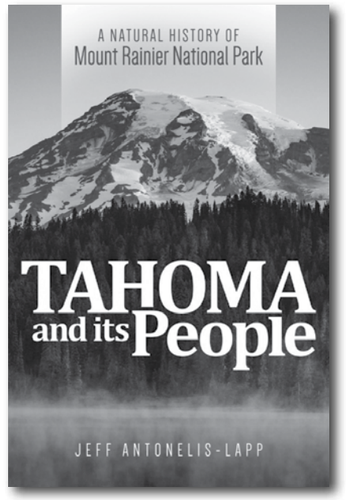
Footprints of Days Past

An excerpt from *Tahoma and its People*



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By Jeff Antonelis-Lapp

The vine maples demand my attention this September morning, ablaze in a fiery display of fall glory. Scattered on the green hillsides, the oranges and rusts, ochres and crimsons signal the turning of the season as I arrive at the park's most recent archaeological excavation. Prior to the installation of new underground utility lines in the Ohanapecosh Campground in the park's southeast corner, cultural resources staff tested for archaeological artifacts. The first people who came to Mount Rainier hunted and gathered with stone tools that they used to cut, pierce, and scrape game and other materials. Sharp-edged stone tools work well, but are brittle and fragile, requiring frequent repair and replacement. Wherever people made, used, or repaired these tools, they left behind a shower of chipped, fine-grained stone fragments. These remains became clues for archaeologists about the people who left them.

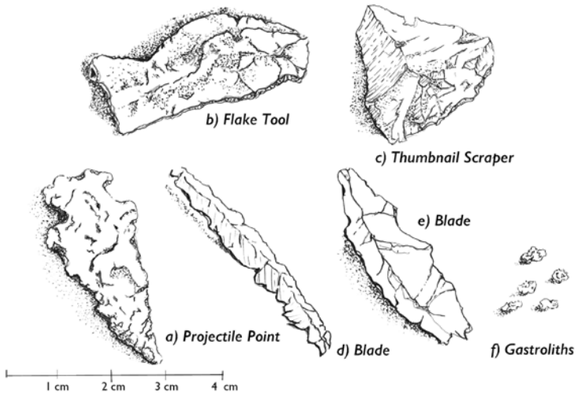
Park staff recovered stone tool remnants during initial testing at Ohanapecosh, and when sampling the landscape more broadly, they found more chipped tool remains at over a dozen locations, probably small campsites. Dating them was easy because of Mount Rainier's unique layer cake stratigraphy. Numerous eruptions at the mountain—and from other volcanoes—have deposited ash and other volcanic material in layers on the ground. These layers relate to the known age of volcanic events and thus the approximate age of the tool-stone fragments contained within them. The earliest Ohanapecosh sites sit below the Mount Mazama ash layer, left by the eruption that created Oregon's Crater Lake at about 7,700 years ago, indicating that people occupied the sites at about that time.

Although the Ohanapecosh finds are some of the oldest at Mount Rainier, they matter for another reason. Most archaeological sites at the park occur at 4,000 feet or higher in elevation, but those at Ohanapecosh are among the first precontact sites found below 2,000 feet. Precontact refers to the period prior to Native American encounters with European and Russian explorers in the late eighteenth century.

Park archaeologist Greg Burtchard greeted me when I arrived at the Ohanapecosh Campground. This would be my third time assisting on excavations, and Burtchard had spent considerable time helping me understand the park's archaeological record—all of the physical evidence of peoples' presence at Mount Rainier. This record includes camping and butchering sites, fire hearths, stone tool artifacts, and other clues of human presence. After introductions and a quick tour of the project, Burtchard put me to work. From one of the original sample holes, the crew had excavated a unit that measured over nine feet square and over three feet deep. Standing chest deep in the unit, one of the researchers carefully skimmed and scraped away small bits of dirt, hoping to locate artifacts in situ. She brushed the loose material into buckets and handed them up and out of the unit for screening. I helped the others shake and sift the dirt through fine wire-mesh screens, looking for any pieces of chip stone tools.

OPPOSITE: View of Mount Rainier from Pinnacle Meadows. Asahel Curtis, July 8, 1930. Washington State Historical Society, 1943.42.56823.

OVERLAY IMAGE: An excavated side hill at the residential base camp near Sunrise, the site of McClure's 1990 finds. Photo by J. Antonelis-Lapp.



