

# NATIVE PLACE NAMES ON THE COLUMBIA PLATEAU

1991

A Time of  
Gathering

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Native American peoples survived for millennia in the Pacific Northwest not solely because of their ingenious fishing and food processing technology, but by virtue of their detailed knowledge of the land and its resources. Education focused on *learning the land*, with dramatic accounts of the adventures of mythological creatures such as Coyote reinforcing their recall of critical information. For example, a single text dictated from memory by Jim Yoke, an Upper Cowlitz Indian, to Melville Jacobs (1934:228-37) in the late 1920s cites 275 named places and provides a capsule cultural annotation and resource inventory for each. The names were recalled systematically from a mental map of Yoke's home country.

Learning a landscape is not simply a matter of naming all the rivers and mountains. In fact, rivers and mountains per se are rarely named in Native American languages. The naming of such features of the land reflects rather a peculiarly Western perspective—one set *above* or *outside*, rather than *within*, the landscape and motivated by the needs of a society bent upon dividing it up. From this perspective, features of the landscape are *objects* to be named. The Native American perspective, in contrast, emphasizes *places* where significant human-landscape interactions occur. Thus, while a few prominent peaks may have been named in the native languages—for example, *taxúma* (in the Puget Salish language) for Mt. Rainier or *lawilayt-tá* (in Sahaptin), literally “the smoker,” for Mt. St. Helens—other peaks of equal prominence were known simply as *pátu*, a general Sahaptin term for “snow-capped summit.”

The Native names now assigned to many Northwest rivers referred in the original languages to major villages or fishing sites on those rivers. Táytin (Tieton) named a spear-fishing site at the outlet of Clear Lake high up the Tieton River. In Sahaptin, *tátaxat* (Klickitat) named the key Klickitat River fishery at the falls just above the river's mouth. *Iyákima* (Yakima), literally “the pregnant ones,” indicated a string of hills near the present-day city of Yakima named for their resemblance to five pregnant women of a mythological account. Place names reveal a great deal about how a people appreciate the world they live in.

Josephine Andrews, a leading elder of the Yakima Indian Nation who was raised in the Naches River area, provided a key interpretation: *naxčiiš*, literally “first water,” refers to the fundamental role that the Naches basin's waters play as a source of life for the whole of the mid-Columbia plain. Her fears for the destruction of that water source brought into sharp focus the spiritual, as well as material, cost of a dam recently proposed on a tributary of the Naches.

The sacred mountain *lalčík* (fig. 2), the easternmost prominence of the Rattlesnake Hills which now mark the southern border of the Hanford Nuclear Reservation, marks an angle in the boundary of the lands ceded by the 1855 treaties. (In the Yakima treaty the name of the mountain is misrepresented as “La Lac,” and interpreted as a “lake” [Doty 1978:97].) Rising 3000 feet above the river, the summit dominates the skyline for miles about. The Priest Rapids prophet *smúxala* (Smohalla) sought a visionary source of spirit power here (Relander 1956:52, 70, 72). Today the mountain serves the elders as a weather vane; lingering snows on its summit augur a late spring growing season.

The ecological relationships forged by the Native cultures over the millennia of their occupation

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of this land are embodied in their place names. When and where may a plant or animal species be most reliably found or efficiently harvested? Success in hunting and gathering rests on a strategic choice of seasonal moves—a succession of camps established to provide a family access to a sufficient abundance and diversity of food and essential materials to sustain them each year. This is the *seasonal round* of those who live by gathering, fishing, and hunting; its precise shape is conditioned by the local landscape, but it is a cultural product; nonetheless, a creation of the human mind.

Many places are named for particularly noteworthy plants, animals, or minerals found there, or for related activities accomplished there. Some examples:

Kalamát, "yellow pond lily" (*Nuphar polysepalum*), names a meadow and pond in the southern Cascade Mountains of Washington where berries were picked in late summer; it is also the site of a historic Indian horse racing track (Norton, Boyd, and Hunn 1983).

Pankú, the edible root *Tauschia hooveri*, gives its name to the area just above Sentinel Gap, near present-day Vantage on the Columbia River (Relander 1956:32).

