

Archaeological Investigations at the Salmon Beds

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Historical Background

This project focuses on developing an enhanced understanding of the utilization of the Columbia Valley in the past by First Nations peoples. The Salmon Beds were one of three major salmon fishing stations in the upper Columbia Valley utilized by the Ktunaxa and Kinbasket peoples. The Ktunaxa, as they prefer to be called today, are also known as the Kutenai or Kootenay. They speak the Ktunaxa language which is recognized as a linguistic isolate. Ethnographic accounts of the Ktunaxa have been written by Turney-High (1941), Schaeffer (1940) and Smith (1984). The Kinbasket or Shuswap Band is a group of Shuswap speaking peoples derived from the North Thompson Division of the Shuswap, but closely aligned with the Ktunaxa. Their arrival in the Columbia Trench is documented in the nineteenth century but Shuswap peoples may have utilized this area during earlier times (see below).

Claude Schaeffer (n.d.) recorded "The Tobacco Plains Kutenai controlled and utilized the Rocky Mountain Trench as far north as Golden, B.C. Families, who spent part of the year at Tobacco Plains for gathering vegetable products, planting tobacco, etc, utilized certain food resources, such as the salmon run at Columbia Lakes, or grazing facilities at St. Mary's River area" (Schaeffer n.d. M1100/3). He also recorded a Ktunaxa name for the Salmon Beds "Koalanuk" "where the lake empties into the river". "A fishing site at the present town of Athalmer, B.C., Salmon spawned here in the shallow waters of the Columbia River, where the last catch of the season was made in October."(Schaeffer n.d., M1100/3) Schaeffer also notes that there were two separate groups of Kutenai who had their main campsites in the vicinity of Columbia Lakes. These two groups occupied the area successively.

a) Katamukinik, the earlier people, named from their campsite katamu, located on the Columbia immediately south of the mouth of Toby Creek. They were a small group of Upper Kutenai, whose economic activities were carried out along the north-south axis of the Kootenai-Columbia valley, with east-west excursions across the Rockies to the bison range. They subsisted more upon fish than game. They are said to have spoken Tunaxa.

b) Akiskenekinik, "people of the two lakes," the successor group, which had its main camp near Fairmont [Hot] Springs between Columbia and Windermere Lakes. (Schaeffer n.d. M1100/3)

Schaeffer provided additional data on the utilization of the Salmon runs:

The fish began to arrive in this region in August and the run or runs continued until September or October. Often a few families would reach the upper Columbia at the beginning of the migration season and send word to Tobacco Plains on the size of the run. If there were prospects of an abundant catch, other groups would then hasten north to take part in the activity.

The fishing parties made their first camp near modern Briscoe in August, and after taking salmon there for a time, moved up the Columbia to the fishing site near Fairmont Hot Springs. During August and September the run was usually of some size and good quality but by October, the fish began to decline both in condition and numbers. The season was closed with a small catch made at the site of present Athalmer.

During the period of the run salmon were taken by means of the detachable point spear. Men would wade out into the shallow waters of the

spawning beds after the fish or else spear them from the shore. At Athalmer a weir was built for the salmon to enter and after the entrance was closed, they were easily secured inside. Mention was also made of the practice of stretching a net across a shallow place to confine salmon but further details were unavailable (Schaeffer n.d. M1100/8)

Schaeffer (n.d. 1100/8) describes two types of fishing spears used by the Kutenai.

The detachable, single-prong fish spear (akn na) was employed by the Kutenai in taking the larger varieties of fish. In use the single-prong spear, .was thrown so as to impale the fish. In its struggles, the fish soon dislodged the barbed head from the shaft, the latter then serving as a drag to tire the fish. The spear was made from mountain goat horn. After holding the horn near the fire to soften it, two slits were cut vertically in the base and latter spread apart to form two projecting barbs. After this the distal end was ground upon a stone to a very sharp point. The head was then fitted to the end of a wooden shaft about sixteen or eighteen feet long. One end of a braided horsehair line [was] then secured to a hole in the base of the spearhead, and the other fastened to the wooden shaft.

