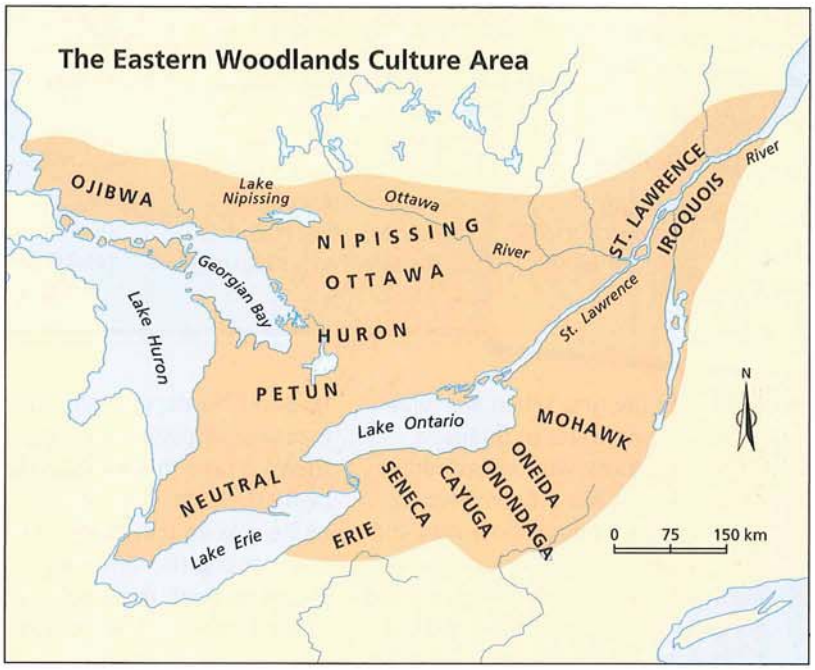
The Iroquois of the Eastern Woodlands

In the next chapter, you will read more about the Iroquois and the Huron, two groups that lived in the fertile country of the Great Lakes.

The Iroquois have lived in their present territory since before 1200. They built large towns, heavily guarded by **palisades** of logs. Towns were surrounded by large fields of maize, beans, squash, and sunflowers.

Iroquois towns usually contained several rows of longhouses—sometimes as many as fifty in a row. Each extended family of the town lived in a longhouse, which was divided into several compartments, or hearths, one for each **nuclear family**. The town was run by a town council, which consisted of the chiefs from each family. When a decision about a town matter was needed, the council would meet and make a decision.

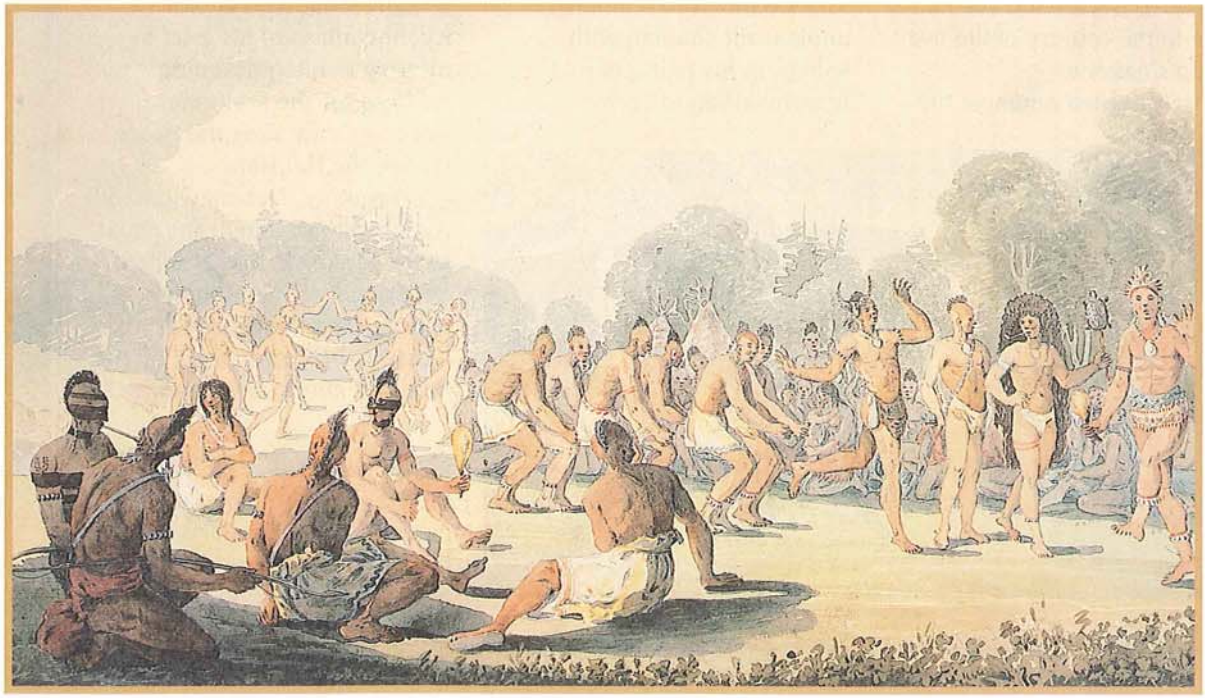
Figure 7–10 The peoples of the Eastern Woodlands



palisade: a defensive fence

nuclear family: a mother, a father, and their children

Figure 7–11 This painting depicts an Iroquois dance for the recovery of the sick. Can you find the ill member of the community?



Using a Legend as a Primary Source

CATALOGUE CARD

What is It? *A legend that describes the beginnings of the Iroquois confederacy*

Who wrote it? *Unknown*

When? *Unknown*

Why? *To explain the importance of peace in the development of a nation*

Many Iroquoian speakers lived south of Lake Ontario in what is now the United States. They comprised five nations: the Cayuga, Oneida, Onondaga, Seneca, and the Mohawk. As these nations competed for farm land and other resources, they found themselves in a state of almost perpetual warfare.

In the late fifteenth or early sixteenth century, the Iroquois nations stopped fighting with each other and made an alliance known as the "Confederacy of the Five Nations." What follows is an adaptation of a legend of how the confederacy came into being.

You might be interested to learn that a legend is not the same thing as a myth. A myth explains something about the world. A legend usually describes the challenges and adventures of a heroic person. Think about this difference when you are reading this adaptation.

In the time when war was the normal state of things, a young Huron woman who lived apart from her mother became pregnant, although she was still a virgin. Her mother dreamed that the child was destined to do great things. When the child, a boy, was born, he was named Dekanawida, and he was truly gifted. As he grew into a young man, he showed a natural gift as a persuasive speaker, but his own people treated him with doubt and jealousy. He therefore decided to depart and eventually came to the country of the five Iroquois nations.