Tiskáya, "Skunk," as a character in myth, is the name of a mountain a few miles below present-day Packwood in Lewis County (Jacobs 1934:52).

Wawyúk-ma, "common poorwills," designates both a village on the lower Snake River (Rigsby 1965:39) and the lower Snake River people (Jacobs 1931:94).

More often a plant or animal name is modified by a reduplication (doubling part or all of a word—this usually suggests small size or large numbers of something in Sahaptin) or by adding the possessive suffix -nmí or the suffix -aš ("place of") or some variant thereof. Some examples:

Nánk-nank, "many cedars," for a place below Cowlitz Falls on the Cowlitz River (Jacobs 1934:230).

Púuši or Púušpuuši (Hymes 1976:20), "of junipers" or "many junipers," for present-day Redmond, Oregon, and for a dip-netting site just below Alderdale, Klickitat County, Washington.

Šq\*la-nmí, "of mountain beaver," for a big mountain near White Pass (Jacobs 1934:231).

Taxús-as, "Indian hemp place," for lower Crab Creek, Grant County; it is reputed that Indian hemp (*Apocynum cannabinum*) here was of such fine quality that battles were fought to control it (Relander 1936:312).

X\*ún-aš, "large-scale sucker place," for Moses Lake, Grant County, or for a campsite on the lake; this name also indicates a creek two miles above Nesika, Lewis County (Jacobs 1931:230).

X\*iyat-nmí, "of white agates," for a stream that



Figure 1. Each spring Plateau Indian elders of the Wáashani faith—also known as the Seven Drums or Longhouse religion—prepare to give thanks to the Earth and Sun for the annual regeneration of their sacred traditional foods. Select groups of elders are sent out the week before the thanksgiving feast (*ikáʔwir*, in Sahaptin) to gather roots and greens and to catch a supply of fresh salmon. These foods are brought to the longhouses, prepared, and served to the congregations the following Sunday. Here James Selam, Sara Quampts, and Delsie Albert Selam offer prayers before collecting bitterroot (*Lewisia rediviva*; *pyaxí*, in Sahaptin) for the Rock Creek Longhouse feast. Photograph by Eugene Hunn.

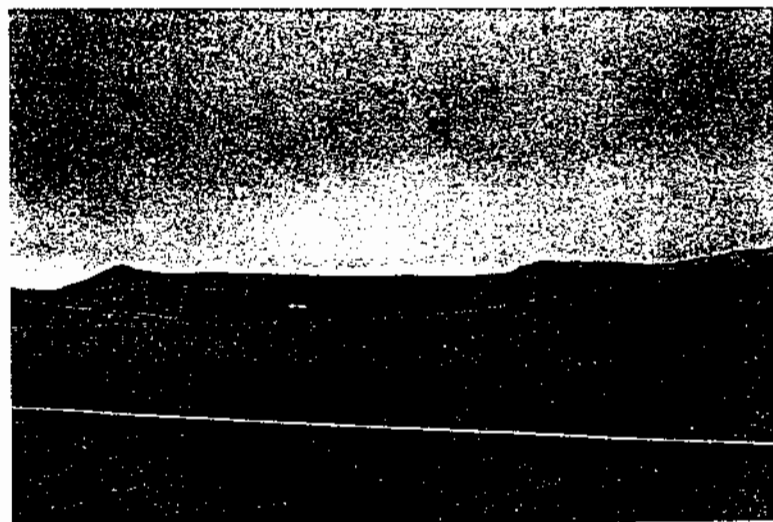


Figure 2. The high eastern prominence of the Rattlesnake Hills dominates the Tri-Cities skyline. It is called Laliik in Sahaptin and is sacred: a way station for spirits of the dead rising to heaven. Photograph by Eugene Hunn.



Figure 3. Native people gaffing for salmon at Celilo Falls, east of the Dalles, about 1900–1920. Photography by A.M. Prentiss, courtesy of Special Collections Division, University of Washington Libraries neg. #NA 745.

heads near White Pass (Jacobs 1934:234).

*Pnáy-pnáy*, “many pestles,” for a spring campsite on Alder Creek, Klickitat County, where roots are pounded and dried.

