal strip, with the language family of each. The names are a White man's version of Indian sounds and many an Indian might not recognize them. He might be puzzled, too, by such words as Applegate and Illinois which are only the names of rivers where a tribe once used to live, while the tribe's own name has been forgotten. One name not to be found there is Siwash. This is an old trapper's

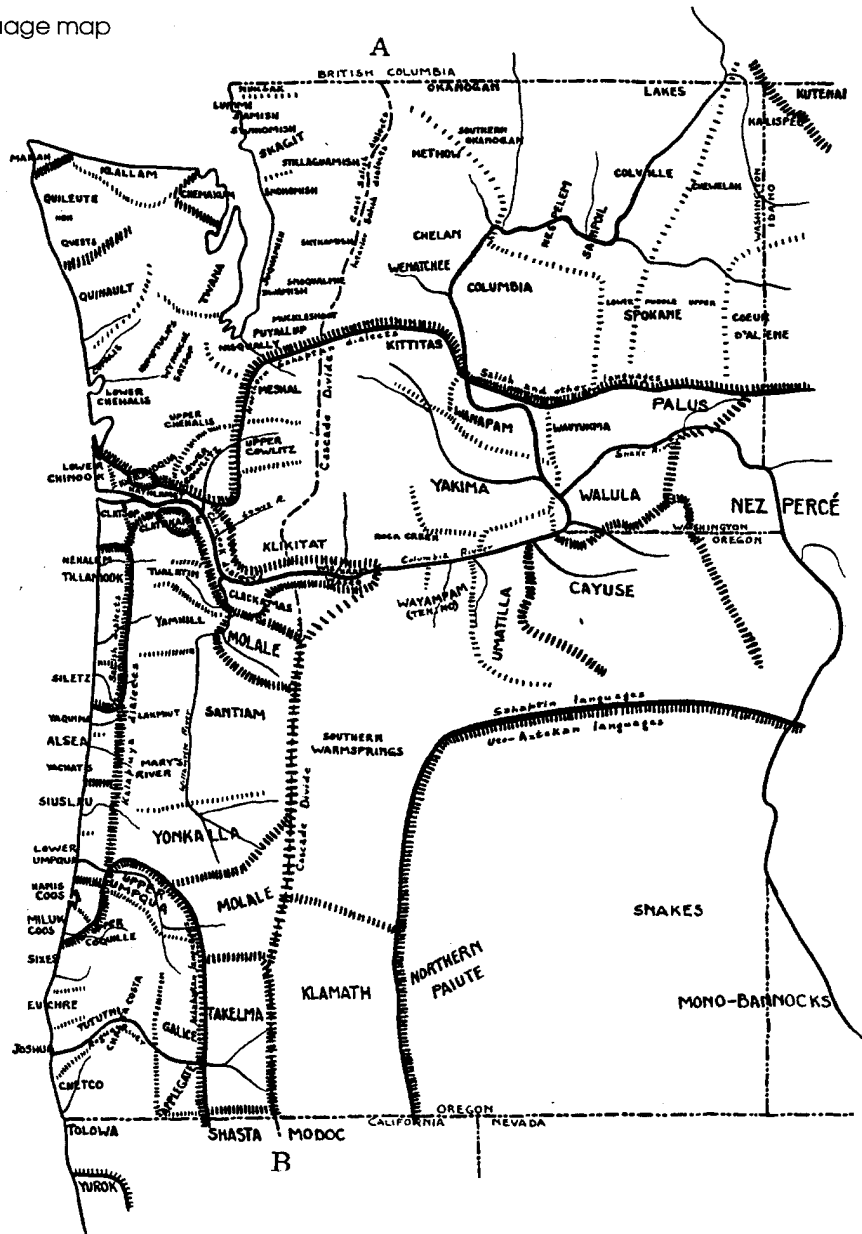
word, used a hundred years ago, by Americans who could not speak French. They heard the Frenchmen in the Hudson Bay Company speak of the Indians as *sauvage* (savage), and *Siwash* was what they made of it. Indians resent that term now, as much as other American citizens would resent "chink" or "nigger".