A selection of flaked-stone tools from a subalpine site at Mount Rainier. These are among the thousands of artifacts and tool-stone fragments found in the park. Those pictured range between 2,000 and 5,000 years old: a) projectile point; b) flake tool; c) thumbnail scraper; d) microblade; e) macroblade; and f) gastroliths, the small, polished stones found inside the gizzards of grouse and their relatives. Drawing by Lucia Harrison.

The day's finds were few and unsensational in appearance, little more than fingernail-sized fragments of tool-stone material. Over lunch though, Greg showed me two intriguing items. One was a broken projectile point of a style typically associated with cultural deposits ranging between 7,000 and 9,000 years old. Technically not arrowheads, since bow and arrow technology did not gain widespread use until around 3,000 years ago, projectile points like this were affixed to small shafts to make darts. Socketed into longer shafts, the darts were launched with atlatls. Atlatls served as a fast-moving extension of the throwing arm, delivering about 60 percent more thrust than the conventional means of throwing a spear, much like the plastic ball throwers that people use today to play fetch with their dogs. The other was a stone scraper about the size and shape of a large guitar pick. Perfectly carved and unblemished, the milky white stone looked as if it had never scraped bark off a twig or fat from the inside of an animal's hide. Holding it, I tried to imagine its origins 7,300 years before. How did the toolmaker acquire the source stone? Where did the artifact take shape—around a nearby campfire? How was it dropped, lost, and forgotten?

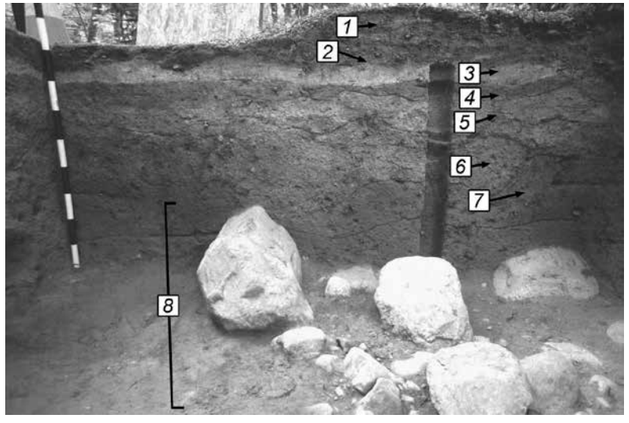
For Burtchard and his crew, the challenge—and the reward—of their work comes from working out the complex puzzles of how people used these areas over the ages, and from seeking the highest possible degree of scientific validity so that their conclusions transcend mere conjecture. Excavations at the Ohanapecosh Campground sites suggest that Native Americans, possibly of Yakama, Klickitat, or Upper Cowlitz ancestry, made short-term camps here beginning at least 8,000 years ago. They were passing through, travelers on their way to somewhere else, probably to Mount Rainier's resource-rich mid-elevations or back to their lowland villages.

The Myth: "Indians Were Very Superstitious and Afraid of It"

When European Americans began settling the Puget Sound region in the 1800s, they encountered Native American villages at strategic locations along the major waterways. Long-standing Indian settlements were numerous at present-day Seattle, Tacoma, Olympia, and hundreds of other locations. There was little knowledge, however, of Indian travel into the mountains.

Native stories tell of people in the mountains in general and at Tahoma specifically, but accounts differ regarding the heights to which they ascended. Nisqually tribal member, historian, and writer Cecelia Svinth Carpenter told of a boundary "where trees stop growing and eternal snowfields lie deep…the sacred demarcation line that encircles the entire mountain." Nisqually people did not pass beyond this line. It was a combination, Carpenter wrote, of respect for and fear of *Ta-co-bet*, the Nisqually name for the great white mountain, which kept people from traversing its uppermost flanks.

Other stories present differing views of the Indian relationship to Tahoma. Arthur C. Ballard grew up in Auburn, Washington, not far from Muckleshoot villages on the Green and White Rivers that had stood for generations. His lifelong passion for language compelled him to translate stories he heard from Indian elders. He recorded and translated two versions of "Young Man's Ascent of Mount Rainier." The first version begins with the words, "This story is not a myth. The man in this story was a real man." The second version begins, "The grandfather of my grandmother