*Qíyak-awas*, “gaff-hooking place,” for a fishing site at Celilo Falls.

*Sapawilalat-pamá*, “for set-netting,” another site at Celilo Falls, where large-mouthed dip-nets were fixed by lines beneath a fish jumping place.

Place name nomenclature always reflects an individual point of view. An exhaustive inventory of a region’s place names, however, will considerably exceed any single individual’s repertory.

### CELILLO FALLS

A few miles below the mouth of the Deschutes a basalt ridge cuts across the Columbia River’s course. This is Celilo Falls. [The Celilo Falls area is now flooded by the Dalles Dam.] Here and for the next ten miles the full force of the Columbia is shunted through a series of narrow passages. (The lower reaches of this tumultuous stretch of river were called “the dalles” by the early French-Canadian fur trappers. The namesake Oregon city is located a few miles further downstream.) At high water in June the river surges up and over these obstructions, but when the flood recedes channels open through which the salmon force their way, driven to return to spawn in their natal streams. The salmon surge past in sharp pulses: spring Chinook salmon in early May, blue-

back salmon in July, then summer runs of Chinook and steelhead followed in early September by the heavy fall Chinook run and in October by silver salmon. The complex configuration of channels and eddies on this stretch of the Columbia provided excellent fishing for men armed with dip-nets, gaff-hooks, or spears (fig. 3). A large surplus of fish was dried and stored for later use or for barter and trade. Local fishermen hosted several thousand visitors during summer and fall while they waited for the runs to pass. The region of the great falls and the dalles was a great emporium that brought together peoples within a radius of several hundred miles.

James Selam, a fluent native speaker of the Columbia River Sahaptin language, was born in 1918 and raised between Rock Creek and the John Day River some thirty miles upriver from Celilo Falls. His father shared rights by inheritance to use certain fishing stations at the Great Falls. Thus James Selam witnessed Native fishing practices there as a child and young adult during the 1920s and 1930s. By consulting a map that showed the contours of the falls before they were inundated by the Dalles Dam, James Selam recalled 15 named sites within the single square mile encompassing the falls (fig. 4). By his own admission his recollection of named sites there is far from complete, yet the details he can still recall graphically illustrate the complexity of traditional geographic perceptions at this key fishery. Most of these names denote fishing sites that belonged to particular families and were often named for the fishing practices appropriate to each site.

The Columbia River itself is known throughout the Sahaptin speech area simply as *né-i-wána*, “big river.” Some major villages are occupied during the summer, others during the winter or year-around. These village names apply not only to the villages themselves, but also to the region immediately surrounding the village. As such, the term might subsume other named sites.

The name of a village might also be used for the group of people who lived there. Thus *wayám* was the summer village on the Oregon side of the river at Celilo Falls; the people of that village were the *wayam-táma*, though they retired during the winter months to the more sheltered village site of *tqúx* at the mouth of the Deschutes River (Rigsby 1965:54) or to a village just up the Deschutes called *wanwáwi* (Murdock 1938:397).

Their closest neighbors were the *skin-táma*, residents of the permanent village of *skin* on the Washington shore at the falls. This village, built on a sandy beach just below the falls, is named for a prominent rock formation on the Washington shore at the lip of the falls. This rock resembled a cradle-board — which is the literal meaning of *skin* — and alludes to a myth of the origin of salmon. In this