Salish Village

No one would make that mistake had he had a chance to learn the Indian history of the Northwest as he learns White history. Indian history, it is true, is ten times as long as that of the Whites, which begins only with Columbus. Also it is shadowy in parts. Yet the next pages put on record at least some of the achievements which make the Northwest Indians among the most famous in America.

Salish language map



4. Language map of Washington and Oregon. The line of the Cascades (A-B) shows the boundary of coast country.

### About the Language Map

Anyone who thought of Northwest Indians as all one group will have his eyes opened by the sight of these rows of tribes, numerous as the stations on a railroad. The map divides them into groups whose languages have the same general foundation though this does not mean that the speakers of such languages can understand one another.

Some of the larger groups stretch far beyond the limits of this map. For instance the Salish, seen at the north, extend east through Washington and Idaho and north into Canada. The Athapascan, mostly in the southern part of Oregon, occupy most of western Canada and some of Alaska while their outposts have reached California and even Arizona. The Sahaptin, who look so small on our map, are the great tribe of eastern Oregon and some of eastern Washington, too.

This variety indicates how widely the big families of Indians have wandered. Yet there are smaller groups whose relationships are so vague that we have only guesses as to where they may have come from. This means that they must have been long away from anyone who spoke a similar tongue. Such groups are the Wakashan and Chemakuan which might just possibly be related to Salish. The Takelma, Kalapuya and Siuslaw bear faint suggestions of California as though they might have been left when their relative moved on that way. And Chinook is anybody's guess. It was, by the way, a real language, though it served as the basis for a kind of trader's talk made of Chinook, French, English and words from various Indian tongues.

<b>A. COAST TRIBES AND THEIR LANGUAGE GROUPS</b>			
Alesea	Coos-Siuslaw	Nooksack	Salish
Applegate	Athapascan	Nisqually	Salish
Cascades	Chinook	Puyallup	Salish
Chehalis	Salish	Queets	Salish
Chemakum	Chamakuan	Quilleute	Chemakuan
Chetco	Athapascan	Quinault	Salish
Chinook	Chinook	Samish	Salish
Coos	Coos-Siuslaw	Satsop	Salish
Copalis	Salish	Semiamoo	Salish
Duwamish	Salish	Shasta Costa	Athapascan
Gallice	Athapascan	Siletz	Salish
Garibaldi	Salish	Siuslaw	Coos-Siuslaw
Hoh	Chemakuan	Skagit	Salish
Humtulpis	Salish	Skokomish	
Kalapuya	Kalapuyan	or Twana	Salish
Kathlamet	Chinook	Skykomish	Salish
Klamath	Sahaptin	Snuqualmi	Salish
Klatskanie	Athapascan	Swinomish	Salish
Lower Umpqua	Coos-Siuslaw	Takelma	Salish
Lummi	Salish	Tillamook	Salish
Makah	Wakashan	Tolowa	Athapascan
Molalla	Sahaptin	Tututni	Athapascan
Muckleshoot	Mixture, mostly Salish	Upper Coquille	Athapascan
Multnomah	Chinook	Upper Umpqua	Athapascan
Nehalem	Salish	Wasco	Chinook
		Wyanoche	Salish

## Chapter II

# FISHING

### The Yearly Moves

Nature set a bountiful table in the Northwest but not all the courses were served in the same place. Most people, even some of the older ones, moved about all summer, visiting the different parts of their river valley one by one, as each provided its supply of food. One place in the stream would be best for salmon, of one kind or another. One would have herring. Out at sea there would be halibut and cod, even whales. On the rocks and shores would be shellfish. Inland, up the hill slopes would be berries and the wild game, deer, elk and bear. In the open meadows there would be roots.

Families started out every summer with much of their household goods and camped at each place until they had gathered and stored all it provided. Of course the schedule was different for each kind of country. Coastal people had everything they needed almost at their very doors. Upstream people had to wait half the summer before the salmon came their way and they would put in months at berrying, hunting and root gathering. In autumn, when the rains began, the family would pull the mats from the roof of their last summer shelter and load the goods on to the canoe. If they were a rich and busy family they might have two canoes, and lay planks across them to form a platform, piled high with baskets and bales. So they came paddling home to spend the winter.