The three-pronged fish spear or leister (a kla ka) was used largely in spearing smaller fish from a canoe by torchlight at night. In May suckers and ling were taken by this method by Tobacco Plains Kutenai at the mouth of Gold Creek. The fore shaft consisted of three prongs, a central pointed prong and two, barbed side prongs projecting a slight angle from the center prong. The central prong, about six inches in length, was made of the bone from the lower leg of a deer; the two side prongs, each about eight inches in length, were made of service berry wood. To the end of each side prong, a sharpened bone barb was lashed so as to project inward at an angle towards the central prong. The fore shaft was fastened to a wooden shaft about ten feet long, by inserting it in a cleft in the end, after which sinew was wrapped tightly about the junction. (Schaeffer n.d. M1100/8)

Schaeffer also records that hook and line fishing was also conducted. In summer, a night set was used for ling and char. In winter, ice fishing was carried out on frozen lakes.



Whenever fish were secured in sufficient numbers by the Kutenai, a quantity was prepared and stored for future use. Fish intended for use five or six months hence were dried in the sun: The fall catch of salmon at Columbia Lakes and the summer catch along the middle river were prepared in this way...The women of each family set to work at once preparing the fish as soon as they had been brought in from the traps. The fish was split lengthwise with a knife by one woman, who also removed the intestines. She made a transverse cut below the head through to the spine, so that the former remained attached only by the skin. Another woman then ran several wooden skewers laterally through the fish, under the skin, in order to keep the halves spread apart, and placed them one on top of the other in a pile. A third then strung the fish, spaced four or five inches apart, on a wooden pole, the pointed end of which was thrust through their heads. A number of these poles, strung with fish, were arranged upon the drying racks, with the flesh side towards the sun. To dry thoroughly they were kept there for a week or longer.

A quantity of fish intestines with small particles of fat adhering to them, had accumulated during the course of this activity. The more industrious women always removed this fat and rendered it into oil. A quantity was placed in a basket of water and boiled, the oil skimmed off with a ladle, and poured into a receptacle made of a deer's bladder. Some women also

boiled the fish heads to obtain oil. By the end of the fishing season a quantity of such oil had been set aside.

.At Columbia Lakes a quantity of salmon was always prepared and cached for subsequent use. The method of preparing salmon did not differ from that described above. The [d]ried fish, however, were packed in flat envelopes (*aku lum*) made of salmon skins sewn together and folded towards the center, like a parfleche, over the contents. Later on in winter the salmon-skin receptacles were boiled and eaten. A number of such food packets were then laid in bark boxes and the latter stored on tree platforms or in log structures. On the return of these Kutenai families from the fall bison hunt, the food stores were taken down and transported to the wintering site at Tobacco Plains. There a portion of the dried salmon was traded for other kind of food. (Schaeffer n.d. M1100/8)

In 1807, fur trader David Thompson traversed the Rocky Mountains by way of Howse Pass and went up the Columbia River. He constructed a fur trade post called Kootenae House that summer. Food was scarce for his 17 people. He sent many of his men off hunting and fishing but their returns were limited to a few fish and some small deer. Most the native people he encountered were "Kootenae" but many of these were noted to be "pitching off to a great distance". On August 9, 1807 he records "4 Tents of Kootenae have arrived, who have passed the greater part of the Summer in the Mountains among the Buffalo. They traded only wherewith to give us a scanty day's provisions-indeed they put a very high Value on all their Provisions, especially when dried." (Thompson 1994:59). However, as the Kootenai had done the work of hunting, processing, drying and transporting the bison meat from the eastern slopes of the Rockies to an area that had only sporadic abundant resources it should not be surprising that the Kootenai valued their provisions so highly.