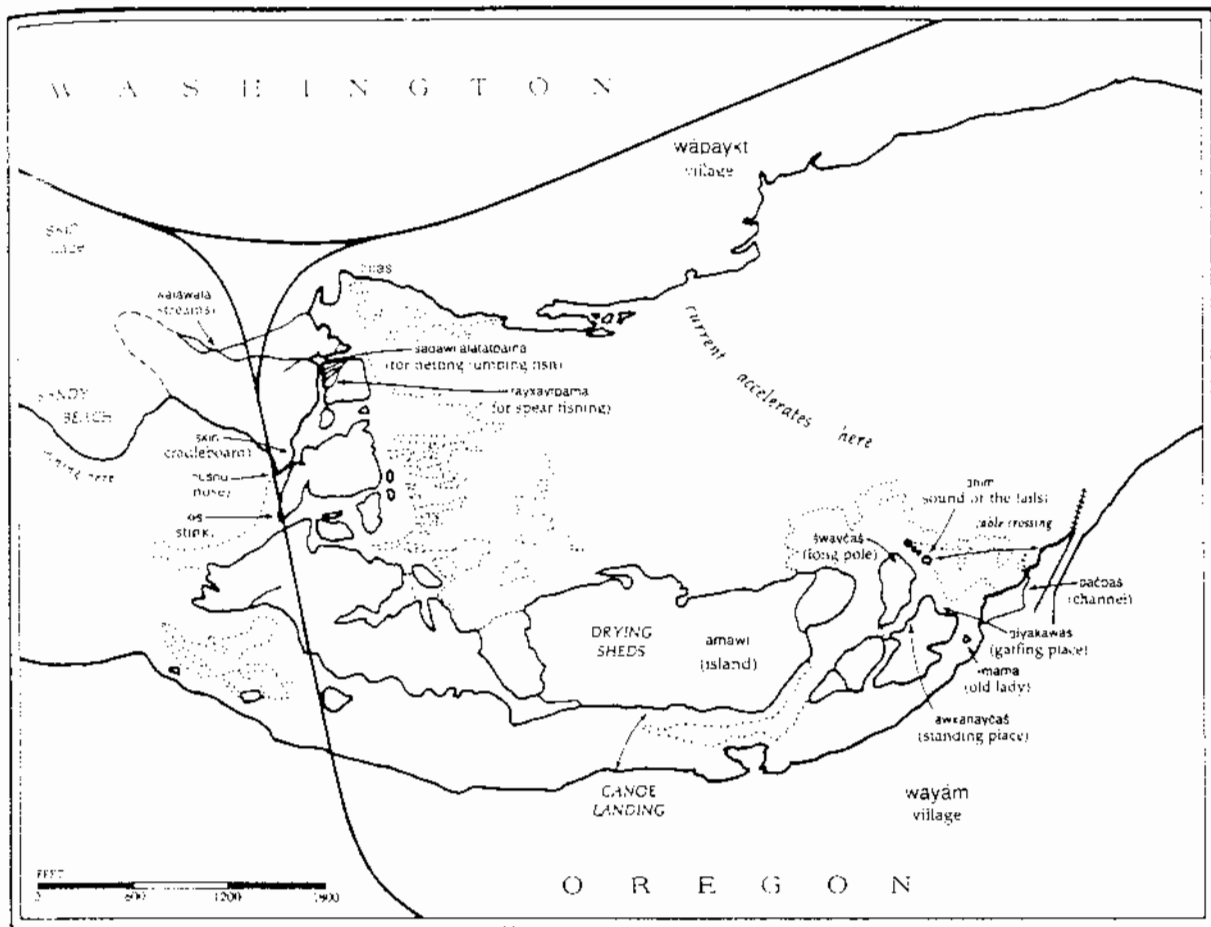


Figure 4. Celilo Falls fishing sites, 1930. James Selam named and located these sites in 1987. Because his family belonged to the community at Skin, he claimed limited knowledge of the fishing places on the Oregon side of the Columbia River. Selam described how he and other children used to fish at Tíčas, one of his family's sites, in the 1920s.

The village was built on the rocks above the sandy beach at the foot of the falls. There were many drying sheds (*wáwtaš*) there. Skin people seined off the sandy beach and set a gillnet just below Nūšnu. This net was 300–500 feet long; the catch was shared by all families of the village. The village women worked together to make the long net. The Wáwáwá area was a high-water fishing site. At Rayxaypamá, a bed of pale flat stones under clear water facilitated spear fishing. At Sapawilalatpamá, the river fell 8 to 10 feet. Fishermen held their dipnets below the falls in order to catch the leaping salmon. Drying sheds were set up in summer on Amáwi (later known as "Big Island" by Wayám [i.e., Celilo] fishermen). The materials and gear were brought across by canoe or boat. Awxanáyčáš

