

Nez Perce

National Park Service
U.S. Department of the Interior
Nez Perce National Historical Park

THE NEZ PERCE (NIMIPIU) HAVE ALWAYS LIVED IN THE VALLEYS OF THE CLEARWATER AND SNAKE RIVERS AND THEIR TRIBUTARIES. THEY FISHED THE STREAMS, HUNTED THE WOODLANDS AND DUG BULBS OF THE EDIBLE CAMAS LILLY ON THE HIGH PLATEAUS. IN THE EARLY 1700'S THE NEZ PERCE ACQUIRED THE HORSE, AND THEIR INCREASED MOBILITY ADDED NEW TRADE AND HUNTING OPPORTUNITIES.

IN 1805, THE FAMOUS LEWIS AND CLARK EXPEDITION ENCOUNTERED THE NEZ PERCE ON THE WEIPPE PRAIRIE. THEY GRACIOUSLY HOSTED THE EXPLORERS, FEEDING AND REFRESHING THEM, BUILT CANOES AND SHOWED THEM THE WAY TO THE PACIFIC OCEAN. SOON TRAPPERS, TRADERS AND MOUNTAIN MEN BEGAN TO MOVE IN TO NEZ PERCE COUNTRY, FOLLOWED BY MINERS AND SETTLERS. BY THE MID 1800'S, THE NEZ PERCES WERE OUTNUMBERED SIX TO ONE!

NEZ PERCE SEASONAL CALENDAR

Long ago the Nez Perce traveled with the seasons to find food. Life reflected the cycles of Nature - each part of the year determined where people would be and what they would be doing.

They hunted, fished and gathered plants in harmony with the seasons. Each year, the circle of life continued - no beginning, no end.

Wee-Lu-Poop: January, season of cold - the winds are bitter and travel is difficult.

Ah-La-Tah-Mahl: February, Fires are needed to stay warm but wood is scarce. Sometimes it is necessary to turn to neighbors for wood.

Lah-Tee-Tahl: March, The first flowers begin to bloom.

Kah-Khee-Tahl: April, time for digging keh-kheet roots, the first root food of the season

Ah-Pah-Ahl: May, season for digging khouse roots - loaves called "ahpah" are made from ground khouse.

Toose-Tee-Ma-Sah-Tahl: June, late season for digging khouse, when roots are ready at higher elevations. To some it is also "Heel-Lul", time of melting snow in the mountains.

Khoyt-Sahl: July, season of the run of blueback salmon in Wallowa Lake. The meat is red and good.

Wa-Wa-Ma-Ahl: August, Chinook Salmon migrate to the rivers' headwaters and spawn. It is also "Ta-yum", time of midsummer heat.

Pee-Kuhn-Ma-Ahl: September, fish migrate downstream to wintering pools and salmon fingerlings travel to the ocean.

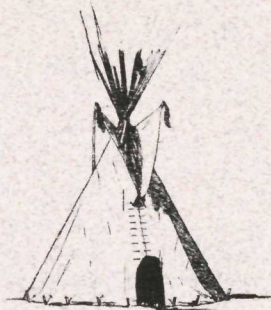
Hope-Lul: October, needles now fall from the Tamarack (Larch). Other trees begin to change color.

Sekh-Lee-Wahl: November, Trees now shed their leaves and days are colder. Hunting time.

Ha-Oh-Khoy: December, new life begins in the cow elk.

NEZ PERCE HOMES

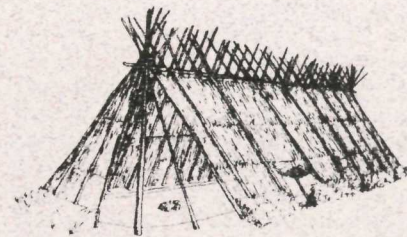
The Nez Percés constructed several different types of homes, from the excavated pit house to the tipi and long house. The tipi was popular throughout North America because it was so readily transportable. To move it, the ends of two of the tipi supporting poles were lashed to a horse. The other ends dragged along the ground, thus forming a roughly triangular frame, a travois, on which the mats, hides and other family possessions were tied.



