A HISTORY OF THE SHUSWAP PEOPLE

SHUSWAP PEOPLE , NAME & LOCATION:

The Spallumcheen people got their name from the Thompson Indians who inhabited the area around what is now known as Kamloops B.C. They called themselves the Splatsínac and therefore were Splatsín. The Thompson Indians in their dialect called them Spalemtsin which got translated by the white people as Spallumcheen which has remained to this day. The Thompson Indians were the ones who led the white people up the Shusawp River system and introduced them to the area.

Splatsin is pronounced "sblajeen" and means the riverbanks, where the Splatsinac lived, along the Shuswap River between Mabel Lake which is the headwater, to Sicamous, which comes from another Shuswap word meaning "in between". Sicamous is located at the juncture of Mara Lake and the greater body of water known as the Shuswap Lake which has a shoreline that measures approximately 700 miles. The Eagle River empties into the Shuswap Lake here and the greater winter village was located at it's mouth.Although this is the area in which they lived, their territory was much bigger than that.

The tribe is part of the greater Salish Nation which takes up a central portion of British Columbia extending from Alkali Lake in the north to Radium, Athelmere and Invermere to the east, to Enderby which abuts on Okanagan Territory to Bella Coola on the West Coast.

In the Enderby area, as with the other tribes, a different dialect is spoken but they can usually understand one another as there are a lot of similarities within the language.

The Shuswap were nomadic to a certain degree because they foraged and followed the food cycles. During the spring months they foraged for roots. Some of these were Indian potatoes called "skwakwina", (skwakweena) which have little white flowers with pink veins and tulip-like leaves. They are about 3-4" high and come out after the snows are receding.

The "potato" is the bulb of the plant. It has a black skin and white fleshy interior like a regular potato. They are quite small when compared to a potato as we know it today. They varied in size from about a 1/4" across to 2" depending on the weather conditions and how ripe they were.

These potatoes were "pit cooked" or "steam cooked" whichever you prefer to call it. A pit was dug according to the size of the group you were intending to feed and the amount of food you had. They ranged in size from 2 ft. across to 4 ft. depending on your needs and could be a couple of feet deep to four feet.

Because of their size, you needed quite few of these potatoes to make a meal but they were supplemented with other root vegetables and meat or fish.

In the early spring, just as the snows were disappearing, all the women and children would head for the hills and start harvesting. Because they were taking the root which would produce a new plant, they were very careful in their harvesting technique. Only certain plants were taken out of a patch to ensure a crop for the following year. They were anxious for a taste of fresh food after the long winter and by now the supplies would be almost gone.

A special tool was used for digging the potatoes called a "patsa", pronounced "baja". It was made for the women by the men and was about the length of a walking cane with a handle and a flat scooped end with a slight curve to it. The pointed end of the stick was poked into the ground just beside the plant and then pried back out of the ground so the bulb popped out. These were then collected by the children and put into either cedar root or birchbark baskets called "mim'c" (pronounced meem'h, with a catch on the second "m").

These were cleaned and stored in their "pit caches" or root houses for food in the winter. As you can imagine, a goodly number had to be collected to ensure a winter supply for all. They taste somewhat like a sweet potato, but not as sweet.

The pit was dug and rocks were heated. The pit was lined with big leaves like the thimbleberry leaves and then the heated rocks were placed and covered with another layer of leaves so as not to burn the food and provide moisture to cook the food. Several layers of leaves and food of different sorts were were put in the pit with the longest cooking ones on the bottom, usually meat. This then would also imbue the food above it with flavour.

When all the layers had been arranged, a final layer of sticks and leaves were made and then covered with dirt. After several hours all this was removed until the food was reached and taken out and put into separate baskets to be served. Many roots were picked besides the potato. Wild carrots, parsnips, onions, Indian "rice", etc., usually in the spring before the plants achieved maturity.