On August 13, 1807 the Kootenae advised the fur trader that it was time to make a weir which Thompson's men proceeded to do. The same day, Thompson records that there had been a battle a few days earlier between the Peigan and Salish. This is likely a reference to the Shuswap group that was also resident in the upper Columbia about this time. On August 27, 12 Peigan young men and 2 women arrived at Kootenae House "to see how we are situated" (Thompson 1994:62). Thompson had been expecting them as the Peigan had tried to prevent previous attempts of trade with the Kootenay at Rocky Mountain House. Also on August 27 Thompson reported seeing several salmon. On August 29 three men went off to spear salmon at night and returned with 5 of them, one weighed 26  pounds. The Peigan stole 3 horses from the Kootenae and left September 1, 1807. Thompson continued to catch salmon throughout September. Most were considered very poor quality because of the distance traveled and the spawning but one weighed 34  pounds. Also in September several Lakes Indians came to visit and trade at Kootenae House. It is clear however that their territory was further west and south.

A letter written in 1940 by C.H. Robinson of the Pacific Biological Station, Nanaimo B.C. notes that:

According to the reports of old-timers, there used to be a very heavy run of springs [ie. Chinooks] to the head-waters of Columbia River above the Arrow Lakes and it was not uncommon to observe some fifty teepees of the Indians on the flats of Athalmer, who took large numbers of salmon off the salmon beds for their winter food. Apparently the last "Big smoke" of salmon took place the fall of 1884. (Schaeffer n.d. M1100/10)

George Simpson records that Native people utilized the spawning salmon even when they were not in the best of condition:

.towards the Fall they become lean exhausted and diseased and are cast ashore in large quantities or found in nearly an inanimate state on the surface of the Water; they are even in this putrid condition acceptable to the Natives who dry them for Winter stock.(Merk 1931: 40).

The historic records and ethnographic accounts clearly indicate that this area was primarily occupied by two groups: the Ktunaxa or Kootenay and the Secwepemc or Shuswap. The Shuswap group that lived along the west side of the Rockies was known as the *Texqokallt*, or North Thompson Band. They hunted from the Kinbasket Lake area to the upper Fraser as well as into the areas of Jasper and Banff (Dempsey1998:65). This group ranged widely in the Rocky Mountains hunting and plant collecting in the early part of the nineteenth century. They were, however, small in numbers and suffered from the effects of disease. By the 1850s they had either died out or joined some of the surrounding groups. "In the 1850s Paul Ignatius Kinbasket brought a band of Shuswaps into the Windermere district from Adams Lake, northeast of Kamloops" (Dempsey 1998:67). They were allocated a reserve on the west side of the Columbia River just north of its outlet from Windermere Lake. An other band of Shuswap once occupied the area of Jasper National Park, known as the Snares. "In 1811, fur trader Alexander Henry noted that they had "retired northward to an uninhabited part of the Rocky mountains, where they continue to wander, a most wretched and defenseless people, who never war upon any of their neighbours" (quoted in Dempsey 1998:68). About 1840, the Snares were lured to a proposed peace treaty with Stoneys at the mouth of the Snake Indian River near Jasper. The Stoneys instead attacked and killed most of the Snares. A few managed to escape including a chief named Capote Blanc who later was painted by Paul Kane in 1846 at Jasper House. The two met again near Boat Encampment in 1847 and Capote Blanc was met by James Hector of the Palliser Expedition in 1859 near Golden. Shuswap groups traditionally lived in winter pit dwellings and some of these are known from the upper Columbia Valley, as well as near Banff and along the upper Red Deer River.



Figure 2:
View of the Columbia River September 1998 showing the water level near the upper surface of Site EdQa 121. The area excavated is on the strip of land between the river and the creek. Athalmer B.C. is in the background. (Parks Canada 9001T-113t).



Figure 3:
View east of the erosion along the bank of the Columbia River.



Figure 4:
Ktunaxa elder Phyllis Nicholas (centre right) said a prayer to the creator at the start of the excavations. (Parks Canada 9001T-126t).

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