He travelled amongst the Iroquois hunters, giving them a message of peace, and urging them to take this message back to their chiefs. The Peacemaker, as he was called, stopped for a time among the Onondagas and gazed through the smoke hole of the house of Ayonhwathah. Ayonhwathah was a **cannibal**, but he was soon persuaded from this way of life by the Peacemaker, and he accepted his message of peace. Dekanawida charged him with the task of converting Thadodaho, a particularly unpleasant shaman with snakes in his hair. Leaving Ayonhwathah to convert Thadodaho by combing the snakes from his hair, Dekanawida left to spread his message of peace among the Mohawk.

Unfortunately, Ayonhwathah failed in his mission. Thadodaho killed each of Ayonhwathah's three daughters in turn. In great grief, Ayonhwathah left his village and went eastward into Mohawk country. Wandering aimlessly, he happened upon Dekanawida, who cured Ayonhwathah of his grief by uttering the Requickening Address for the first time. Together they sang the Peace Hymn, the Hai Hai.

Together, Dekanawida and Ayonhwathah taught the ritual to the Mohawk, and accepted adoption into the Mohawk nation. They then turned westward, accompanied by the Mohawk chiefs, and quickly

Figure 7–12 In this modern-day video, Dekanawida is shown preparing to bury the war clubs and hatchets of the different nations under the roots of a tree.

Using a Legend as a Primary Source continued

convinced the Oneidas to join the League as younger brothers of the Mohawk. Bypassing the Onondaga for a time, they travelled to the Cayuga, who also accepted membership in the League as younger brothers. The three nations then returned to the Onondagas, all of whom, save Thadodaho, joined the League, as older brothers on the side of the Mohawk. The four nations then went to the Seneca, and convinced this last nation to join, also as older brothers.

With the power of all five nations behind them, Dekanawida and Ayonhwathah returned to Thadodaho, and with the greatest difficulty, straightened his mind, and combed the snakes from his hair. Thadodaho, who was made first among equals in the role of the fifty League Chiefs, placed antlers on the heads of all the chiefs as symbols of their authority, and taught them the words of the Great Law.

PRIMARY SOURCE

As a result of his efforts, Dekanawida had brought peace to the Five Nations, and they ceased to war amongst themselves. Henceforth, they lived as brothers of the same clan.

WHAT DO YOU THINK?

1. The legend of the Peacemaker bears a resemblance to a story that is important to European culture. What is that story? How is it similar to this legend? How is it different?
2. Identify other regions of the world where war is "the normal state of things." Are these regions close to peace?

SOCIETY AND GOVERNMENT

Iroquoian societies were both matrilineal and matrilocal, terms you learned on page 187. Women owned the fields in which crops were grown, and they were responsible for ensuring that the crops were well-tended and harvested.

When a couple married, they went to live with the bride's family. All Iroquoian groups had a fairly complex system of government. At the local level, each **extended family** or clan had two leaders. One, the "civil chief," directed the normal activities of the clan. The "military chief" was in charge of settling conflicts with other groups. Both chiefs were chosen by the women elders of the clan, who also had the authority to remove a chief if he proved to be a poor leader.

Several towns usually cooperated in an area. On a regular basis, councils would be held to discuss matters concerning the entire group, and each town would send representatives to this council.

The nations of the Iroquois cooperated as much as possible. Matters concerning the entire nation would be discussed at a confederacy council, and each tribe would send representatives to this council. At all levels, decisions were made **democratically**, and the opinion of the majority was followed.

DID YOU KNOW?

The Iroquois had a three-level system of government—town, tribal, and confederacy. Canada today has a similar three-level system—municipal, provincial, and federal.

cannibal: one who eats human flesh

extended family: the people related to the members of the nuclear family, e.g., the mother's mother or sister

archaeological excavation: a dig to uncover evidence of former civilizations

hearth: fireplace

THE AGRICULTURE OF THE IROQUOIS

Agriculture came late to the Iroquoian people. Around 500 CE, they learned how to grow corn from their neighbours to the south. Until this time, the Iroquois had lived in small villages and had led a fairly nomadic existence, often travelling around the region seeking food. The discovery of agriculture eventually led to a rapid increase in both the size of villages and the number of people living in them because people could now stay in one place. This change is well documented by **archaeological excavations** of village sites in southern Ontario.

In the early-agricultural period, between 500 and 1300 CE, villages remained rather small, comprising about eight longhouses and about 250 people. The whole village covered about one hectare, and was surrounded by a defensive palisade. Fields were still rather small. Each **hearth** was shared by two families.

In the middle-agricultural period, between 1300 and 1400, villages grew much larger. New crops—beans, sunflower, and squash—were cultivated, along with the staple crop of corn. The villages had now become towns, each averaging about a dozen longhouses and 1000 people. By this time, the longhouses varied tremendously in size and housed between 30 to 80 people.

By the late-agricultural period (1400 to 1600), some towns covered up to four hectares or more, each with more than 2000 people. These palisaded villages were surrounded by large fields, which provided a stable source of food. Tobacco was a valuable trade item that could be exchanged for non-agricultural products with nations further north, such as the Huron.

DID YOU KNOW?

The longhouse was built of a wood frame and covered with bark

Figure 7–13 This reconstruction of an early Iroquoian village (around 1000 CE) is located near London, Ontario.

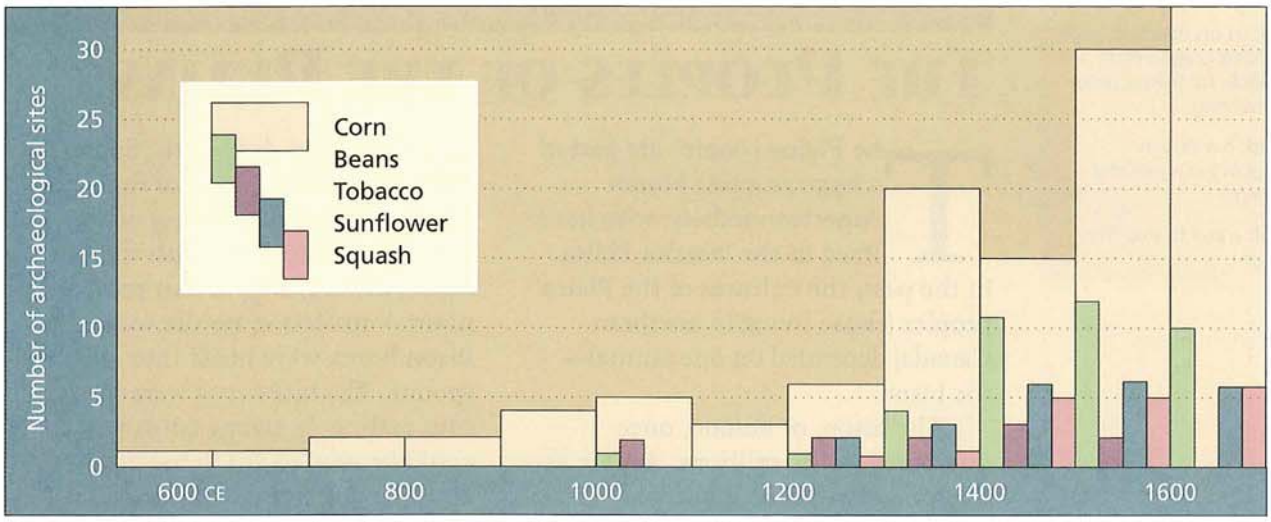


Figure 7–14 After 1000, Iroquois agriculture grew quickly. According to this this chart, evidence for which crop has been found most frequently by archaeologists?