When the Indian potatoes were in bloom, the fields and hills looked as if they were covered with snow patches. (Sadly, it is not that way today). There was Indian rhubarb, Indian celery and many other plants that were the diet of the people.

In the summer, the women and children harvested many types of berries including saskatoons (sometimes called "service berries" by the non-natives), choke cherries, pin cherries, huckleberries, blueberries, strawberries, raspberries, blackcaps and the "soapberry", called "sxusm" by the natives and "soupalallee" today. These were used for making Indian "ice cream".

These berries are red, tiny and look somewhat like red currants.

They grow on bushes in clusters and are quite sticky. They are difficult to pick so the women would lay blankets or rush mats under the shrubs and then beat the branches with a stick. When the ripe berries fell to the ground, the mats were carefully gathered up and the berries poured into cedar root baskets, (which didn't leak). Different baskets were utilized for different things.

When the berries were fresh picked, a handful or so depending on the amount of people to be fed, were squeezed to extract the juice. The berries are bitter except when they're really ripe but not to most peoples liking, after being accustomed to the sweets of today. The natives did not have sugar as we do today so berries of other types were used to sweeten the "ice cream".

Before this though, a whip had to be made. A branch of maple was cut about the diameter of your thumb and about 14" long. A section that would be the handle was left with the bark on, approximately 4 to 5 inches long, or the width of your hand. The balance would have the outer bark peeled off. Underneath the red bark is a soft layer of fibrous white tissue, which was then peeled in thin strips and left to dangle. When this was done, the central core of wood above the handle was cut out or broken off. The dangling strips were then folded back toward the handle like an egg whisk of today and secured by other strips of the fibrous material. Voila!, your own egg beater or ice cream maker.

A special person was designated to make the ice cream. This person would have to calculate how much to make and had to be really accurate to avoid waste and the penalty for guessing wrong.

When this was all done, the person would carefully wash their hands and bring a clean basket. The juice was squeezed into the basket and the whip used to start stirring the berries and juice which would immediately begin to froth up like egg whites. The longer you beat it, the stiffer it got.

If you used "green" berries (not quite ripe), you got white ice cream. If you used ripe red berries, the ice cream was a pretty coral colour. To sweeten the ice cream, different berries were used to add colour and flavour. Saskatoons added gave it a sweetness and a pretty lavender colour. Huckleberries made it more purple. Thimbleberries, raspberries and strawberries made it red and really sweet. Nowadays, sugar is used but totally changes the natural flavour.

After the ice cream had reached the proper consistency, everyone gathered round to eat some. At no time during the making of the ice cream is anyone allowed to taste or sample any of it, especially the person making it. The making of the ice cream is in itself, quite a ritual. Certain steps have to be observed.

When the ice cream is made, it resembles a big bowl of pink meringue and has the same texture. It will not drip from a spoon when it is ready. It is extremely filling and quite rich. It only

takes a few spoonfuls to fill you up, even though it is quite light and airy.

When the people are finished and if there is any left over, the foam reverts back to juice which is then made into a tasty thirst quencher like lemonade. It is very good on extremely hot days as it prevents dehydration.

Many berries ripen during the summer months so it is a full time job to harvest and prepare them for storage. Some were dried and rehydrated during cooking. Some were made into a paste like fruit leather is made today. They also had other uses.

The juice from the wild cranberries was used as a dye to stain the cedar roots used for making fancy designs on cedar root baskets. If you immerse your hands in the juice, your hands will turn black and it will not wash off no matter what you do. It stains your skin and only the natural regrowth of new skin will cause it to eventually disappear. (I found this out the hard way. I spent several weeks looking like I had black gloves on.) It has an odor when cooking like old gym socks, but afterwards it is absolutely delicious. The red dye for the baskets was obtained from the bark of pin cherries or "Indian cherries".

Baskets were an essential part of everyday life and survival. They were used for storing ands gathering food, cooking, packing water, packing containers to pack babies in, tied to the backs of horses to move their belongings, haul berries, meat, etc.

