Walker River Paiutes - A Tribal History

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Stories are excerpts from the book

In the beginning the Numa (the people or the Northern Paiute as they are called today) came to the land called the Great Basin in boats. All the land was covered with water. As the water subsided the People moved down from the mountaintops into the valleys in search of food. The People were named after the plants or animals that grew or lived in their area. Those in the region around Agai Pah (Trout Lake or Walker Lake is it is called today) were the Agai Diccutta (Trout Eaters) and the Pugwi Diccutta (Fish Eaters). Those with whom the People had the most contract were the Toi Diccutta (Tule Eaters) to the north, the Tubusi Diccutta (Grass Bulb Eaters) to the west, and the Cozabee Diccutta (Fly Larvae Eaters) around Mono Lake to the south.

The People were on good terms with each other and frequently shared hunting, fishing and gathering areas. They knew the earth's secrets: when and where the edible plants grew, the habits and cunning ways of the desert and mountain animals. For the largest part of the year the extended family hunted and harvested alone. Each individual knew many skills. Labor was divided according to sex. The women were primarily responsible for seed gathering, preparing food, and the weaving of baskets and most of the clothing. The men did the large game hunting, manufacturing of hunting implements and rabbit-skin blankets. Both sexes fished and built tule or grass houses and temporary shelters of brush or tree branches. The children and old people, when they were able, had tasks to perform; they helped gather seeds, pinenuts, firewood and assisted in the less strenuous aspects of hunting and fishing.

After the long winter, the snow melted along the streams, near lakes and in the low hills: The first plant life began to appear and the People gathered the tender stems and leaves, and prayed for a bountiful year. In the spring, migratory birds returned from the south to the marshlands in the region around Trout Lake. The People knew when to expect their return and listened for the call. The men made boats of tule, which they paddled, through the marshlands in search of bird eggs. The women wove flexible bag-like baskets of green tule for carrying eggs. Along the shore, nets were set at an angle, supported by forked sticks trust into the mud. When the ducks swam beneath the nets, the hunters would jump out and frighten them to an attempted flight. The ducks and mudhens were caught in the nets. Some were roasted in the coals of the fire. Others were baked in pits under ground giving them a most delicious flavor.

Later when the desert began to turn green with plant life, the women and children began to collect the "carved" seeds, which were boiled and eaten. The first leaves of the squaw-cabbage were also picked.

In the spring as the women moved from valley to valley harvesting seeds and roots, the men hunted. The hunters used many devices: bows and arrows, spears, snares, baits, pitfalls, deadfalls, nets and blinds and decoys. The women also used implements well adapted to their labors and to the necessity of traveling over a large area. "It was necessary that she keep her possessions at a minimum, her domestic objects lightweight and durable. Each woman needed one set of harvesting baskets, more were a burden....

The People felt there was no virtue in accumulating excess property." The economy was based on mobility; the People had to be able to move with ease as the plants and seeds were ready to harvest. Well adapted to their specific uses, the basketry was of "different weaves for different sizes of seeds." The water jugs were covered with pine pitch to hold water.

In April and May, the spring trout run up the Agai Hoop (Trout River) began. People from throughout the region gathered at the mouth of the river to fish. Many fishing methods were used. Pazaki (weirs) were built of willows interwoven on cottonwood frames and placed across the river. The weir dams channeled the fish passage and men on passonis (platforms) downstream from the channel in the dam caught the fish with dip nets. Hooks of greasewood and bone were hung on hemp fishing lines and harpoons were used to spear the fish.

The fish runs were occasions for festivals. When the supply of fish was large enough a trout feast was held. Toi, Tubusi, Cozabee and Pugwi Eaters joined with the Trout Eaters to partake of the feast and participate in other social activities including gambling, dancing and games. Sometimes other basin tribes including the Washo and Shoshone participated.

By June, when many of the desert seeds and berries were ripe, the families went out into the surrounding valleys. While the women harvested the seeds of mustard and metzelia plants, the men set traps for birds and ground squirrels. Sometimes the family received word that the berries of the desert thorn (hu-pwi) were ripe, and the family moved to harvest the seeds and plants. They also preferred, however, to remain near their primary residences so they could cache their seeds within a convenient distance of their winter homes.

In July, the rice grass (wai) was ready to harvest. The women cut great armloads of the grass. It was then moistened to prevent flash burning and placed on a small fire. As the grass burned, the little black seeds dropped into baskets. They were collected and cleaned on a winnowing tray, husked on a mortar, and used to make a kind of soup.