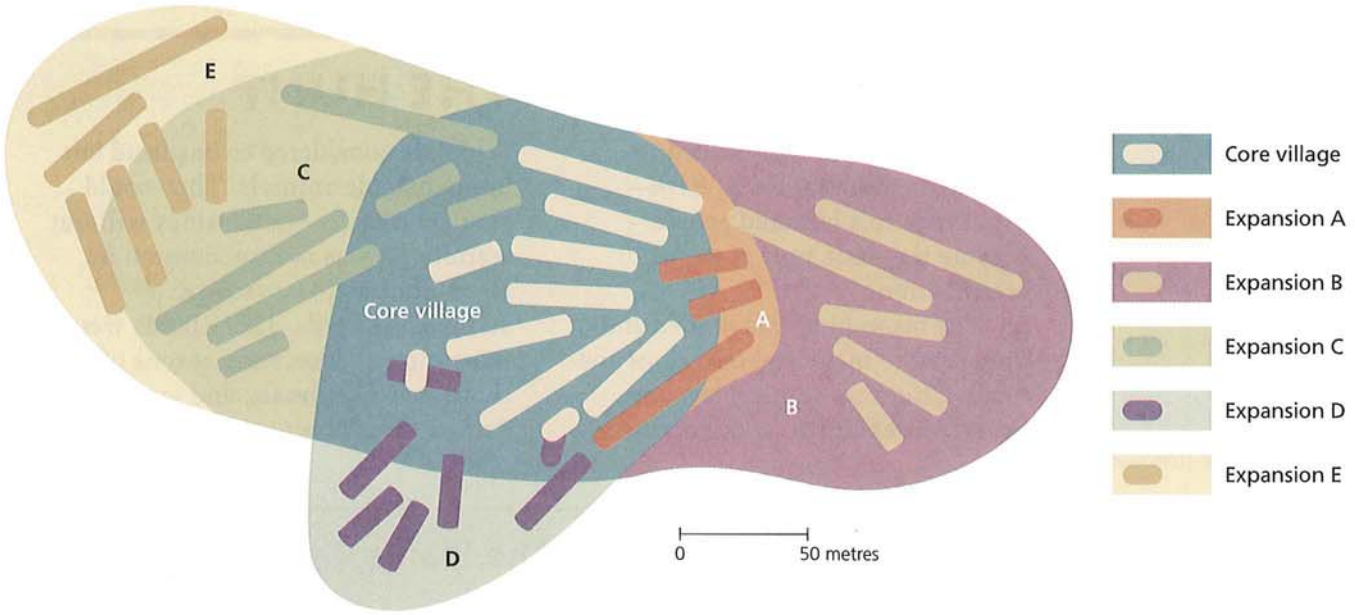


Figure 7–15 This diagram shows how an early Iroquoian village could expand into a town. The core village is visible, as well as each addition.

ACTIVITIES

1. What were the effects of the development of agriculture among the Iroquois? What do you suppose were the advantages of agriculture? What disadvantages do you think may have occurred?
2. How was Iroquois society democratic? Why were women so important to its development?
3. Look again at Figure 7–12. What is symbolized by the image of the hatchets being placed under the roots of a tree? What common expression used today captures this image?
4. Reread the information on the growth of Iroquois villages on page 196 and examine Figure 7–15. To which period does this town belong? How can you tell? Based on the number of longhouses shown here, how many people might occupy this town?

blind: an enclosure used to conceal oneself from wildlife for the purpose of hunting

pound: hunting by trapping in a pen and killing

corral: a pen to trap the bison

THE PEOPLES OF THE PLAINS

The Plains peoples are part of a huge group of North American Indians who have lived in the Interior Plains. In the past, the cultures of the Plains peoples (those living in northern Canada) depended on one animal—the bison.

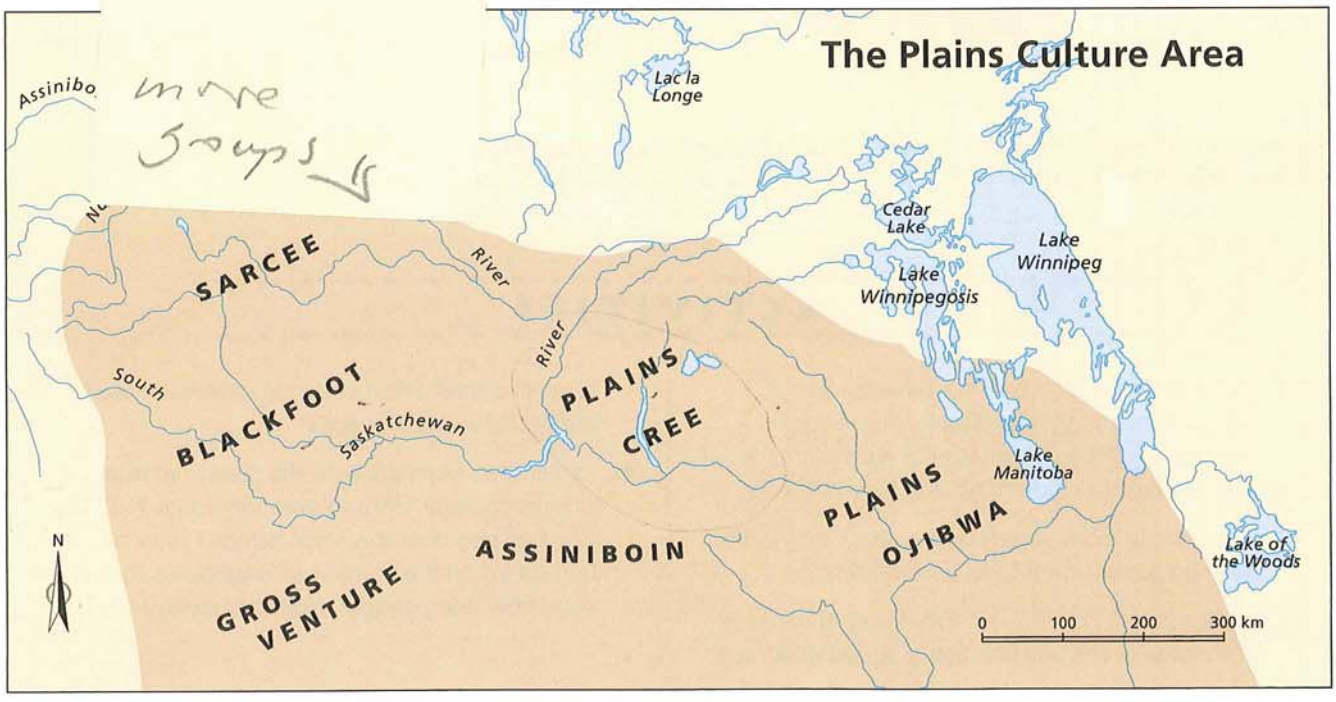
The bison, or buffalo, once numbered in the millions. As late as the nineteenth century, it was estimated that 40 million bison lived on the Interior Plains. The Plains people subsisted on bison meat, and made many household and personal items from bison hides, hair, horns, and bones. The organization of Plains society was also affected by the bison. The number of people needed to operate an efficient bison drive—about fifty to a hundred people—became the basic unit of social organization.