At the new campsite, four long poles were bound together near their tops. The poles were stood up and spread outward to form the outline of a cone. Other poles were leaned against this framework to strengthen it. Because of the strong prevailing winds from the west, the door faced east. In fact, the entire structure tilted slightly eastward to streamline the rear, thus lessening the wind pressure on it.

Layers of tulle mats were tied on to the poles like shingles. In higher and colder elevations hides were sewn together and draped over the frame. The mats or hides overlapped in the front where wooden pins were used to secure them. The top was left open for a smoke hole and the bottom opening formed the door. In winter, dirt was piled around the base to keep out the cold and in summer the flaps were left open and the lower part of the tipi covering rolled up, permitting air to circulate freely.

Long houses were most common in winter, where several families lived together communally. The size varied from 30 to 150 feet long, depending on the size of the village. The fires were arranged in a row down the middle of the house, about 10 or 12 feet apart. There were two families for each fire. The area around the fires was kept clear, with personal belongings and bedding kept around the outside walls. There were two or more small entrances on one side of the house. The beds around the outside walls were elevated by layers of dry grass and the inner bark of cottonwood trees, forming a soft mattress.



Lewis and Clark made frequent mention of these long houses, and for some of them, gave measurements. One of the longest was situated near Lawyers's creek, and thus described: "The village . . . consists of one house only which is 150 feet in length, built in the usual form of sticks, mats and dry grass. It contains 24 fires and about double that number of families."

As trade increased, canvas replaced the mats and hides and tipis got larger and easier to move. It wasn't until the Reservation period that houses became 'permanent', made from cement, wood and plaster. Today, tipi's are usually only seen in summer for 'camping-out' and social gatherings.

SINEW

Sinew was obtained from buffalo, elk, moose and other animals. The prime sinew for sewing was taken from the large tendon which lies along both sides of the backbone, beginning just behind the neck joint and extending in length for about three feet. It was removed as intact as possible to obtain the greatest length. The short piece of tendon found under the shoulder blade provided an especially thick chord of sinew, several lengths of which were sometimes twisted together for use as a bowstring.

To prepare the string, the still moist tendon was cleaned by scraping it thoroughly with a piece of flint or bone. Before it was too dry, it was softened by rubbing it together between the hands, after which the fibers of sinew could be stripped off with an awl or a piece of flint. It sounds simple, and the experienced person did it with precise skill, but it was no task for a novice. If the tendon was not prepared soon after it was taken from the body, or if the natural glue was not removed by immediate soaking in water, it became stiff and dry and had to be soaked until freed from the glue which clung to it. Then it was hammered and softened until the fibers could be stripped off readily.

As the fibers were peeled off in lengths of from 1 to 3 feet, they were moistened with saliva and twisted by rubbing them against the knee with a quick motion until they acquired the proper degree of elasticity. The sinew was always carefully wrapped in a hide cover until it was to be used.

In sewing, the soft end of the sinew was wet with saliva, twisted to a fine point, and allowed to dry stiff and hard so that, like a needle, it might be pushed easily through the awl holes in the skins. Several pieces of sinew would be prepared in this way before embroidery work began. While working, the women kept the rest of the strip of sinew moistened by applying saliva with their fingertips or by keeping the unused end of it balled up in their mouths. Thus the mouth served as a spool from which the sinew thread was fed.

Sinew could be kept indefinitely, and the thrifty beadworker usually had a large supply on hand, although it was easier to use when fresh, as the remaining natural glues became brittle when dry. Even if it became dry, however, it could be soaked in warm water until its flexibility returned.

DYES USED BY THE NEZ PERCE

BLACK:

Wild carrot root (*Perideridia gairdneri*)
Tree moss (*Aleectoria jubata*)

GREEN:

Meadow grass
Algae (small)
Green algae slime

YELLOW:

Oregon grape root (*Berberis nervosa*)
Alder bark (*Alnus incana* L.)
Sunflower root

RED:

Indian paint root (*Lithospermum incisum* Lehm.)
Huckleberry (*Vaccinium membranaceum*)
Mountain Blackberry
Chokecherry (*Prunus virginiana* L.)
Brachen fungus (*Echinodontium tinctorium*)
Tamarack Bark
Hemlock Bark

BLUE:

Copper stains
Larkspur (*Delphinium menziesii* DC.)

