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Salmon River Lore

A brief history of the Salmon River Canyons by ROW.

The Salmon River is rich in history. On our trip between White Bird, Idaho and the confluence with the Snake River, we explore 52 miles of the longest undammed river in the continental United States. The Salmon is also the largest wilderness area in the U.S. outside of Alaska - the Frank Church River of No Return Wilderness.

The Nez Perce and Northern Shoshoni Indians lived in the Salmon River Canyon for over 8500 years! Their descendants named the river Natsoh Koos: Chinook-Salmon-Water, and the Shoshoni came to call it Agaimpaa: Big-Fish-Water. The Indians found the river too turbulent for canoes; their trails down tributary streams gave them access to the canyon. As we travel down the Lower Salmon Gorge we'll stop at several Indian sites: Pictographs painted on the rocks by the Nez Perce; A Colony of pit houses; the fords used by the Nez Perce to cross the river during the Nez Perce war of 1877. We'll learn about their customs, their beliefs and how they survived in this wild, rugged land.

The first white men who came to the river were members of the Lewis and Clark Expedition in the summer of 1805. (Hence the later-named towns of Lewiston and Clarkston.) While Captain Lewis negotiated with the Shoshoni for horses, William Clark scouted from the Lemhi River Valley, hoping to discover a river route that would prove less arduous than land travel. Clark soon discovered that the river he hoped would be their relief was in fact one that would "render the passage of anything impossible. Those rapids which I had seen," he said, "was small and trifling in comparison to the rocks and rapids below." So Lewis and Clark moved north and crossed the mountains at Lolo Pass, following a path very close to the Lochsa River.

Slowly, white men discovered the Salmon River and explored its banks. In the 1850's small settlements began to form. Conflicts with the Indians mounted. Then came the Idaho gold rushes and their luck and misfortune. The Lower Salmon gorge was the stage for many placer operations. With the miners came many Chinese laborers. Along the river we'll explore several of their small rock houses. These are very unique in that they are the best-preserved examples of Chinese rock dwellings outside of China in the entire world!

Today the tributary creeks bear names that record their early settlers' legacy. As we travel down the river, we become increasingly aware of how little the river has changed since the Indians lived here. History is alive in the present.

We look forward to sharing these stories and many more with you!

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