The bison hide was tanned and then used to make tipi coverings and robes. Clothing—tunics, leggings, skirts, breechcloths, and moccasins—was made from deer skins. Some hides were not stripped of their fur. These were used as winter cloaks and robes that were worn with the fur facing inward, a style that provided natural insulation for the wearer. Bison horns were made into cups and spoons. The intestines were processed into extremely strong cords that could be used to stitch together clothing and tipi coverings, or to make bow strings and bindings for spears and arrows.

THE HUNT

Bison are considered to be placid but unpredictable animals. They could stampede easily—sometimes without warning. It was not uncommon for bison hunters to be crushed by stampeding herds. These herds were magnificent, consisting of tens of thousands of animals, and would darken the plains as they passed.

Figure 7–
the Plains



Bison herds were often funnelled towards a location where they could be killed. **Blinds** were constructed, wide at one end and narrowing towards the collection point. The hunters began the process by locating and moving a herd towards the wide end of the buffalo run. Other members of the group—women, children, and old people—then rose up from behind the blinds, shouting and waving their arms, which kept the stampeding herd within the run.

The run would end in one of two manners. The first was the buffalo **pound**, large enough and strong enough to contain part of the herd. As the bison milled around within the pound, hunters would kill them, usually with bows and arrows. Because the bison were fairly placid, they did not seem to notice when other bison were being killed.

The First Trail Mix?

The Plains peoples were nomads who travelled great distances to hunt bison, so they needed to take along food that would not spoil. Because they did not have access to vegetables and nuts, they developed an extremely useful and nutritious trail food, pemmican.

Pemmican has three main ingredients: ground-up bison meat that has been dried, lard, and dried berries. The meat was mixed with the lard and dried berries to make a cake, and then wrapped in bison-hide packages.

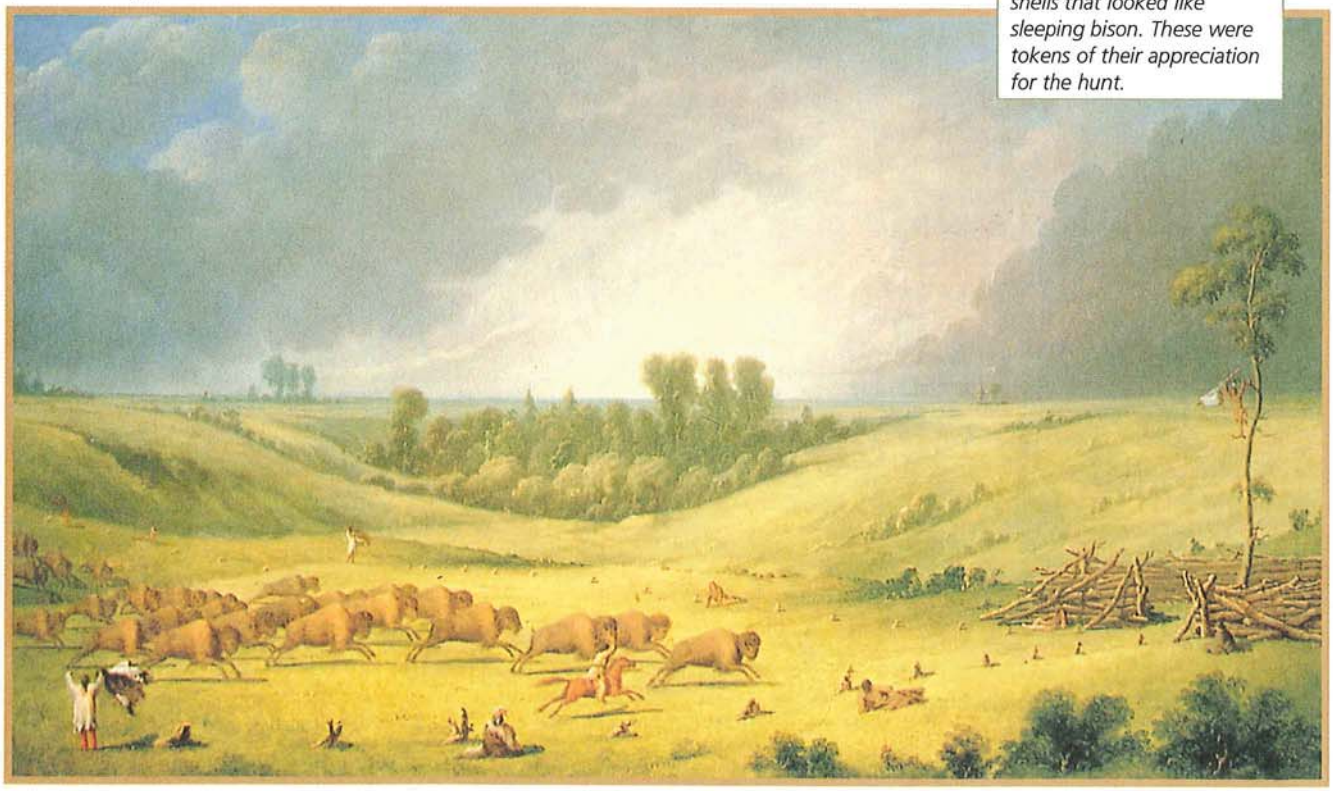
Pemmican lasts for months at a time, and is both nutritious and tasty. A small amount can provide a great deal of food energy because of the high protein content.

Figure 7–17 Pemmican cakes last a long time and provide excellent nutrition.

Figure 7–18 This painting of a Cree bison pound shows the edge of the **corral** to the right. The corral did not have to be strong. As long as it was interwoven with brush and no light passed through, the bison would think it was a solid wall.