They were made primarily from two materials, birchbark and cedar root. The "stinestn" (steenesdn) or cedar roots were gathered in the early spring by digging around the base of a cedar tree where roots often protruded from the ground. They would dig around the root and exposed the length of it for as long as they could and then pulled it out of the ground and cut it. The longer the root, the better.

When enough had been gathered, they were cleaned of the outer skin and cut into thin strips the full length of the root. Some were about fifteen feet in length. They were then tied in bundles until they could be used, if they weren't used immediately.

When they wanted to use them, after they had dried, they were soaked in water until they re-acquired their pliability.

Special tools were used for all these procedures but the important ones neded for making baskets were a sharp tool for cutting and an awl.

Birchbark was also gathered in the spring just as the sap was starting to rise for easy removal of the bark. The cuts were not deep as they had no desire to kill the trees. Large and small strips were used for making baskets of all sizes and shapes for various usage.

The bark was rolled up and carried back to the village where the women decided what to make out of them and then they were cut into the desired shapes.

The beautiful thing about birchbark baskets was that they could be made on the spot when needed if you didn't have enough for your requirements.

Willow was used for the frame or hoop making the rim of the basket. The ends were folded up and the awl used to puncture holes for the cedar root to go through as lacing and secure the willow to the rim. Handles were usually made from strips of leather or buckskin looped through the rim.

Small baskets were used for picking berries and were tied to the the waist through the loops attached. This left the pickers hands free to bend the bushes and branches down to get the ripest berries at the top of the branches such as saskatoons and chokecherries. For low shrubs, this left both hands free to pick and improve efficiency.

If you had a baby, these were tied to your back in another birchbark conveyance to keep your hands free but the baby close at hand should they need to be fed or changed. The women would talk to their babies and sing lullabies while they were picking. The babies usually slept and were quite content to be packed by their mothers or aunts and sisters.

When the smaller baskets were filled, the contents were dumped into bigger baskets centrally located to the picking area. As these big baskets were filled, the men would carry them back to the campsite or if they were lucky enough to have horses in later years, they were tied to the backs of the horses.

Many baskets were filled as traditional berry picking grounds were visited throughout the seasons.

Cedar root baskets were used for thimble berries and soupalallee which were very tender and juicy and tended to mash easily and would leak from a birchbark basket.

Cedar root baskets were tightly woven and a necessary part of a native womans' "kitchen" utensils. They were used to pack water and to cook in sometimes. To boil or cook food in a basket, a hot rock was placed in the bottom, food placed on top and then water poured in. The rock was continually changed as it cooled and replaced with hot ones.

Some of these baskets were created with elaborate and colorful designs. The designs were created by the cedar roots which had been dyed or stained by the different roots and berries used for dyes. These were woven into the baskets and beautiful designs were made. Some baskets were made with lids, hinges or otherwise. In later years, these were traded and some can still be seen in museums

today as they were extremely sturdy and long wearing, where the birchbark baskets did not last too long depending on what they were used for. They would eventually crack or become too brittle. The white outer bark of the birch was removed in the making of the birchbark baskets most times, but were occasionally left on for ornamentation.

Some baskets were made from pine needles, but these were purely ornamental and were used for storing things such as sewing supplies, ornaments for the hair, etc.

As autumn approaches, the natives begin to prepare for the arrival of the salmon, which was in great part, the main staple of the native diet.

At spawning, which the salmon return to do, it was a time of frantic activity as this meant the difference between survival and death during the winter months. As the fish were caught by either spear, harpoon, weir, or set lines, the women would dry or smoke them to preserve them.

Huge salmon were split down the middle along the backbone and cedar slats were used to keep the fish flat and stop them from curling so they received full exposure to the smoke or air being used to cure them. Some fish when fresh caught, would be staked around a the outer edge of the specially banked fire to cook them somewhat as we barbecue today. They would periodically turn them to cook both sides.