PAINTS USED BY THE NEZ PERCE

BLACK:

Charcoal with grease
Iron or magnesium stain

BLUE/GREEN:

Copper stains

WHITE:

Chalk (kaolin), clays

SILVER:

Muscovite with grease

ORANGE, RED, YELLOW:

Iron ochres

BUCKSKIN

NEZ PERCE BRAIN TANNING METHOD:

Here is Viola Morris's "recipe" for Nez Perce Buckskin (1969):

GREEN HIDE

Remove flesh and hair entirely. This is done while the hide is thoroughly wet from soaking several hours. Place over log or round pole and scrape with dull drawknife. **LET DRY.**

TAN

For large hide, take 2-3 lbs. of beef brains, remove exterior membrane, place in 1 1/2 quarts of water, add small handful of salt. (Clothespin for nose!). **BOIL** until brains will mash between the fingers - mash until all broken and mixture becomes smooth.

Place brine solution into container large enough to hold hide. Work dry hides into solution, add lukewarm water as needed to cover hide. Soak until good and moist - work about as needed to get solution into, over and around hide. Remove, **stretch** until soft and dry. This usually requires two people to stretch and work back and forth, but one can do it if he is strong, eats Wheaties and enjoys the odor!

REPEAT process with new brain solution.

Upon removal from solution, wring hide (two people) until dry as possible, then stretch and pull, stretch and pull until soft. Hide should be off-white in color and feel much like velvet.

SMOKE

Sew hide sides together to form a cylinder. Attach a skirt of denim at bottom. This skirt will be cone shaped and acts as a funnel directly over smoke. Hang hide above smoke pit on tripod with bottom of skirt flared out to scoop up smoke into hide cylinder.

FIRE

Pit should be at least one foot in diameter and one foot deep. Start fire with dry wood chips; burn to bed of coals; lay green alderwood chips, rotted fir or rotten pine over coals in some quantity, sprinkle down with water to create heavy smoke. Place hide cylinder over smoke, weigh down denim skirt with rocks and let smoke for 10-20 minutes depending upon hide size, thickness and color desire. Inspect at sewed side seam from time to time to determine color. When inside is done, turn inside out and repeat. Chips are used for main source of fire, as they burn up fast and provide quick heat to make good smoke.

Smoking a hide makes it water resistant, therefore best for moccasins, coats, gloves and work-a-day dresses.

BEADWORK

(From Bobolink's Necklace)

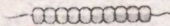
In the long-ago time, before the coming of people, it is said that Bobolink wore a necklace of shell and bone beads. These were perhaps the first beads used in what later became home to the Nimiipu, 'The People', or the Nez Perce.

From Mother Earth came materials and inspiration for designs. The old-time Nez Perce artists gathered and fashioned elk's teeth, porcupine quills, bone disc beads, and bone tubes into necklaces, bracelets and earrings. Long before the arrival of European traders, the Nez Perce's were trading for materials from as far away as British Columbia and California. Shells from the coast, such as the iridescent blue abalone and white tusk-shaped dentalium, were traded up the Columbia River and, through Nez Perce traders, over the mountains as far as the Mississippi Valley. The dentalium shells were so highly valued that they became a form of currency among the people of the Pacific Coast and Columbia River. Yet Nez Perce artists acquired enough of them to sew row upon row of these shells on their dresses.

The first glass beads to reach the Nez Perce's probably followed the same route. By the late seventeenth hundreds, maritime merchants were actively involved on the coast trading European goods for valuable sea otter pelts. Faceted 'Russian' and Italian glass beads from Venice were traded upriver to Nez Perce's who worked the new materials into their existing art forms.

When Lewis and Clark arrived in 1805, they found the Nez Perce's already in possession of glass beads yet anxious for a steady supply. Lewis and Clark noted a preference for blue beads, a fondness that continues even today. The Corps of Discovery was so well-equipped on their journey that there was a surplus of most items on their return. Unfortunately, they underestimated the popularity of blue glass beads and by the time they arrived back among the Nez Perce, they had all but exhausted their supply.