Winter is not snowy on the coast. The people attended to that long ago, they say, by fighting the five Snow brothers and killing all but the youngest. But they did nothing about the wet. It drifts down through the tall trees in a steady drizzle or in white swirls of mist. This is when people need house and fire and the Northwesterners had plenty of both. Their huge wooden houses, sometimes as big as a White man's church, often could shelter dozens of families and their earthen floors had room for several blazing fires of cedar logs. They spent the winter around those fires, feasting, telling tales and holding ceremonies and dances. In the intervals, the women worked at their basketry, skins, or weaving; the men put their fishing and hunting gear in order, carved cedar wood with their stone tools or shaped the mountain goat horn into ladles. At times, some of them might sharpen their spears, put on their skin armor and set out to war. Or they launched their canoes to visit some other village.

But it was dark in the houses. No one minded the coming of spring, when the rain ceased to drum on the roof and it was time to pack and go, up river, down river or just to the fishing place near the house. Even yet, it is hard to find any coastal Indians at home in summer. They will be gone to the fish canneries, the fruit camps or just fishing or berrying by themselves. To coastal Indians, summer does not seem the time to stay home.



Celilo Falls

## Salmon

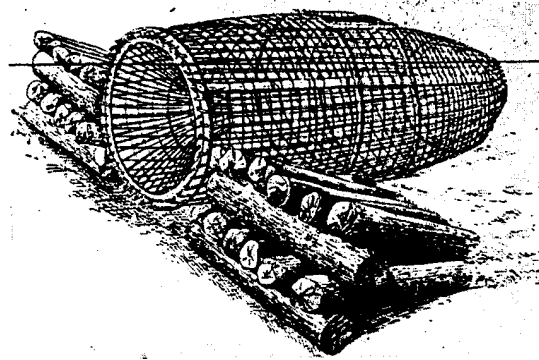
In some Northwestern languages, the word for fish was simply the word for salmon. Salmon was the fish and, in fact the food supply, as important to the Indian as bread to the White. Books have been written about the life story of this magnificent fish, which can bend its two or three foot length and leap up waterfalls six feet high. Why do salmon make their yearly journey from the depths of the open sea, up the freshwater rivers, sometimes as far as fifteen hundred miles? They are seeking their birthplace, say the experts, there to lay the eggs for another generation of salmon. For it seems that these powerful deep sea fish are really born in fresh water. They swim to the sea where they live for three or four years - even seven for one variety - and they grow heavy with oily meat. Then, one summer, the female is ready to lay her eggs. She seeks the mouth of her own particular river and swims up it to the shallow waters where she was hatched, or as near to them as she can get. She deposits her thousands of tiny eggs and the male waits beside her to fertilize them. Then, soon, they both die.

Nothing can keep the salmon from this tremendous life-and-death journey. They swim straight upstream, four or five miles a day, and when they meet a



rock or dam, they leap and leap, trying to get over it. They never turn back. Anyone who sets a trap or net with its mouth opening downstream can sometimes see it fill in a few minutes. Even when landed, salmon do not lie down and die, as weaker fish do. They jump like wildcats in the net and have to be clubbed to death.

Wicker basket fish trap



In the Indians' belief, no salmon ever really died. Actually, salmon were not fish at all, but people, living in a magic village under the sea. Every summer they sent their young men and women in fish disguise to meet the human race and to provide their food. When a salmon was killed and eaten, it immediately took form again in the home village. The only thing that would prevent this was carelessness of the human race in leaving salmon bones where dogs could drag them about or where they could be touched by someone ceremonially unclean. Therefore great care was taken with the bones and particularly with those of the first salmon of the season. Each tribe had its own ceremony for cleaning and cooking the fish, according to directions given by the salmon themselves.

Sometimes the salmon chief had some to visit an Indian village in the form of a handsome young man, and had married one of their maidens. At other times an Indian hero had gone in dreams to the village of the salmon people and had found them dancing with the broken spears and nets which had failed to kill them. These they accepted as presents from the human race. The salmon chief showed how a young salmon came to life instantly, as soon as his bones were thrown into the river, and how if one were missing, the salmon boy would lack a finger or even a hand.

There were five tribes of salmon and they all lived in a great wooden house, like those the Indians themselves built. Whites, too, know these five "tribes" whose scientific names are listed at the end of this chapter. Each had its own habits and its own breeding places, familiar to coast fishermen as the makes of cars are to modern people.