The coming of the salmon also heralded another phase in the life cycle of the natives. Where, during the summer months, the people followed the berries even up into the mountain ranges, to get the later blooming crops because of the altitude and a later season, the autumn and the coming of the salmon meant another shift. The people moved back to the valley bottoms where the fish were and besides the snows were already starting in the mountains.

When enough fish and game had been dried and all the berries, roots and other food stuffs had been gathered, the people migrated to their underground homes by the lakeside at Sicamous. The food had been stored in the cache pits and the people prepared for the long winter months.

While the men had been hunting during the summer and fall months, the hides had been preserved to be worked on in the winter to make clothing, shoes, bedding, blankets and items for trade with neighbouring tribes.

Some things had to be made by the young women which would be the equivalent to a dowry. They made their own personal household items to set up housekeeping when they moved away and made homes of their own.

A lot of time was spent looking to the future, either in terms of

food supply in case of drought or a bad year for plants and berries, seasons when game was scarce, or in the event of some other catastrophy like a raiding party from another tribe. These sometimes happened when other tribes ran short of food or needed women for wives or needed some new slaves to make their lives easier.

The cedar roots that had been collected during the summer were now made into baskets, The young girls were taught the art of weaving and making baskets, tanning hides, beading and sewing. The men made their arrow heads, bows, spears, harpoons, war clubs, snowshoes and other equipment.

During the winter months, the men would go ice fishing for fresh fish to supplement their dreary diets and sometimes went on hunting expeditions. They also trapped beaver and muskrat, rabbits, etc. for pelts to use and trade. When the furs were turned to the inside, warm winter footwear was made. Snowshoes were also made so that they could traverse over the sometimes deep snows.

The women made porcupine quill baskets, ornaments for their hair and dresses and other ornamental gear for trade. The mans wealth and status in the community was measured by the amount of ornamentation his wife made for him because it denoted that he was a good hunter and provider, therefore his wife had more time to create these artistic things for him.

The fringes that were left on the clothing were there for a purpose as they could be used to repair the clothing in the event of a mishap causing damage. They could also be cut thinly to be used for catching fish or snaring an animal in case of being stranded, hurt or hiding from the enemy and unable to get home. They could be used to make a splint in case of an accident.

In earlier times, marten pelts were used for clothing. They were worn hanging down in strips almost like a hula skirt for the men. They were wrapped around the feet in winter and the people slept in a circle around a fire with their feet pointed at the fire like a starburst design. Later on as time progressed, hides were tanned and used to make clothing.

The deer, elk, and moose hides were soaked for a time in a solution made from deer's brains. They soaked them for a few weeks, then the fur was scraped from the pelts after wringing them out on a special apparatus. The shoulder blade of an animal was used as a scraping tool. These were also used to separate the hides from the carcasses after the animal had been slain.

When the hides had been scraped, they were put onto stretching frames and lashed tightly. Next the hides were softened and smoked. The tool for this was often a special wedge shaped rock tied to a stick that was pushed against the hide to soften it and make it pliable. While this was going on, the fire was built and kept smoldering until the job was finished. This is what gives

"buckskin" it's distinctive aroma. This procedure took anywhere from a week or two depending on the size of the hide and the thickness of it. Moose hide is a lot thicker than deer hide.

Smaller pelts were stretched onto cedar slats especially shaped to fit the pelts. They were shaped somewhat like a rocket and the hides were turned inside out and stretched onto these boards to dry. Beaver, because of it's round shape when it is skinned out were lashed onto willow hoops. As the hide dried, it shrunk and it tightened the hoop and held the pelt secure until it was completely dry. Then it too, was rubbed with the stone utensil to soften it for use.

The women used their teeth to chew and soften some of the hides and consequently, the women lost their teeth early. They also chewed some of the fibrous plants to make them into ropes.