When white traders came overland and began supplying Nez Perce artists with a steady supply of beads, the classic style of their beadwork bloomed. Based on designs originally rendered in porcupine quill embroidery, rawhide painting, and 'cornhusk' basketry, beadwork became an art form in its own right. By the late 1870's, the Nez Perce's were famous for it. The careful balance of color and smooth appliqued surface created an optical illusion of constant movement, techniques of which baffle beadwork students to this day.



REGALIA & DANCES OF THE NEZ PERCE INDIANS

Following is a brief description of various styles of cultural dances performed by the Nez Percés.

THE GRAND ENTRY: Opens the program by recognizing and honoring national flags. The Nez Perce National Flag (Eagle Staff), the American Flag, and other flags lead the way into the dance arena. The flag bearers are followed by the head dancer or whipman, whipwoman, elders, royalty and men's traditional dancers, grass dancers and fancy dancers. The women follow in the same order and they in turn are followed by junior boys, girls and children. Once everyone is in the dance arena, the host drum sings the Flag Song and the Veterans or Victory Dance. This is followed by a prayer. **The audience is requested to remain standing throughout the Grand Entry.**

INTER-TRIBAL DANCE: All dancers take part, both adults and children, with each dancer displaying their own style of movements to the beat of the drum.

MEN'S REGALIA: The headdress for the male is generally a roach of porcupine hair. However, the war bonnet, fur turban and horned headdress are also common. Most of the men and boys wear a breechcloth of buckskin or felt, usually beaded or cornhusked, attached to a beaded belt. A beaded vest of buckskin or felt is often worn. Full buckskin outfits consist of a fringed shirt and trousers. Moccasins are beaded and extend just above the ankle. Strips of leather with large bells or rattles are often worn around the ankles. Beaded cuffs are common. Feather bustles are worn by war dancers who wear breech cloths. These are made of long feathers radiating from a circle of stout material attached to a belt.

MEN'S TRADITIONAL DANCE: Men traditionally wear a buckskin shirt and leggings with a feathered war bonnet or roach made from porcupine hair. Traditional outfits are sometimes made of felt or cotton. Contemporary dancers often decorate their shirts with ribbons and feathers, similar to the lavish and colorful fancy dance outfits. Traditional dancers remain upright as they move to the slow beat of the drum, occasionally looking down as if to examine the tracks of wild game or the enemy.

MEN'S FANCY DANCE: A large mass of colorful feathers and ribbons adorn the outfit of dancers who perform fast, spinning movements to the quick beat of the drum. Sometimes the drum stops suddenly in an attempt to 'trick the dancers'. The best fancy dancers are in good athletic condition.

GRASS DANCE: This dance has several different origins. It is performed in a graceful, swaying motion which resembles prairie grass bending before the wind. Strands of yarn or ribbon, which hang from the shoulder and waist, represent long blades of prairie grass.

DUCK AND DIVE: A traditional men's dance where warriors move forward while ducking the arrows and bullets from the enemy. The warriors let out a war hoop each time they dodge a projectile.

PRAIRIE CHICKEN: This dance mimics the actions of the prairie chicken during the mating ritual. The dancer flares his arms and swoops and sways while rapidly shuffling his feet.

CROW HOP: The dancer's foot hits the ground on each slow, deliberate beat of the drum, imitating the hopping movement of a crow.

WOMEN'S REGALIA: Traditional women and girls dresses are often of buckskin, fringed at the sleeves and hem. Decorations consist of beads, porcupine quills, shells, elk's teeth, colored ribbon, etc. Wing dresses, usually of wool or velvet feature wide sleeves that broaden from the shoulders to the elbow. Both buckskin and

wing dresses add a wide beaded belt around the waist with a small beaded or woven cornhusk bag worn on the belt and/or carried. Braids of otter fur are also worn with beaded medallions by the ear. Necklaces of beaded medallions or wampum, shells, etc. are worn. The moccasins are high-topped to mid-calf, usually heavily beaded. Leggings are sometimes worn and may be beaded.