Later in the summer the mudhen's feathers began to molt, rendering them unable to fly. With tule boats, the men formed semi-circles and drove the fowl into the land, where men, women and children were waiting to ambush the hens. On some lakes there were thousands, perhaps millions, of birds to be harvested.

In August, the buck berries were ripe in the groves along many river bottoms. Vast groves of them were found in the valley to the west of Walker Lake. The berries were dried and saved for winter when food was scarce. They would be mixed in with the pine nuts and dried meat.

Pine Nuts, a staple of the People's diet, began ripening in early fall. The pine nut crop was extremely erratic, "some years there were virtually none in the entire areas." The People traveled into the mountains east of the land of the Tule Eaters or to the east and to the southwest of Trout Lake. Sometimes it was necessary to move into the mountains west of the Grass Bulb Eaters. The People could tell when the pine nuts were getting ripe by watching other plants. When the yellow blooms of the rabbit or rubber bush appeared or the rose hips on the wild rose bushes turned red the pine nuts were ripe. Scouts were also sent out to find the most promising area.

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In preparation for the winter, the women had already stored a food supply of seeds, berries, roots, pine nuts, dried fish, and rabbits. Small huts were made to store the willows, which would be gathered for basket making. The men continued to hunt and also gathered hemp, which would be used for making cordage for rabbit, fish and mudhen nets.

During the winter storms, the families stayed inside their homes. Meals were cooked in watertight baskets by dropping hot rocks from the fire into the soup-like mixture of ground meat or seeds and water. Winter was also the time for making willow baskets. The willows had to be carefully selected in the fall for strength and flexibility. During he winter, the women weaved winnowing trays, baskets and cradle-boards. Stories were recited about when the animals were people. Each animal in the stories had a song.

Residence was not permanent if the wood supply became exhausted in the camp area. It was more practical to move to a new locality than to keep going further and further for fuel.

Winter clothing might consist of a rabbit skin cape or sagebrush material. Shoes were made of sagebrush bark, which did not shrink like buckskin does after getting wet.

January and February were the most difficult months for the People. Snow covered their food caches, the marshes froze and the ground squirrels were in hibernation. During these months there might be a winter trout run up the river. The men would set up their pazaki and passonis and would catch a few fish to supplement their sometimes meager winter food supply.

The People ate many foods besides those mentioned. In fact "the diet of the [People] was far more varied than that of modern day United States." They always left enough so that there would be more plants the following year. Although there was never a consistently large enough food surplus to establish a trading economy, families did share food. The women "frequently shared seeds with neighbors and especially with relatives, but were not obligated to do so;" although a food surplus for trade was very unusual, some trading did occur among the groups, most probably when the groups gathered for fishing or hunting activities. The People probably traded with the tribes in Yosemite and Owens Valley. "One item [traded] was sugar…pine sugar. A certain species of bees made that sugar on the pine trees. The trees had what looked like a heavy frost on them and the Indian gathered that as their sugar." Some trading probably occurred when journeys were made to areas of the Fly-larvae Eaters at Mono Lake. The People gathered a "sort of a larva from a certain type of flies which were found in the water."

Various roots, bulbs, willows and even pine sugar were used for medical purposes. The old ones used to "pray for us and my mother made a special kind of basket that hold water. [Grandfather would] have sagebrush ready and then when we have a headache, why he put water in this basket and he get sagebrush in there and you put it on top of our head and he go like that. Our headache would go away."

The economic system of the People required no permanent central government. The basic and efficient economic unit was the family which was for the most part free to change residence as necessity or desire dictated. Rabbit, mudhen and antelope drives required an organizer, who was called the poinabi. His position of leadership was based on his dependability, skills and ability to organize and lead. The poinabi was "not necessarily the same man each season nor for each event." Although the territorial limits

of the groups were somewhat fluid, the People had some understanding of where the mountain ranges were or where certain ridges were that had considered boundaries.

Yet the area around the Trout Lake was a lush one and other tribes may have sought to come into the area. Battles or skirmishes were fought the Pitt Rivers who made forays into the area.

Families also traveled into the Owens and Yosemite Valley, where they may have remained for several years. Although the men were fleet of foot and could run down a deer, it was difficult to move a whole family a great distance. The People lived in a desert region and made the most out of what they had. To them the desert was a beautiful place.