Ohanapecosh Soil Stratigraphy. In an archaeological unit in the Ohanapecosh Campground, the tephra layer sequence extends back nearly 8,000 years: 1–Mount St. Helens eruption, 1980; 2–Mount St. Helens "X" eruption, 1837; 3–Mount St. Helens "W" eruption, 1472; 4–Mount Rainier "C" eruption, about 2,330 years ago; 5–Mount St. Helens "Y" eruption, about 4,270 years ago; 6–Mount Rainier "L" eruption, about 7,390 years ago; 7–Mount Mazama "O" eruption, about 7,670 years ago; 8–over-bank flood deposits, between 8,070 and 10,570 years ago. Courtesy of Greg Burtchard, Mount Rainier National Park archaeologist (retired), modified by Kirsten Wahlquist.

went up to the summit of Mount Rainier." In the stories, the young man finds a lake at the summit while searching for magic powers. A lake does, in fact, exist in an underground cave on the mountaintop.

In 1886, a young European American named Alison Brown accompanied a group of about 30 Yakama Indians on a hunting expedition up Cowlitz Divide on the mountain's southeast flank. Failing to find any game, they continued upward until seven or eight of the group—with Brown in tow—decided to climb toward the summit. Brown later said, "We did not try to reach the highest pinnacle," but on their descent spent the night at the base of Gibraltar Rock.

These accounts, supplemented by extensive archaeological remains and the well-known Indian trails system, clearly show that for ages people were drawn to the place "where the waters begin." Ignorant of such evidence, the newcomers assumed that Native Americans avoided mountainous areas, and believed that primitive superstitions restrained Indian people from venturing into the mountains.

Historians and anthropologists now believe that travel by native groups was sufficient to create and maintain routes that linked lowland areas to the high country. There is evidence of frequent and long-lived travel between the eastern and western sides of the Cascades and that some of today's trails, roads, and highways follow these earliest pathways. In addition, Native Americans contributed substantially to the successes achieved by early European American explorations of Mount Rainier. A rich historical record details Indian involvement in a variety of adventures.

Take the example of Dr. William Fraser Tolmie. Freshly graduated at age 20 as a medical doctor and surgeon from Scotland's Glasgow University, Tolmie arrived at Fort Nisqually in the spring of 1833 to serve as doctor and trader to the local people. Just three months after arriving at the fort between present-day Olympia and Tacoma, Tolmie received permission for a botanizing trip to Mount Rainier. He wrote in his journal, "I am going to Mount Rainier to gather herbs of which to make medicine, part of which is to be sent to Britain and part retained in case intermittent fever should visit us—when I will prescribe for the Indians." The familiarity with the route and the prospects of good hunting enticed the Nisqually Indians Quilniash, Lashima, and Lachalet, a Puyallup Indian named Nuckalkut, and a fifth unidentified individual to serve as guides. Their 10-day trip to the park's northwest corner marked the first time that a non-native approached the mountain.

Like others before him and multitudes ever after, Mount Rainier mesmerized Second Lieutenant August V. Kautz. Of the mountain 60 miles east of Fort Steilacoom, the quartermaster and commissary officer wrote in his journal in 1857, "On a clear day [the mountain] does not look more than

TOP: A fire hearth being excavated at a residential base camp near Sunrise. Photo by J. Antonelis-Lapp.

BOTTOM: The exposed hearth, bottom right. The rocks scattered about the unit are manuports, having been carried to the hearth long ago by the people using the site. Photo by J. Antonelis-Lapp.

ten miles off…a grand and inspiring view." The strong-willed Kautz made plans for a summit attempt that summer. With scant information about a route and under the prejudicial influence of the times, he wrote, "Information relating to the mountain was exceedingly meager; no white man had ever been near it, and Indians were very superstitious and afraid of it."

Kautz befriended the brilliant Nisqually Indian war strategist Leschi, who suggested that he take a route up the Nisqually River drainage. Leschi probably also recommended that Wah-pow-e-ty, who lived in the same village, guide his group. Kautz outfitted each man with an alpenstock and shoes with four-penny nails driven through from the inside for traction on the steep, icy slopes. No one made it to the top, but Kautz ascended solo to within 400 feet of the summit.

The Stevens and Van Trump 1870 expedition, regarded by most historians as the first successful climb of Mount Rainier, featured Hazard Stevens, son of Governor Isaac I. Stevens. His account of the climb, like Kautz's before

him, carried the prevailing attitude of the times. He wrote that, "Takhoma had never been ascended. It was a virgin peak. The superstitious fears and traditions of the Indians, as well as the dangers of the ascent, had prevented their attempting to reach the summit."