## First Salmon Ceremony

Every stream had its own dates for the salmon run but, all over coastal country, the coming of the first spring salmon was one of the most important days in the year. This fish was the scout for the whole salmon village and, according to the treatment he received, his people would follow or stay away. The man who caught him laid him down carefully with his head upstream, so that others would swim upstream too. Then he took the fish home to his wife and went out to summon the village.

The wife knew all the directions given by the salmon chief for the First Salmon ceremony. The fish must be cleaned off with fern leaves, never with water. It must be cut with the ancient knife of stone or mussel shell and the cuts must be up and down, not cross-wise. (The Quinault, of earlier days, refused to sell salmon to Whites for fear they would disobey this rule and stop the salmon run). Generally the fish was cut down the back bone. The bone was removed, with the head on it and the fish opened out like a book. Short sticks were placed across it to stretch it flat (see p. 67) and it was roasted in a split stick before the fire. Sometimes it was broken up (with hands, not a knife) and boiled. Everyone took a piece of this first salmon and they must finish eating it before sundown. The heart was burned in the fire, and the bones thrown on the riverbank or in the water where the salmon could take them back again .

Some villages gave this treatment to the first salmon of every kind, some only to the first kind to arrive. In any case, no one could go fishing until after the ceremony had been held. But when the run really began, there was no time for placing fish with their heads upstream. It was like harvest time in a farming country, with every man working overtime, every woman drying fish on the long frames over smoking fires, while the boys fetched wood and brought in fish by the canoe load.

All winter, people had been busy preparing the equipment. They rarely used hook and line, for this important food had to be taken wholesale. They took the materials at hand—chiefly wood and fibre—and out of these they contrived traps, spears and nets. Each village studied its own stream and used the device best suited to that kind of water, shallow or deep, foamy or clear.

## Weirs

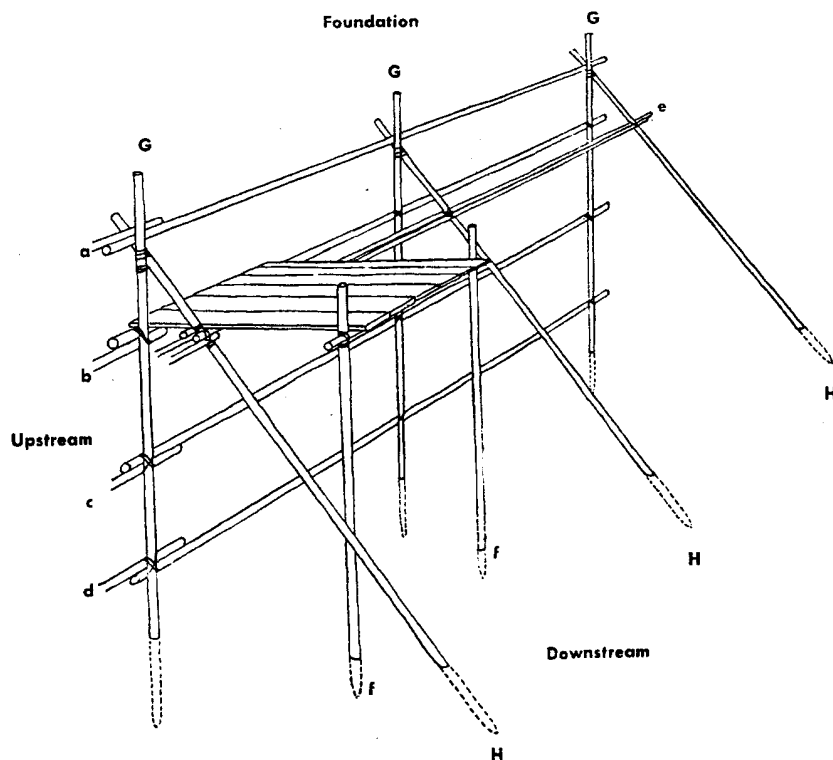
If their stream was clear and shallow, the villagers would build a high wooden fence, or weir, clear across it. Along the top of their weir were platforms where men stood with long handled nets (p. 20), dipping up the fish as they swarmed against the obstruction. It was no easy work to build a fence like this every spring. The poles had to be set by divers deep in the river bottom and they must have had a vision before they could attempt it. The platforms and the woven lattice work which, formed the fence had to be tied to them with cedar bark, for there were no nails (p. 20). Fishing squads had to take turns, night and day, dipping up the fish and piling them in canoes and many a man slipped and fell from the narrow wet runways.