DID YOU KNOW?

The Blackfoot kept spiral shells that looked like sleeping bison. These were tokens of their appreciation for the hunt.



jump: hunting by enticing over a cliff

A Londoner Reacts to the Bison

William Blackmore was a visitor to the United States from London, England during the mid-nineteenth century. He travelled more than 160 kilometres on the Kansas Pacific Railway. When the train encountered a herd of bison, Blackmore noted that it

> ... passed through an almost unbroken herd of buffalo. The plains were blackened with them, and more than once the train had to stop to allow an unusually large herd to pass.

PRIMARY SOURCE

DID YOU KNOW?

While horses had lived in North America for millions of years, they became extinct at the end of the last Ice Age, along with other large mammals. When the Spanish arrived in Mexico, they brought horses with them. By about 1750, the horse had arrived in the northern plains. The horse lightened the work of the bison drive because enough horses could replace a corral.

Plains peoples also used buffalo **jumps**, or cliffs, to trap and kill buffalo. The run would end at the top of the cliff, and the stampeding herd would simply run over the edge. Many buffalo were killed by the fall, and the survivors were slaughtered by waiting hunters at the bottom. Once enough animals had been killed, they were butchered and processed. Both buffalo pounds and buffalo jumps seem to have been used for thousands of years. (A recreation of a buffalo jump at the Head-Smashed-In Buffalo Jump Interpretive Centre in Alberta is shown on page 185.)

The Tipi

The tipi is an ideal house for nomadic peoples. It consists of three or four support poles made of wood, usually birch, because this tree grows straight and has relatively thin trunks. These poles are set up in a pyramid shape, large enough to shelter a single family. This framework is then covered with stitched bison hide. A flap is left open at the top of the tipi to allow for ventilation and the escape of smoke.

The tipi could be set up or taken down in a very short period of time. When a herd of bison was passing, it was often crucial that the band be able to move on very short notice.

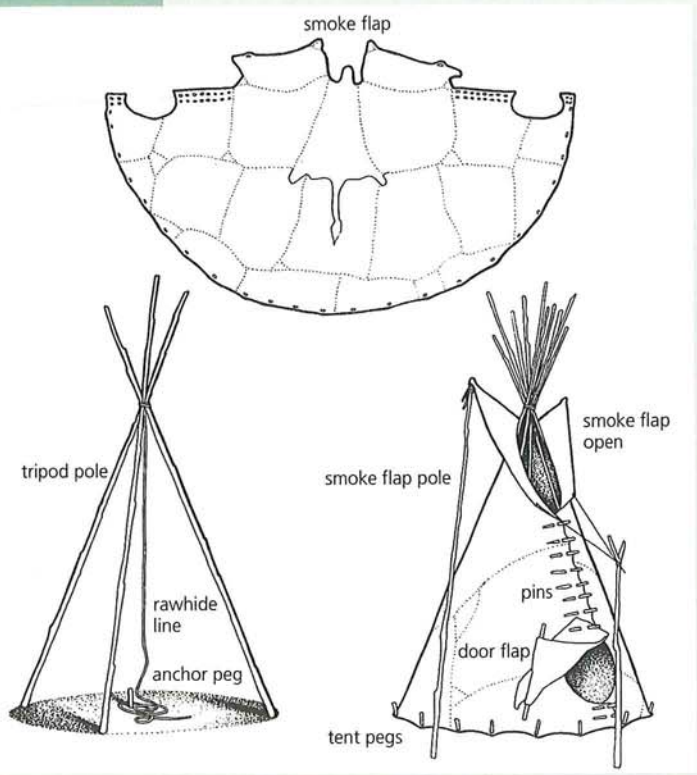


Figure 7–19 This diagram shows the construction of a tipi, beginning with the frame (left). The bison hide is shown top, before being placed on the pole frame.

PLAINS SPIRITUALITY: THE SUN DANCE

The Sun Dance was the central religious festival of the Plains peoples. Actually, it has nothing to do with worshipping the sun. Among the Plains Cree, it was called the "Thirsting Dance." This is a more accurate term, since the dancers sought visions by subjecting themselves to pain and suffering.

The Sun Dance was held during the summer, when most members of a nation assembled prior to the bison hunt. Sometimes a woman who was admired by everyone was the sponsor of the event. Often she would hold the event after prayers made at a time of crisis had been answered. On other occasions, a man would pledge to hold a Sun Dance, especially if he had returned safely from a war expedition.

While the sponsor **fasted**, a lodge for the ceremony would be built, using a tall centre pole made from a specially chosen cottonwood tree. This pole was decorated with a variety of offerings, such as bison skulls or other ritual objects. Rafters from the centre pole rested on a framework of smaller poles, which made up the walls of the lodge.

When the lodge was finished, the dances began. Dancers were people who had made vows. They danced, often without rest, for the several days that the ceremony took. Dancers were not allowed food, drink, or rest until the Sun Dance was over. They danced in place, following the rhythm of chants, keeping their gaze fixed on the top of the centre pole. To prove themselves, young men would have their chests pierced with skewers of bone, which would be attached by ropes to the centre pole. As they danced, they would lean backward until the skewers were ripped out. The scars that resulted were held in high esteem as badges of the ability to withstand pain—essential for a warrior.

to fast: to abstain from food

initiation: a ceremony during which one gains new status, such as membership in a select group

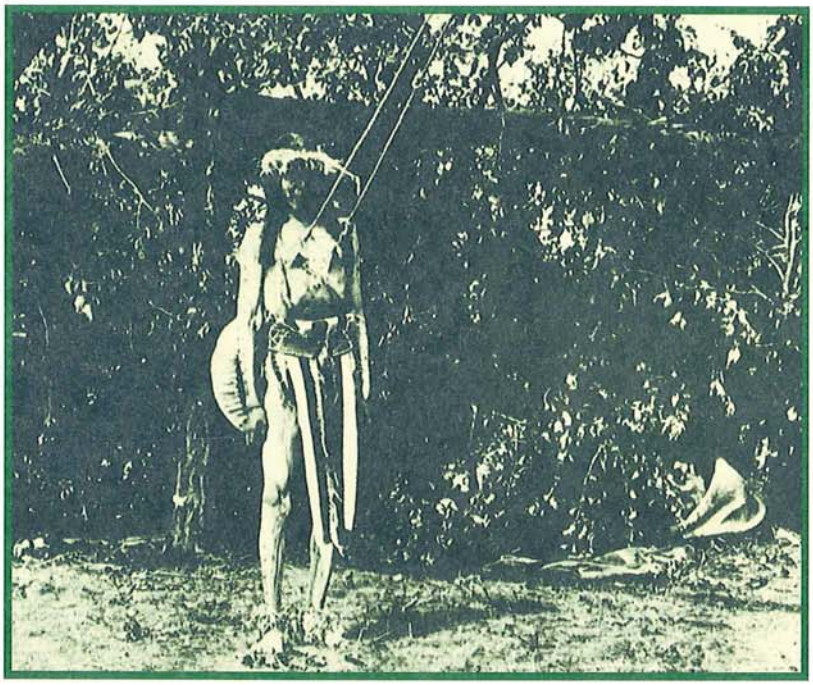


Figure 7–20 This young man is performing the Sun Dance as a rite of **initiation**.