Stevens and his climbing partner Philemon Beecher (P.B.) Van Trump made the summit after a harrowing climb only to realize that they lacked enough daylight to make it safely back to camp. At the summit crater, they found a cave with thermal vents that emitted hot gases from the mountain's core. There they spent a damp and miserable night, alternately baking and freezing. Van Trump took a nasty fall during their descent and once reunited with their Indian guide Sluiskin, the pair relied heavily on his expert knowledge of the terrain to lead them back to safety.

TOP: Units being excavated at the residential base camp near Sunrise. Photo by J. Antonelis-Lapp.

BOTTOM: A feature believed to be a "stone griddle," in situ, at a residential base camp in the park's northeastern corner. Courtesy of Greg Burtchard, Mount Rainier National Park archaeologist (retired).

Despite these—and other—examples of Native American presence and expertise on and around the mountain, the belief about Indian superstitions and fears persisted well into the twentieth century. It would take years of growing archaeological evidence and an unlikely partnership to dispel the mistaken idea. University professors and graduate students, tribal elders, Mount Rainier National Park staff, and other experts would eventually work together to set the record straight.

Emerging Truth, Stubborn Bias

In the summer of 1963, there was little reason for Native people in the Mount Rainier area to cooperate with Allan H. Smith. An anthropologist at Washington State University, he had few connections with local tribes, whose people were understandably suspicious of outsiders. With his colleague Richard H. Daugherty, he held a contract with Mount Rainier National Park to determine the extent and use of the mountain by Indian people. Smith planned to gather ethnographic information about their use of the mountain, which Daugherty would then use to guide an archaeological survey.

From his interviews on the Yakama, Nisqually, and Muckleshoot reservations, Smith learned that Yakama, Taidnapam (present-day Cowlitz), Nisqually, Puyallup, and Muckleshoot people seasonally frequented and laid loose claim to particular areas on the mountain. While boundary lines proved arbitrary with some overlap, ridge crests generally served as approximate dividers. Smith's informants told stories of trips to the mountain in late summer to early fall where they picked huckleberries, gathered plants, and hunted elk, deer, bear, mountain goat, and other animals.

In the project's second phase, Daugherty conducted field surveys in hopes of identifying potential archaeological sites. His team located chipped stone tools in a roadcut near Bench Lake on the mountain's southern slope. They also followed up on park naturalist Terry Patton's report of a rock shelter on the eastern slope in the Fryingpan Creek drainage. These two locations marked the highest known archaeological sites in Washington at that time. The work that followed would soon change our understanding of human activity at Mount Rainier.

David G. Rice and Charles M. Nelson, members of Daugherty's survey team and anthropology graduate students, began test excavations at the rock shelter in September 1964, the first study of its kind at the park. The shelter was about the size of a modern backcountry campsite, with a back wall arcing upward to form a protective roof about 16 feet overhead. There Rice and Nelson recovered chipped stone fragments indicating tool maintenance and repair,

nearly one-half of which were smaller than a fingernail. They also found 13 formed tools that included knives, scrapers, and projectile points that they believed indicated connections with native people in eastern Washington. Key finds included bits of bone and tooth enamel from goat or sheep, which indicated that people had hunted nearby and had dressed and roasted their kills there over 1,000 years ago.

The upper valley of Fryingpan Creek, at an elevation of 5,400 feet, remains under snow from October through June, so the ancient hunters probably used the site during snow-free times between July and September. Rice suggested that their home villages may have been in the Yakama lands east of the Cascades, or the lowlands west and north on the White or Green Rivers. Horse travel did not become commonplace until the 1700s, so people walked—sometimes for up to several days—from their villages to the camp.

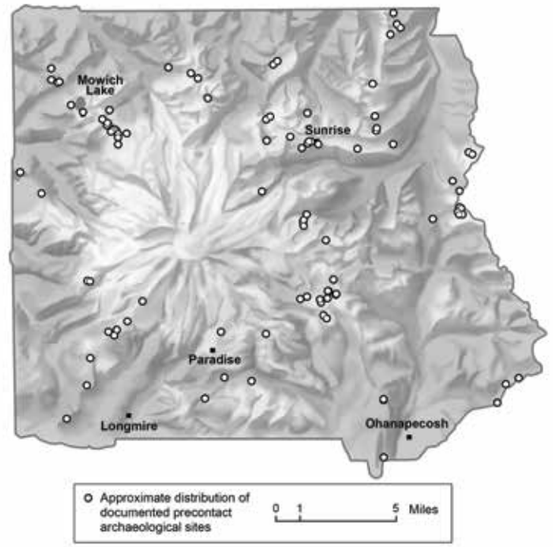
The combined challenges of weather, terrain, and distance suggest that people had strong reasons to venture onto Tahoma's uplands. They often passed through the area as they traveled across the Cascades to visit family, trade, or for other purposes. It's possible they came for religious or spiritual practices. Most importantly, anthropologists and archaeologists believe that people came to specific locations on the mountain for the express purpose of extracting resources—plants and animals—in short supply or unavailable in the lowlands.