("standing place") was a site where seven men stood in a line dipping into the rushing current (the whole island was subsequently named "Standing Island"). In the early days it was necessary to swim from Awxanáyčáš to reach Šwáwéčáš. A dipnet on a long pole (over 20 feet long) was needed to reach the current here. This site belonged to Chief Tommy Thompson's family and thus the island came to be known as "Chief Island." The rock called Atiim stood at the very lip of the falls. In the early 1930s it came to be called "Albert's Island" after the family that claimed it then. It was accessible at low water by boat, though a cable was stretched across to it from Taffe's fishwheel early in this century. Páčpaš was the location of several high-water fishing sites. It was a narrow channel favored for catching "eels," apparently the same as that known as Downes' Channel. The current here turned the best of Taffe's fishwheels (Donaldson and Cramer 1971: 110). "Old Lady" rock was tabooed. From Hunn, F. S., with J. Selam and Family. 1990. *Nch'i-Wána. "The Big River": Mid-Columbia Indians and Their Land*. Seattle: University of Washington Press.



Figure 5. Delsie Albert Selam holds a "cous" root (*Lomatium cous*) in her hand. Cous—a name borrowed from Nez Perce originally—is one of a dozen species of the genus *Lomatium* (of the carrot family) named and used as food or medicine by Native peoples of eastern Washington. Photograph by Eugene Hunn.



Figure 6. The camas lily (*Camassia quamash*) in flower. Camas, an important edible bulb, was abundant at Kintitas east of Ellensburg and near Glenwood in Klickitat County before the meadows were plowed by settlers. Hundreds of Indians camped on these meadows for a week or two in June harvesting a year's supply of camas, an occasion for horse racing, gambling, and intense social activity. The word "camas" comes from the Nez Perce. Photograph by Eugene Hunn.

myth the Swallow Sisters (five mythological beings in the form of birds) have dammed the river, preventing the salmon from migrating upstream to spawn and thus depriving the upriver peoples of their livelihood. The mythological superhero Coyote, disguised as a baby, straps himself to a cradleboard and floats down the river to Celilo. There he deceives the Swallow Sisters who take him in as a foundling. While the sisters are away digging roots in the nearby hills (as the women of skin families still do), Coyote destroys the dam and releases the salmon to return to the streams of their birth (cf. Beavert 1974:34–37). (See article by Martin Louie, this volume.) The cradle-shaped rock for which this village and its people were named was destroyed during construction of the railroad bridge across the west end of the falls.

Lewis and Clark described Celilo Falls: "...The waters is divided into Several narrow chanel[s] which pass through a hard black rock forming Islands of rocks at this Stage of the water, on those Islands of rocks... I observe great numbers of Stacks of pounded Salmon neatly preserved..." (Thwaites 1959, vol 3:148). The two largest of those islands are known locally as "Kiska" and "Big Island." "Papoose," "Chief," and "Standing" are local names for smaller islands that split the main channel between Big Island and the mainland at the head of the falls on the Oregon side.

Native nomenclature—as James Selam recalls it—departs again from Euro-American convention in that the islands themselves were not named. "Kiska Island" is a corruption of the Sahaptin term

gis, literally "drinking," which denoted a fishing site on the northwest side of the island at which dead fish were trapped in a pool on the rocks, where they fell unopposed. Kis was opposite a prominent rocky point on the Washington shore known as *núšnu*, "stone." The rock called *skin*, "cradleboard," was just upstream, as were two fishing sites named for the fishing methods used there. At *tayxayt-pamá*, "for spear fishing," flat pale-colored rocks just beneath the surface of the current highlighted the migrating fish so they could be easily speared. At *sapawilalal-pamá*, "for set-netting," fish leaped from the water in their efforts to surmount the falls. A wide-mouthed net netted with lines caught the fish as they fell back.

Big Island was called simply *amáwi*, "island." It was located immediately opposite the village of *wayám* (about where the Celilo Longhouse stands today) and was reached by canoe from the *wayám* landings. About the turn of the century, an overhead cable was stretched to Big Island from the Seufert brothers' Turnwater fish wheel and fish processing operation on the Oregon shore to transport Native fishermen and their catches (Donaldson and Cramer 1971:92). Drying sheds were built on Big Island to service a number of fishing stations on the island's northeast point, but James Selam could not recall the names of these sites. "Chief Island" was so called because Chief Tommy Thompson, last of the traditional salmon chiefs—leaders with the spiritual authority to regulate fishing—had had his fishing places, collectively designated *šwáyčáš*, there. "Standing Island" was named for a fishing site at the channel between it and Chief Island. It was known in Salapatin as *awxanáyčáš*, which means something like "standing at the lip of the falls." Here seven men standing could dip-net salmon together. The fishermen swept their long-handled dip nets with the current, feeling for fish in the roiling water. Whenever a fish was netted, the successful fisherman stepped back to be replaced by another.