ACTIVITIES

1. How did the bison contribute to the development of Plains culture? Create a poster or write a paragraph that summarizes the information on pages 198–200.
2. In what ways were the Plains peoples adapted to a nomadic lifestyle? How did the horse enhance this lifestyle?
3. Why was the Sun Dance ceremony so important to Plains culture? Why was bravery an important aspect for young men?
4. What other passages from childhood to adulthood can you identify?

ACTIVITIES

1. How were pit houses an ideal form of housing for the Plateau peoples?
2. Natural disasters can be devastating to people so closely in tune with their environment. With a partner, conduct research in the school library or from other sources to find examples of other such events that affected the lifeways of a Native group. Share your findings with the rest of the class.
3. In what ways were chiefs important to the welfare of the group they led? How could an inefficient chief be damaging to his people?

THE PEOPLES OF THE NORTHWEST COAST

rank: status, position in a group

stand: types of trees covering an area

Archaeological evidence supports the view that the coast of British Columbia has been inhabited for more than 10 000 years. The peoples of the Northwest Coast were part of a distinctive culture that stretched from Oregon to Alaska. Archaelogists have concluded that most of the features of historical nations of the area probably had evolved by about 1500 BCE.

SOCIAL ORGANIZATION

Northwest Coast peoples were deeply concerned with concepts of inherited **rank** and privilege. Villages had chiefs and nobles who had the right to high-ranking family names, and who controlled access to resource sites. A noble's wealth depended on the ability to manage resources effectively. House sites, salmon-fishing stations, berry patches, and important **stands** of cedar were

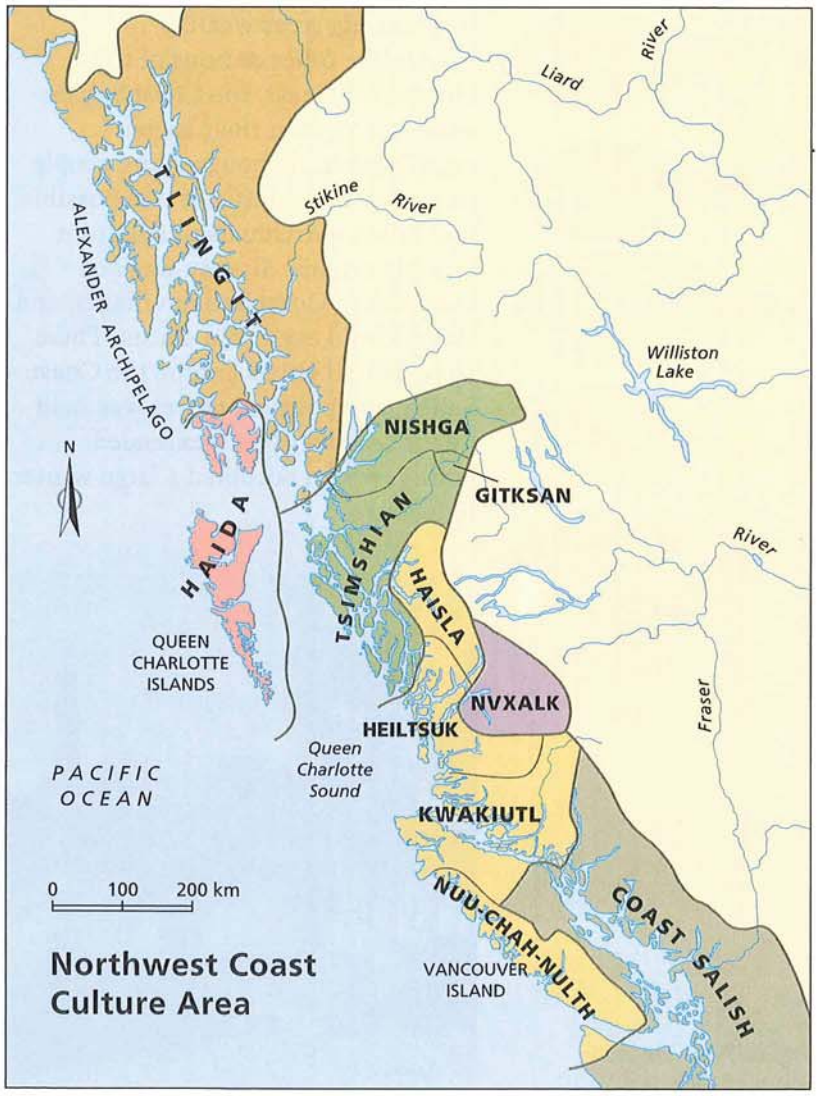


Figure 7–23 The peoples of the Northwest Coast

potlatch: a traditional ceremony practised by many aboriginal peoples of the Pacific Northwest Coast. "Potlatch" is Chinook, meaning "to give." The gifts of a potlatch are payments to those who witness a family ceremony, e.g., a marriage.

totem pole: a large red cedar log that is carved and depicts a family history using crests and designs owned by an individual family—primarily a Northwest Coast tradition

considered private property and were passed on to family members. Groups called "clans" consisted of people who shared a name and descent from a common ancestor. A clan not only held territory, but also possessed ritual dances, songs, and the right to have certain crests representing their clan: the grizzly bear, for example.

Many people in a town were commoners, who lacked any prestige or privileges. They shared in the group's activities and provided the labour needed to develop the village's wealth. Slaves also formed a part of the population. They were either purchased or captured in raids on other nations. They performed menial tasks, and could be sold and given away at **potlatches**, or even killed, if a chief wanted to show that he cared little for his great wealth.

Unlike other nations of the Northwest Coast, the Coast Salish were less rigid in their social organization. Although some people possessed high status, it was possible for skilled individuals to rise from humble origins. Slavery was not common in Coast Salish villages, and slaves could even gain status. There were no real chiefs among the Coast Salish, and political power was held by the leaders of each extended family, which occupied a large winter longhouse.

ART AND DANCE

The peoples of the Northwest Coast have created some of the most distinctive art in the history of Canada. **Totem poles**, for example, have been carved from the single trunks of western red cedars. Many of these trees could reach a height of 30 metres. Totem poles were used by each clan to tell the story of its origins and deeds. Each clan reckoned descent from a mythical common ancestor, which was represented by a stylized animal or bird, and each clan had the right to use specific images on their totem poles.