Near their lowland villages, people enjoyed regular access to salmon and cedar. Deer and elk were abundant, and camas was common in lowland prairies. But the dense, lower elevation forests up to about 3,500 feet in elevation held fewer valuable items than those found in the meadows or in open subalpine settings a thousand feet further up the mountainside. The forest's edge, subalpine parks, and meadows held the greatest variety and quantity of plants and animals that people sought, available during the snow-free summer season.

People hunted deer, elk, and bear wherever they found them, but they especially prized those animals not available in the lowlands. Hoary marmots were valuable for their pelts that people sewed into blankets or robes. Mountain goat hides were treasured for their wool.

Many plants grew at mid-elevation (between about 3,000 and 5,500 feet) that benefitted native people. The long, narrow leaves of bear grass were used as part of a decorative pattern in basket making, imparting a light color to the design. Medicinal plants such as Gray's lovage were harvested to treat colds, coughs, and croup.

The subalpine meadows provided Native Americans with important food plants, too. They dug the roots of some plants and the corms of avalanche and glacier lilies. Nuts of upland plants like whitebark pine were also harvested. There is little doubt, though, that the several varieties of huckleberry that have purpled the fingers of berry pickers for innumerable generations were an essential subalpine food plant at Mount Rainier. People may bicker whether they are "huckleberries" or "blueberries," but the three



Mount Rainier's archaeological sites encircle the mountain, the majority at mid-elevation, resource-rich locations. Image courtesy of Greg Burtchard, Mount Rainier National Park archaeologist (retired) modified by Kirsten Wahlquist

varieties of *Vaccinium* were a powerful draw to Tahoma's mid-elevations. Native people favored the black huckleberry (*Vaccinium membranaceum*). Even today, a half-gallon bag of fresh, clean berries brings top dollar in Indian communities. Other varieties also flourished in the mountain's main berry picking areas that lay between 3,000 and 5,500 feet.

Smith and Daugherty's work and Rice's subsequent findings should have provided a new compass bearing to direct archaeological surveys on the mountain. Surely now, the stories of tribal elders supported by physical proof would unmake the myth of the region's native people as "superstitious and afraid" of Tahoma. Unfortunately, their seldom-read work moved only within small academic circles. The stone tool artifacts and bits of bone landed in a university storeroom, forgotten. Smith's report languished on a dusty shelf in the park library. The bias lingered and ignorance prevailed for another 30 years.

In the 1960s and 1970s, Mount Rainier National Park could do little to help visitors understand that they walked in the footsteps of the ancients. Park staff and visitor centers lacked the information to tell park guests that ancestors of people living nearby on all sides of the mountain had hunted and gathered plants there. The absence of place name information prevented people from connecting features like the Nisqually or Puyallup Rivers, Wapowety Cleaver (as spelled on park maps), or Sluiskin Falls to the area's original inhabitants, early guides, and travelers.

The rock shelter along Fryingpan Creek and the Bench Lake location remained the park's only documented archaeological sites until the late 1980s. In 1990, archaeologist Richard J. McClure Jr. identified four additional sites. His work to organize the growing collection of precontact

artifacts served as the foundation for the landmark work of Greg Burtchard and Stephen C. Hamilton in 1995. Working on contract with the park, the pair conducted archaeological reconnaissance on more than 3,500 acres. They added an astounding 32 finds to the park's record.

In addition to documenting new sites, Burtchard brought order and form to the increasingly robust collection of precontact artifacts. Probably his most significant contribution lay in his development of a spatial model that sought to explain why indigenous people valued mountain environments, and why they favored some landscapes over others. He reasoned that seasonally productive subalpine ecosystems stretching around the mountain answered the questions of "where" and "why" people came to Tahoma over the ages. He also developed a temporal model to explain when precontact use of the mountain began and how it changed over time. Testing and refining the models to predict where and when people frequented Mount Rainier continues to guide the park's archaeological trajectory and provides a frame of reference for evaluating and interpreting the finds.