A small rock between the northeast corner of Standing Island and the Oregon shore was called *fmána*, "old woman." Just above was an island at the top of the falls where I.H. Taffe set up three fish wheels and a cannery about 1890 (Donaldson and Cramer 1971:109). Just below these wheels was *páč'paš*, "channel," a good site for catching "eels" (Pacific lamprey). "Gaff-hooking place," *q'iyak-awas*, was located on the north shore of Standing Island.

#### ALDER CREEK

Sixty miles upriver from Celilo is Alder Creek, an obscure stream that drains the Horse Heaven Hills in extreme eastern Klickitat County, Washington. This is a land of sere hills, of high winds, of extremes of



Figure 7. A large collecting basket (*anps*) full of camas bulbs (*xmasš* or *wáka'mu*) ready to be cleaned prior to baking in the underground oven. Photograph by Eugene Hunn.

heat and cold, relieved by an occasional creek crowded with thirsty alders, cottonwoods, and willows. As was true of virtually every Columbia tributary, a village was situated at the confluence of Alder Creek with the Big River, a small village known as *náwawi*.

The old winter village was built on the Columbia River flood plain just below the mouth of the creek. It was occupied only during winter low-water periods, when flooding was no problem. When Delsie Selam (James Selam's sister-in-law) and Sara Quaepts (Delsie Selam's cousin) were young girls in the late 1920s, they lived in a tule-mat longhouse on Alder Creek at its junction with Six-Prong Creek, a few miles above the mouth of Alder Creek. Here they were sheltered from the winds that whip up the Columbia River by a high ridge known as *áwtaš*, literally "wound." They climbed to its summit in winter to harvest the corns of mariposa lily (*Calochortus macrocarpus*), an emergency winter ration. From there they could see the whole of the Sahaptin world. Today their ancestral burial ground rests on the southeastern shoulder of the ridge.

Early each spring the Alder Creek families traveled up the creek through a series of camps, biding a week or so at each until the nearby root supplies were exhausted. Sweat Lodge Camp, *x\*iyayé-mí*, was visited twice each spring, very early, to harvest the first Indian celeries, the sprouts of Gray's desert parsley (*Lomatium grayi*), and later for roots. *pnáy-pnay*, "Many Pestles," is an important bitterroot (*Lewisia rediviva*) ground on the ridge west of Spring Canyon, an area Sara Quaepts and Delsie Selam still regularly visit on root-gathering excursions. "Many Pestles" may refer to the rhythmic percussion of the women pounding desert parsley (*Lomatium*) roots in their oak mortars. The root meal was then molded with the fingers to make a cake that kept indefinitely when dried. Cottontails, for which Cottontail Burrow Camp, *ayk\*s-mí tánawt*, was named, were pulled from their burrows with a specially shaped stick. The meat was eaten and the pelt made into warm winter socks. The sweat lodge at Sweat Lodge Camp played a key role in Native life. Each morning at dawn, first the men and then the women entered the lodge, a willow frame some four feet high sealed with robes, earth, and grass. River cobbles heated white-hot were placed on a hearth just inside the entrance, then sprinkled with water laced with medicinal herbs. The bathers called out prayers to the Sweat Lodge spirit in the stifling darkness, then emerged into the cold dawn air. This daily ritual purified body and spirit.