Ritual dances were another feature of Northwest Coast aboriginal life. Dances were important because they reminded people of the importance of each clan, and communicated the legends of each clan. Dancers wore elaborate costumes, including wooden cedar masks. Masks were worn to represent characters in legends. Each mask was elaborately carved and decorated, and some masks were ingeniously hinged so that the dancer could represent the ability of some bird, animal, or mythical being.

Both totem poles and ritual dancing remain features of Northwest Coast aboriginal life today.

Figure 7–24 These paddles from Bella Coola are also beautifully decorated.

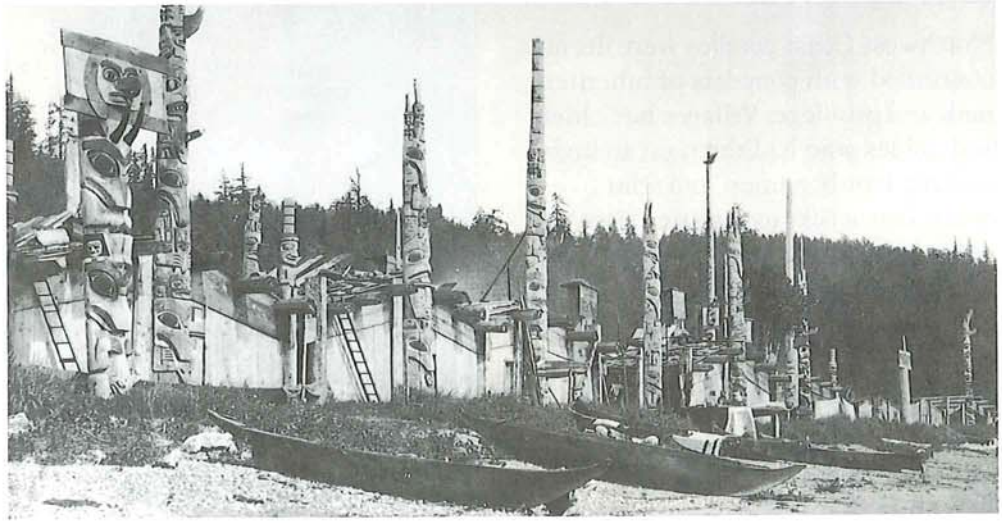


Figure 7–25 The Haida village of Skidegate

HOMES AND CANOES

Cedar was used in the construction of houses and canoes. Northwest Coast big houses were extremely large, and lasted for years. They were constructed by first raising a strong frame of dressed cedar logs, which were then faced with cedar planks. The support poles of longhouses were usually carved with images important to the clan that occupied them.

Northwest Coast canoes were made from single cedar logs, and were extremely seaworthy. The waters of this part of Canada can be very stormy, especially in winter, yet the larger canoes were designed for journeys of hundreds of kilometres, or for the hunting of whales off the coast. The largest canoes were more than 20 metres long and could carry more than fifty persons. Smaller canoes were used by individuals for both fishing and as a means of visiting nearby villages.

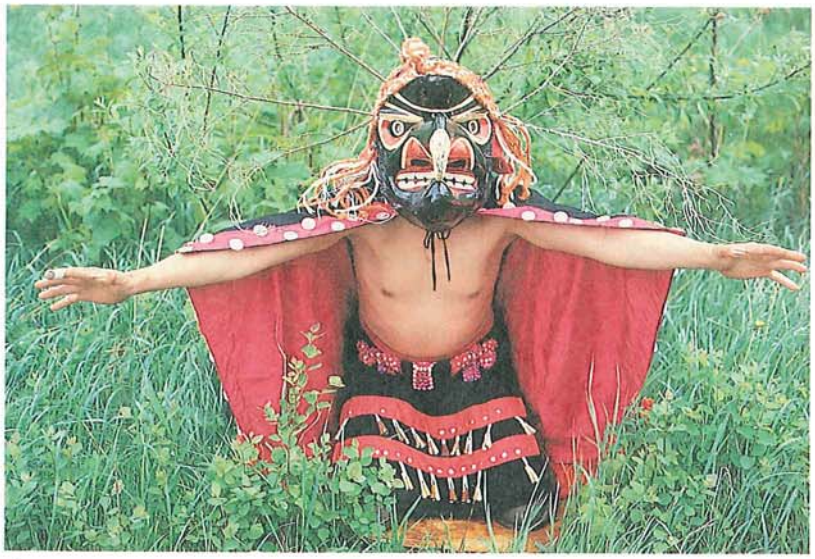


Figure 7–26 Ritual dancing is still a feature of Northwest Coast aboriginal life.

THE POTLATCH

Status and wealth were extremely important to Northwest Coast aboriginal peoples. The **potlatch** was the outward sign of a noble's status. Nobles hosted potlatches whenever a major event took place, such as the birth of an heir, the death of a chief, or