Many utensils and implements were made from the animal bones, antlers and hooves such as antler and bone spoons, hide scrapers, skinning tools and ornaments. Not too much went to waste.

The medicine men (doctors today) used the hooves of deer and many other parts including bird feathers, bear claws, etc. to make their curatives and regalia.

These people were highly respected and considered to have many powers because they worked to cure people when they were ill or hurt. These people were specially chosen because of certain skills they displayed when quite young as was the custom with other fields of endeavor. Among these skills was a certain psychic abililty. Some call it the "second sight" and in present times, E.S.P. (extra sensory perception).

They spent a great deal of their time gathering plants and herbs to heal and cure sicknesses. They were to a certain degree skilled magicians who practiced their skills with a great deal of secrecy, pomp and display so that their skills would not be duplicated by others. The air of mystique that they used lent to the myth that they did indeed have magical powers.

In any chosen field a person had to apprentice the same as today. When a child was chosen for a special place within the community, he was fostered to the local artisan and trained in that field.

The act of fostering also served a dual purpose. When a child was raised in another family's home, they formed a bond with that family that made them almost a member of that family which prevented any warring or animosity between families.

As all children were fostered to other families, this helped to cement and strengthen relationships with other members of the tribe while they learned a trade which would benefit the community.

The boys would be fostered with the men who were the skilled

hunters, fishermen, warriors, wood carvers, armament makers, boat makers, etc.

The girls would learn from the skilled women how to tan hides, prepare and store foods, make the best regalia and clothing, learn all the best berry picking sites, etc.

Girls and boys also had tests to pass as the ritual of adolescence approached. When the boys were to become men, they had to prove themselves. They did tests of endurance, stamina and skill. One of the high points for the boys was to be allowed to go on their first hunt and have their first kill. It was considered quite an honor to be able to bring home food to feed the other members of the community.

When the girls started menstruating, they were isolated from the other members of the community. They were given a shelter of their own, away from the other people.

They were left with the necessities for survival but they were not allowed to touch food being prepared for others. They weren't allowed to pick berries or participate in other activities. An elder lady would instruct her in the rites of passage into womanhood and motherhood. They were given certain tests to perform to prepare them for the pain of childbirth, They were given this time of isolation to meditate and learn certain arts and skills. Their time was not spent in idleness as they were constantly being tutored in something.

Both genders had to start practising certain rituals to enhance their skills at the onset of puberty.

Where native children were pampered and doted on by the whole community, they now had to shed their childhood and become adults with roles and responsibilities within the tribe.

Life was very harsh and there were severe consequences if you didn't perform your duties. To be banished or exiled from the tribe meant certain death. Only when everyone worked together for the survival of all did one survive himself.

Much is made today of the so-called "vision quest", but in actual fact, the young people were sent out to learn survival skills, the art of being alone with nature and the woodland spirits, which they had to learn to respect.

Everything around you contributed to your survival and existence and so therefore were not to be treated lightly. For lack of a better word, we use the word, "spirit" today as the closest equivalent in English. Everything had an essence or spirit and you had to learn to communicate with them. Nothing was used that wasn't spoken to first to thank it for the sacrifice it was making and to ensure there was no waste. Waste was truly a cardinal sin and could mean the diffence in death or survival.

They searched for the animal that would appear to them during their "alone time", as the animal which would assist them during times of strife, give them strength and wisdom, and sometimes even rescue them in times of disaster.

The young people were sent out every morning summer or winter to swim in the river just before the sun came up. They were encouraged to dive to the bottom and hold their breath for as long as they could, trying to surpass the last effort each time. This was all part of improving their stamina and powers of endurance.

When the water was ice cold, a flail was made of twigs that was used on the body to stimulate circulation by bringing the blood back to the surface of the skin to warm them. A small fire was sometimes built depending on the distance from home that had to be travelled.