Each camp was located where a side canyon joins that of Alder Creek. Each was well sheltered from the cold winds that buffet the ridge crests where the food roots must be dug. Each was well supplied with water in the early spring; tall sagebrush was

available in abundance for firewood. The spring gathering season was short, for the low hills above the Columbia at Alder Creek are soon baked dry. This necessitates a second, longer journey across the Columbia into the Blue Mountains of Oregon, which rise above 6,000 feet at the headwaters of the North Fork of the John Day River, and remain rich and green well into June. A special desert parsley root grows here that is found neither on the lower hills near Alder Creek nor in the Cascades north of the Columbia. This is the famed *xawš* (*Lomatium* *cous*, fig. 5), a term borrowed from Nez Perce and translated into the local English vernacular as "cous" and applied quite indiscriminately to a variety of distinct Indian root foods. When the *cous* harvest was finished, Delsie Selam and Sara Quaepts moved on to *imáayi* (now known as Fox Valley) for *camas* (*Camassia quamash*). Many Columbia River Native people gathered there in early summer to dig these wild lily bulbs and to bake them in earthen ovens until they were sweet (fig. 6, 7).

#### INDIAN HEAVEN

James Selam's family, by virtue of their kinship ties to skin, fished the summer and fall salmon runs at Celilo. From there they trekked each summer to their huckleberry camp southeast of Mt. St. Helens to a place called *áyun-aš*, "loverage place" (for *áyun*, *Ligusticum canbyi*, a medicinal root), in the area now known as Indian Heaven. Here they could escape the oppressive August heat of the Columbia Valley. The women gathered and dried a winter's supply of huckleberries and wild blueberries while the men hunted deer or ranged down into the Columbia Gorge to fish at the mouths of the White Salmon, Little White Salmon, and Wind rivers. According to James Selam, each community had a traditionally recognized camping and berry-picking area on this high, forested plateau. The Klickitats camped ten miles north of *áyun-aš* at *psawas-wáakuš*, "saw-like," now called the Sawtooth Huckleberry Fields. All gathered to socialize, trade, and race horses at *kalamát*, "yellow pond-lily," a broad meadow astride the Klickitat Trail (see Norton, Boyd, and Hunn 1983).

Pond lilies are rare in high mountain meadows; however, when James Selam and I hiked in — bushwhacking along the overgrown path he had taken with his parents over 50 years before — there were a few pond lilies in a shallow tarn at the meadow's edge. An incongruous heron flushed squawking at our approach. Although the pond lily was a staple food of the Klamath people of southern Oregon, it was not used by local Native groups. Thus this meadow's namesake was memorable not so much for its economic value but for its surprising presence far from its expected haunts.

In conclusion I wish to correct the impression I may have given that Native American nomenclature is largely economically motivated. For native peoples, topographic forms may reflect deeper mythical realms. At a spot just off State Highway 14, high above the Columbia River opposite the mouth of the Deschutes, James Selam indicated the exact spot where Coyote hid when he taunted nayšlá, the "Swallowing Monster" that dwelled long ago in a deep pool in the river below. Selam pointed to a narrow defile below us that led down to the water. This had been gouged by Coyote as he was dragged into the monster's cavernous maw. Coyote found all sorts of people trapped inside. Grizzly Bear, Wolf, Rattlesnake, all sorts of powerful beings were powerless to escape. But Coyote had come prepared. He pulled out tinder, kindling, and flint, built a fire beneath the monster's heart, and proceeded to hack at its moorings with his knife. Coyote led the Animal People to freedom from the belly of the dying beast, some escaping by its mouth, others in the opposite direction.

## NOTES

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2. Indian words are written in a phonemic alphabet based on Rigby (1965:156). Consonants with a superscripted apostrophe are "glottalized," pronounced with an explosive burst of air from the throat. The symbols š and ṣ̌ are equivalent to "sh" and "ch" of English orthography, as in the words "shore" and "chore" or "fish" and "nich." The "barred l" (ł) sound is pronounced more or less like the "tlh" of "athlete." The barred lambda (λ) is pronounced more or less like "l." The "barred i" (ị) is pronounced more or less like the "i" of "bit." A superscript "w" following a consonant indicates rounding. The q is a "k" sound pronounced far back toward the throat. The x is likewise pronounced far back toward the throat, but sounds more like the "ch" of Scottish "loch." I have left off the subscripted dot as the "back x" is the only "x" sound in these examples. A question mark without the dot is a "glottal stop." The accent mark indicated the most heavily stressed syllable of a polysyllabic word.

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