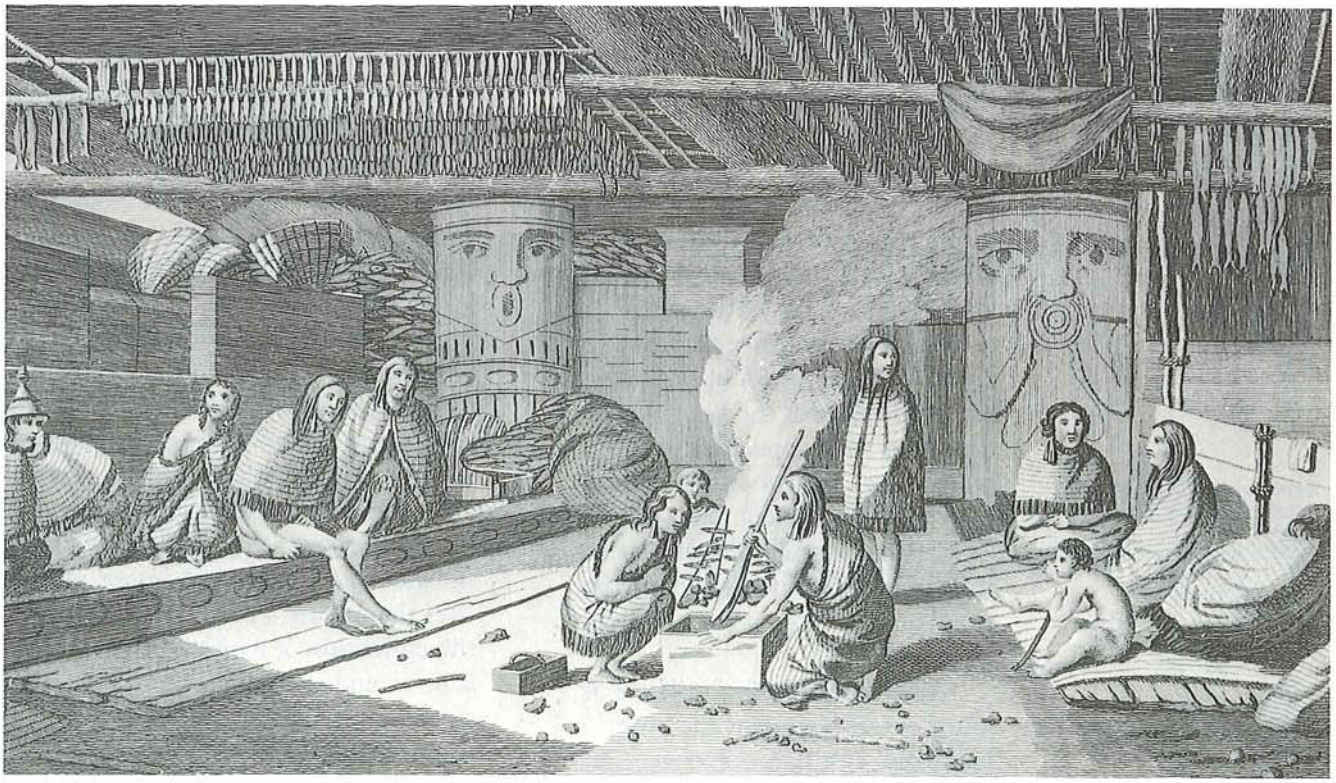


Figure 7–27 As you can see, the interior of this Northwest Coast big house is very large. How can you tell that salmon and cedar were extremely important?

DID YOU KNOW?

The Northwest Coast "bent-wood cedar box" was so well made it was watertight. These boxes were often used as storage containers. Large boxes were also used as cooking vessels. Each box was decorated with images of a clan's symbolic crests.

Figure 7–28 A bent-wood cedar box

the raising of a new house or totem pole. In so-called "rivalry potlatches," other nobles and their followers were invited from nearby or even distant villages. They were treated to an elaborate feast and ceremonial dances. At the end of the potlatch, the host would demonstrate his wealth and status by giving away large amounts of his personal possessions—canoes, blankets, food, ceremonial coppers (shield-shaped copper plaques), boxes, and even slaves. In some cases, the host noble would even **ceremonially** destroy property.

Although the purpose of the potlatch was public recognition of a noble's status, it was also a way of redistributing wealth and food. While a noble might be temporarily made poor after a potlatch, he could gain much of his wealth back when his guests held their own potlatch and invited him as guest. In fact, in rivalry potlatches this return invitation was necessary in order to avoid shame.

FOOD BY THE SEASON

The Northwest Coast peoples are unusual in that they enjoyed an extremely complex society without developing agriculture. This was due to the nature of the environment in which they lived—food, in great variety, was readily available.

However, because food had to be collected from different sites and at different times of the year, it was necessary for the peoples of the Northwest Coast to move around their area. This movement was called a "seasonal round." Depending on the time of year, **habitations** could be small and mobile, or they could be large and fixed.

An area for which the seasonal round is well known is the lower mainland of British Columbia. This was one of the richest areas for animal and plant life on the entire Northwest Coast. It supported, at various times of the year, a pre-European-contact population of over 30 000 people—one of the densest population **concentrations** in all of North America.

The season began in the winter months. At this time of year, the various nations of southwestern British Columbia lived in large, permanent villages. This was a time of relatively little hunting-and-gathering activity, and people spent their time making and repairing tools, and telling tales within their own groups. There were major winter villages in the lower mainland. These had been occupied in some cases for thousands of years, and they were very large. Archaeological investigations of the Musqueam village indicate that it stretched nearly 2 kilometres along the north bank of the Fraser River and was home to at least a thousand people. Two other villages, Kwantlen and Tsawassen, were home to at least as many people. All these villages were part of the larger Coast Salish nation, which also had villages across the Strait of Georgia and upriver along the Fraser. Another large winter village at the head of Howe Sound was occupied by the Squamish nation.

Early spring was a time when stored supplies of food were beginning to run out, and the larger villages began to slowly break up as family or house groups began to move around the area to collect what food was available. One major source of winter food was shellfish, especially mussels, clams, and oysters. Enormous deposits of these shells, called **middens**, have been found throughout the area.

By early summer, the peoples of the area had established camps all over the region. These were bases for the collection of foodstuffs, including salmon and shellfish, birds, and early-ripening plant foods, such as salmonberries and huckleberries.

ceremonially: with dignity, observing the occasion

habitation: a place to stay

concentration: the measure of how many people there are relative to the space they occupy

midden: a heap of garbage, shells, or other debris

Many Squamish people moved south and occupied camps along the northern shores of Burrard Inlet and in what is now Stanley Park. The Musqueam occupied sites along the shores of English Bay and Lulu Island. Groups of Cowichan and Nanaimo came across the Strait of Georgia and lived in fairly large villages on Lulu Island and on the Fraser River. The Cowichan village on Lulu Island was at least a kilometre long.

Late summer to early fall is the period when the major salmon run takes place on the Fraser River. The numbers of fish moving up the Strait of Georgia and then up the Fraser was so large that people were able to collect enough food to last them for most of the winter months. Early summer camps were largely abandoned as people from nearly all groups moved up the Fraser to catch fish near the mouth of the Fraser Canyon. Fish caught were dried on huge racks, and the dried fish was then carried back to winter camps. In 1828, the chief trader at Ft. Langley recorded 550 Cowichan canoes and 200 Squamish canoes passing downriver at the conclusion of this season. In the late autumn, people also collected the Indian potato from the marshes of the lower Fraser. By the late autumn, most people were back in their winter villages.

Figure 7–29 Salmon drying on large racks late in the summer season

Despite the fact that the people belonged to several different villages or nations, they often cooperated with each other. Food collection sites belonged to people from specific villages or nations, and these groups had the right to use these sites as opposed to members of different families. Because Salish people had a **bilateral kinship** pattern, it was possible for people to marry outside their own group, and this meant that individuals could enjoy ownership rights to many different sites. Bilateral kinship also meant that individuals could choose to spend the winter in the villages of relatives, as opposed to the village they normally lived in. So while a village could be primarily, for example, of the Musqueam, Cowichan or Squamish families could also spend the winter there.

bilateral kinship: ancestry is reckoned through the mother's and father's families

ACTIVITIES

1. Imagine you are a member of an important family and you have been chosen to make a totem pole that shows major events in your family's history. What images would you select? How would you arrange them?
2. How did the Coast Salish differ from other Native peoples of the Northwest Coast?
3. How did the seasonal round of the Plateau peoples differ from that of peoples of the Northwest Coast? How were they similar?
4. In 1914, Edward Curtis made a film called *In the Land of the War Canoes*. If possible, have your teacher screen this film for the class. After watching the film, discuss whether it is an accurate depiction of Northwest Coast life. Can you detect any bias in the film?