Burtchard began reaching out to tribes near the mountain, forming partnerships on a variety of projects. Training sessions for seasonal and permanent rangers soon included workshops led by local natives who knew their peoples' history at Tahoma. New interpretive programs told the stories of the original park visitors. When the new Jackson Visitor Center opened its doors, it featured cultural displays with the latest information telling the stories of indigenous people at Mount Rainier. The remodeled Sunrise Visitor Center soon followed suit. Finally, the park had gotten the story right about the precontact presence of people on the mountain.

Like Beads on a Necklace

Several factors coalesced to enable park staff to learn and tell about Native Americans at Mount Rainier. Stories from the ground played a primary role. Isolated finds like projectile points, clusters of chipped tool-stone, and tools provided clues about locations and activities. Through field reconnaissance projects, experts discovered and traced the paths of early people and formed ideas about how they used the mountain. Archaeological excavations added extensive detail to the picture of when people first came to the mountain, what they did, and how often they returned. A growing relationship with local tribes helped park staff learn their narrative. This comprehensive body of work allowed them to share with visitors the full account of the first people who came to Mount Rainier.

In his 1998 overview of Mount Rainier archaeology, Burtchard proposed distinct site types that had been, or would be, identified on the mountain. Among these are hunting or limited-task field camps similar to the one found along Fryingpan Creek in 1963. Small groups occupied these sites for up to a few days at a time, hunting and gathering in the vicinity. While there, they maintained and repaired tools, butchered animals, and cooked, ate, and slept.

Butchering locations make up another type of site at Mount Rainier. Typically located at exposed and windy places that reduced the number of pesky flies, hunters used rock flakes or flake tools as cutters and scrapers to process game. A spot on the alpine tundra west of Sunrise suggests that people butchered and partially dried meat there, most likely marmot or mountain goat.

A larger type of site, residential base camps, dot Mount Rainier's parklands near the forest edge at a number of locations. Family groups probably used these sites repeatedly for extended periods during late summer and early fall to access upland plant and animal resources that they then transported back to base camps and eventually, to lowland villages. Fire hearths, small shelter depressions in the ground, and a broad mix of light and heavy tools identify these camps.

One of Mount Rainier's most extraordinary residential base camps lies in the park's northeasternmost corner, where Burtchard and colleagues conducted excavations over several field seasons. The Muckleshoot Indian Tribe lent logistical support and field assistance that enabled the team to recover nearly 20,000 stone tool artifacts. Projectile points representing both bow and arrow and the earlier atlatl technologies, scrapers, other tools, and a high density of chipped tool-stone debris comprise the bulk of the finds. Site features included a flat rock "griddle" used for cooking and multiple fire hearths with fire-cracked rock that date to about 4,200 years ago. Also found were over 300 pebble-like objects called gastroliths, the gizzard stones of grouse, a common chicken-sized game bird. Finding these stones tells the story of people roasting and eating the birds there. Similar, deeper finds allowed Burtchard to estimate that use of the area began (at least) between 8,000 and 9,000 years ago.

One way to appreciate the value of Mount Rainier's growing archaeological record is to compare it to the precontact currency system of Native Americans in the region—the dentalium shell bead necklace. As shells were added, the value of the necklace increased.

A little more than 50 years ago, Mount Rainier's precontact record consisted of a small collection of isolated finds enveloped in a cloud of misunderstanding about the presence of Native Americans on the mountain. The sustained cooperation of local Indian tribes, park staff, and other experts finally prevailed in dispelling the mistaken idea that indigenous people avoided mountainous terrain. For over 9,000 years at more than 100 locations, native people have hunted marmots, mountain goats, and other game. They have gathered huckleberries, bear grass, and other plants. Tahoma's archaeology now places people on all sides of the mountain, encircling it like shell beads on a necklace, becoming ever more valuable as new finds are added with each passing year. ❂

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COVER STORY

Above: ***Distant eruption cloud of Mount St. Helens. Photo courtesy of Jeff Renner.***

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ON THE COVER

Jeff Renner is a mountaineer, meteorologist and accomplished scuba diver who became a household name in Western Washington in 1980 while covering the eruption of Mount St. Helens as a science reporter for KING TV in Seattle. He shares his memories of that long-ago disaster for the cover story in this issue of *COLUMBIA*. Photo of Jeff Renner on Mount Baker by Bill Fenster; courtesy of Mr. Renner.