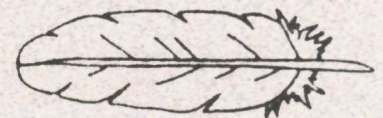
If a woman wishes to dance and is not in regalia, she will wear her moccasins and a large shawl around her shoulders. Shawls are often decorated and fringed at the edges.

WOMEN'S SHAWL/FANCY DANCE: Brightly colored dresses overlaid with highly decorated yokes and shawls distinguish these dancers. Their moccasins and leggings are decorated and often coordinate with the colors of their dress and shawl. Fast, energetic movements, with outstretched arms show off the shawls.

JINGLE DANCE: Legend tells about an old man, who while laying on his death bed, dreamed of his daughter dancing in a beautiful dress adorned with metal cones. The spirits instructed him how to make the dress and attach the cones to the cloth. As he dreamed of his daughter and her friends dancing in their jingle dresses, the sight and sound caused his miraculous recovery. He then instructed his daughter and her friends on how to make the dress and thus was born the Jingle Dress. Hundreds of snuff can lids are attached to these dresses making a marvelous sound with every move of the dancer. A wide leather belt, often decorated with large metal discs goes around the waist. Decorated moccasins and leggings complete the outfit.

WOMEN'S TRADITIONAL DANCE: This is a dignified dance with the women gently bouncing, dipping and swaying to the slow beat of the drum. Traditional buckskin or wool dresses are highly decorated. Woven cornhusk hats are often worn on the head and a shawl is draped over one arm. Beaded and woven bags are carried and attached to a waist belt.

CIRCLE DANCE: This is the final dance of the program. Everyone is invited to join in the circle, which moves in a clockwise direction. All of the dancers hold hands, signifying unity and friendship and giving strength to the circle of life.



Special performance in the event an Eagle Feather is dropped during the program: The Eagle Feather symbolizes the spirit of a fallen warrior which can only be matched in power by another warrior.

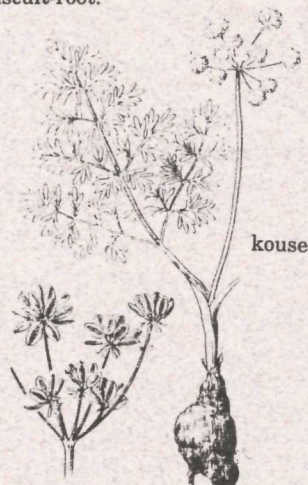
Because of the sacred tradition, only veterans are allowed to retrieve the feather and only with their left hand. It is imperative that no person should tell a lie during this ceremony or they will face 'harsh consequences'. The Eagle Feather represents good medicine and is an honored symbol to the Indian. **No picture taking or video taping is permitted during this ceremony.**

NEZ PERCE PLANT USES The river valleys and fertile prairies yielded an abundance of roots, berries, medicines and other plants used in daily life. Usually men did the hunting and fishing, while women gathered roots, berries, prepared the food, and took care of camp life.

Food was gathered in different areas as the year progressed. Plants were gathered at lower elevations in the spring, then in the mountains as snow melted. Much of the food was dried for winter use. Food was always shared with others. There was a 'first foods' feast at the initial salmon catch or root and berry harvest to give thanks and ensure a continued abundance.

ROOT FOODS

Roots were a mainstay of the Nez Perce diet. One of the first roots to be gathered on the hillsides in March and early April was wild potato (*Lomatium canbyi*). It was boiled with the skin on, then peeled and eaten fresh. In spring and summer, kouse (*Lomatium cous*) was gathered in great quantities. It was eaten raw, dried whole, or cooked. It was also ground into a meal and made into small finger cakes or larger bricks, then dried. When dry, it tasted similar to stale biscuits and was also known as biscuit-root.



Wild carrot (*Daucus pusillus*) was also an important root. It was dug during June and July. It was eaten raw or dried, or ground and made into a porridge or finger cakes. Yampa (*Perideridia gairdneri*) was dug from late June through August. Its smooth brown-skinned bulbs have a sweet carrot flavor. They were eaten raw or cooked. After boiling or steaming, bulbs were seasoned with fat and eaten. Cooked bulbs were also ground into a mash and shaped into shell-like cups, then sun-dried. They were eaten dried or cooked as cereal.