Big weirs, like those made by the Quinault, belonged to a whole village and everyone shared in the catch. Smaller ones, across little streams, might belong to one man. Usually he was a wealthy village headman and he used his weir at night, when the fish ran thickest, leaving it to other people in the day. There are stories about Coyote, mythical hero of many Indians in Washington and Oregon, and of how he built such fish traps for everyone to use. Sometimes they were two parallel fences, with a little door in the one downstream. The fish, swimming upstream, would enter the door and then find themselves facing a blank wall. Or, there might be only one fence, its door leading into a walled enclosure. In either case, the fish would swim around, looking for an exit, while men above stood dipping or spearing them.

Sometimes very few got through to the village above and then the angry villagers would launch a heavy log, to be carried down by the current and break the trap. It seems not to have happened often for there were thousands of fish and the river wore hollows under the trap where they could wriggle through. Moreover, some downstream villages made it a point of honor to open the river when they had caught enough and give others a chance. Some Indian groups have "conservation" rules of this sort to the present day.

However, the fish grew poorer as they went upstream. Salmon do not eat after they leave the sea and, by the time they reach the headwaters, their flesh has grown white and flabby. Downriver people used to laugh at their upstream neighbors for eating those half dead fish, just as farmers laugh at city people for buying peas a week old. And, indeed, the upriver people were glad to trade for the smoked meat of the fat fish caught near the river's mouth.

## 1. How a salmon weir was made

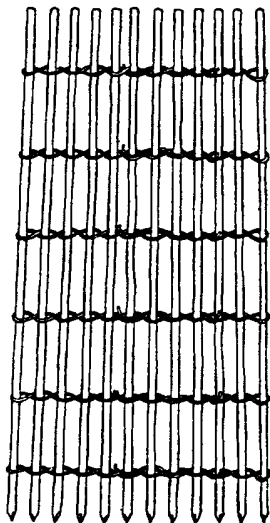


First the men went to the forest and cut poles about 4 inches thick and anywhere from four to twelve feet long. These are the uprights shown at G, G, G. They were pointed at the ends and stuck into the river bottom by divers who first had to clear the place of stones and gravel. These upright poles would not stand alone against the current so each one was braced by a slanting pole H, H, H, placed against it on the downstream side. The tops of these two were tied together with heavy strips of cedar bark.

A series of poles (a) was placed horizontally in the crotch formed by the upright and the bracing poles. These stretched all the way across the weir. Then other horizontal poles, b, c, d, were lashed to the upright poles below the water line.

Now the framework was secure enough and the men, standing up in the canoes, tied planks along it at b and e, to make a walk a little above the water line. At intervals along this plank, they built out little platforms where they could stand to fish. For these, they had to place two short supporting uprights in the river at f, f. They lashed other poles across them, their ends resting on the plank walk and then laid boards across these, in the opposite direction. These platforms were about four feet above the water though they would be less if the river rose. They were wide enough for two men to lie and sleep.

## 2. How a salmon weir was made

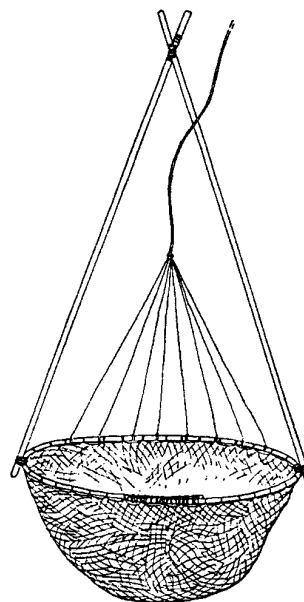


### THE WICKERWORK SECTIONS

When the foundation was up, the men filled in the open spaces with sections of wickerwork like that at the left. These were made by the women out of sticks of the tough vine maple or hemlock, about an inch thick. They were fastened together with cedar bark in the basketry method called twining and described on page 96. Each section was made just long and wide enough to fit a particular part of the weir and they sometimes lasted so well that they could be put away when the run was over and used another year. The sections were placed against the uprights on the upstream side, with their pointed ends stuck in the river bottom and their upper ends tied to the weir. The strong down current helped to hold them in place.