A "q'ilya", or "sweathouse" was built near a river, stream or creek. This was constructed by overlapping long branches in a criss-cross woven circular design. When the frame was built, cedar branches, hides/blankets were draped over to cover it completely. A berm was created around the edge to seal in the steam that was to be created. A door flap was made for entry. A circle of stones was made in the inside of the circle. If lava rocks could be found, they were heated in a fire built outside to heat them because they could withstand great heat and not shatter like other rocks.

When the rocks were hot enough, they were carried inside and piled in the circle of stones. The person entered, closed the flap, sealed it with another rock and after seating themselves comfortably, would begin to pour water on the rocks, creating great clouds of steam.

Another winter activity was story telling. Because there were no schools as such, these story telling times were also used to teach the history of the people and family geneology. Everything was passed on orally as they had no written language. Consequently, the story tellers had to have a good memory.

Certain people were chosen for this skill and travelled from village to village telling stories, passing on news from one village to another and were sometimes capable of speaking in different languages. The were welcomed in most villages with great fanfare and feasting. It was a time for everyone to relax and enjoy each others company, hear the latest events, and most of all to hear the stories, which would sometimes go on for days at a time.

Death was always a sad but inevitable event among the people but nothing was as devastating as the diseases that arrived with the coming of the Europeans. The natives had no immunity to the new diseases and perished by the thousands. Where there had been a healthy population thriving before, whole tribes became decimated.

Before that though, the natives didn't fear death as they felt it

was only a step on the journey of life. The spirits of the ancestors were greatly revered and sometimes called upon for assistance in times of trouble or sorrow.

Groups of women were designated as the "official wailers". They came around the corpse and said their prayers for the soul of the departed and then would begin to wail. Once the period of mourning was over, the gathering of the people would ensue in games of chance and much visiting. The deceased's name was not mentioned for a period of a year so as not to stop them on their journey. At the end of the year, a special gathering was held in which many stories would be told about the deceased person and gifts exchanged on their behalf to thank the people for coming to celebrate the life they had led.

Life changed dramatically with the advent of the non-natives. Reserves were created and people made to stay in one place with no means of travel to gather the usual sources of food. People lived in crowded conditions and died from a dread disease called tuberculosis, amongst others.

Families were split up with the children taken away to residential schools. The churches banned the medicine men from practicing their skills and their medicine couldn't cope with the new diseases in any event. The whole life style of the people was attacked on different fronts and people called Indian Agents were put in charge of the people. The Governments made rules and regulations to decide the fate of the natives and they no longer controlled their lives.

The people tried to cope by becoming farmers, ranchers, and loggers. This was not a life style to which they were accustomed or had any experience in. Their diet of food changed, their style of clothing and their language was stripped from them. They had to learn to cope with a foreign language in their own country, eat strange food, wear strange clothing, abandon their long held beliefs and become aliens in their own homeland. Where they had been masters of their own fate, others told them what to do and how to live, where to go to church, what to believe, what to eat, what to wear, etc.

Today, Indians are still controlled by the Dept. of Indian Affairs and reserves still exist. Although life is different in lots of ways, it is not better in some ways.

Bands have elected Chief & Councils which are very much like Mayors and Aldermen in towns and cities, but their powers and authority is still controlled by the Government.

The Spallumcheen Band was tired of their children being taken away by social workers and raised off the reserves so they got together and confronted the Government. They created their own by-law which gave them the right to raise their own children on reserve or at least with native people. This happened in the seventies and to this day they are the only Band in Canada who have this right.

Housing has impoved to a degree and native people are being allowed to get an education beyond grade eight. Native people now have achieved degrees, graduated from high school, college and university. They drive cars like everyone else and the quality of life has improved for some. Some have managed to master the art of being farmers and ranchers and some have distinguished careers.

The native people of Spallumcheen Band have had a hard time existing to the present day but they look forward to the future with high hopes for the coming generations.