Bitterroot (*Lewisia redivia*) was often obtained through trade, as it grows mostly in the mountains of Montana and Oregon. It was dug in May during the flowering season when a black outer covering of the white roots was easiest to remove. It was sun-dried for storage. After boiling 15-30 minutes, which was supposed to remove the bitter taste, it was served plain or seasoned with fat and berries. It was also used as a medicine.



Probably the most important root was the blue-flowered camas (*Camassia quamash*). This member of the lily family was dug from late July through September in mountain meadows and prairies. A digging stick (tookas) of fire hardened wood with an antler handle was used to pry these deep growing bulb from the ground. The black outer covering of the bulb was removed. Then the white bulb was washed and baked in an earthen pit for two or more days. When baked, the bulb turns brown and tastes similar to sweet potatoes. The baked bulb can be eaten fresh, dried whole or ground into meal for porridge or shaped into loaves.



BERRIES

Probably the most important berry was the serviceberry (*Amelanchier alnifolia*) which was eaten fresh, dried, mixed with roots, or made into small cakes and sun dried. The purple to black berries were gathered in July from shrubs along river banks and prairies. If serviceberries were scarce, black hawthorn (*Crataegus douglasii*) or red hawthorn (*Crataegus columbiana*) were gathered in May and June and used in the same way.

Blue huckleberries (*Vaccinium membranaceum*) were also very popular and were gathered in the mountains in late July to September. They were eaten fresh or dried and later boiled.

Blackberries (*Rubus ursinus*) black cap raspberries (*Rubus nivalis*), and red raspberries (*Rubus idaeus*) were eaten fresh or dried when abundant. The shiny red to black fruits of the chokecherry (*Prunus virginiana* L. var. *demissa*) were gathered in late September. They were eaten fresh, dried, or ground and then shaped into cakes or balls which were then dried. Blue elderberries (*Sambucus cerulea*) were gathered in late August and early September in moist areas throughout the region.

Berries that were eaten fresh or dried included the red berry of the fireberry (*Vaccinium scoparium*) that was found in the mountains in open areas, golden currant (*Ribes aureum*) and other currants that were gathered in August and September, red sweet gooseberries (*Ribes oxycanthoides*) and purple sour gooseberries (*Ribes inerme*) which were gathered in August.

Berries that were only eaten fresh include strawberries (*Fragaria* sp.), salmonberries (*Rubus spectabilis*), and thimbleberries (*Rubus parviflorus*). Rosehips (*Rosa* sp.) were occasionally gathered.

OTHER PLANT FOODS

Various other foods played a part in the Nez Perce diet. Several kinds of mushrooms were boiled or fried. Sunflower seeds were gathered, roasted, ground and formed into balls with added rendered fat. Pine nuts from long-needled pines were roasted and eaten. Wild honey and jellied sap of the tamarack (*Larix occidentalis*) were used as sweeteners. In the spring, the sweet tender inner bark of the Ponderosa pine (*Pinus ponderosa*) was gathered in strips and eaten as a treat.

Dark brown tree lichen (*Alectoria jubata*) was gathered, the needles removed and washed. It was cooked overnight with the camas in an earthen pit, becoming gelatin-like. Then it was ground into meal and dried. The meal was boiled into mush, and rendered fat, ground camas or berries were added to make a dish called "ho'pop".

The young tender stems of arrowleaf balsamroot (*Balsamorhiza sagittata*), wild celery (*Lomatium grayi*), elk thistle (*Cirsium scariosum*), and cow parsnip (*Heracleum lanatum*) were also peeled and eaten like celery in the spring.

USES OF PLANT TODAY

Camas, kouse, and bitterroot are still used today. Huckleberries are now the most popular berry, although serviceberries and elderberries are still occasionally gathered. Ho'pop is still used by some.

In the past, native plants were a necessity of everyday life. Today, other foods are easier to obtain and the old foods are mainly for special occasions. Many plants have been become scarce due to farming, grazing and pesticides.