### DIP NET FOR THE SALMON WEIR

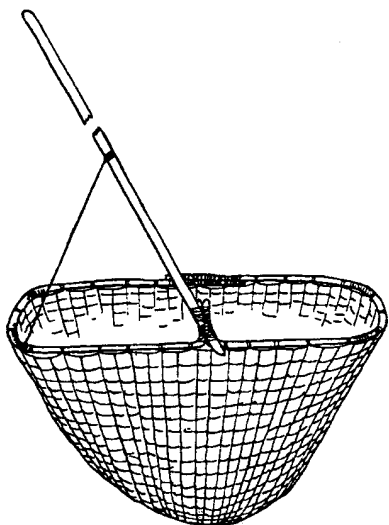
The net was of nettle fibre, made by the women in basket shape, (see Chapter IX) with a mesh about two inches wide. Its rim was of strong, elastic yew wood, bent in an oval about five feet by seven. A strong light pole was tied at either side of the rim. These extended upward and were tied together. A man standing on the weir platform, took hold of these poles and let down the net so it rested on the stream bottom. Fish, swimming over it would hit one of the several light cords of elk string, and a quiver would go up the long string. Then the man would raise the net, often with several salmon in it.



### Dip Nets

In the upper waters, the river was often full of rapids. Here the hard rocks did not permit of driving foundation stakes or, if they did, the spring floods might wash the stakes away. Then the men had to work night and day, diving and standing in the cold water to get their weir mended before the salmon run stopped.

In rough water, they dipped up salmon from the shore, standing on some rocky point, or on a platform built of logs. You can see Indians fishing in this way today, at Celilo, near the Dalles. Their plank platforms, wet with spray, jut

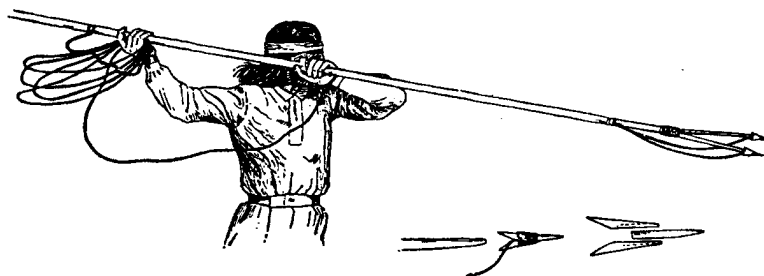


7. Dip net used from shore.

out over every section of foaming water and all day men take turns standing there, tied with ropes to keep them from slipping. (This last is a government order. They say they never bothered in the old days.) Each has a net with a handle twenty feet long, which he thrusts upstream as far as he can reach. The rapids carry it down, with its opening toward the fish as they swim up. Every moment, in the busy season, some net is brought ashore and the fisherman reaches for his club to kill another salmon.

### Harpoons and Spears

In shallow rapids, where the fish could be seen, fishermen sometimes harpooned the salmon instead of dipping. We shall hear more about harpooning when we come to whale hunting, for this kind of throwing spear is famous in the Northwest. The salmon harpoon was fifteen feet long, with a detachable, two-pointed head. Sometimes the fisherman could stab his salmon by simply reaching down into the rapids. Sometimes he threw the harpoon at a leaping fish. In any case, the spearhead came off in the salmon's body but it was attached to a long cord whose end was held in the fisherman's hand. The fish could swim far beyond the reach of the spear and still be held by the cord.



8. Two pronged salmon harpoon with elkhorn tip, spruce shaft and line of elk sinew.

People who have seen Indians throwing harpoons from fishing platforms say that their aim is unbelievable. One salmon leaps high, another low yet the spear point always strikes. Sometimes its two points may even strike two fish. In that case, said the Indians, the fisherman must not shout, or show any signs of triumph, or all the salmon would get right off the drying racks and go back to the sea. Of course, it was easy to use a harpoon in clear, shallow water, as one passed along in a canoe. Indians going on a trip would take a harpoon if there were any chance of salmon. If the water were muddy, they took a different tool. This was a long, strong spear whose point was not removable.