Angered, the serpent tightened its coils. The pressure became so great that stones began to melt. Liquid rock flowed down the sides of the mountain. The huge serpent, slow in its movements, was roasted in the hot rock.

— "Craters of the Moon"
Shoshone legend

NATIVE TRADITIONS

NATIVE PEOPLES first encountered the Snake River canyons perhaps 12,000 to 15,000 years ago. Since that time they have successfully adapted to the cold, relatively inhospitable environment of the Ice Age — the most recent geological epoch — and to the contemporary temperate climate. These earliest Idaho peoples may have witnessed events unparalleled in recent history. It is possible, for example, that they witnessed the awesome
Pleistocene migration routes; previous page, petroglyphs from Birch Creek; detail, Shoshone pot.

of the Bonneville Flood and watched the explosive, volcanic eruptions on the eastern plain. These events probably produced a rich mythology maintained by oral tradition, reinforcing the human relationship to the plain. Although this oral tradition is not preserved in the archaeological record, much is known of the lifeways of these early peoples. From the remnants of their tools and a range of sites documenting their varied use and modification of the landscape, we see a highly successful adaptation that continues in the traditions and lifeways of contemporary American Indians.

The ancient story of humans and their relationship to the land is told in several archaeological sites that are scattered across the Snake River Plain. Some sites consist of a few isolated artifacts or the fragmented remains of a camp or village. There are also quarries and places where people made tools. Taken together, these sites are pieces of the complex puzzle that is the cultural history of the Snake River Plain.

In southern Idaho and throughout much of the western United States archaeologists divide time into two major cultural periods. The Paleo-Indian period (7,000–15,000 years ago) dates from the late Ice Age, or Pleistocene Epoch. Sometimes called the big-game hunting tradition because of its emphasis upon the use of large herd animals, the Paleo-Indian period was followed by an Archaic period (7,000 to historical times) in which humans made the transition from a hunting culture to one that diversified its use of an increasingly arid environment.
EARLY MIGRATIONS

Traditionally, archaeologists have placed the migration of people into North America at no more than 20,000 years ago. Under the most common theory, hunters from Siberia traveled across the Bering Strait land bridge, created during the Pleistocene Era when glacial ice lowered the water levels of the world’s oceans. The bridge between Siberia and Alaska, sometimes called “Beringia,” was nearly 1,000 miles wide. The first ancestors of modern American Indians were probably hunters of Eurasian origin who brought with them material culture developed in the Old World. In addition to early peoples, a number of animal species, including elephant, deer, elk and moose, migrated across the strait. As these species moved east, the camel and horse, which evolved in the Americas, moved across the land bridge to Eurasia.

While this theory is widely embraced by scholars, increasing archaeological evidence suggests alternative and earlier migrations into the Americas. Sites excavated in Mexico and South America suggest a far earlier human presence. It seems likely that some people from Eurasia may have traveled by boat down the North American coast. But as is the case with much of the Snake River Plain, the rapidly changing geology of the Pacific Coast may have obliterated any evidence left by these early nomads.

Although it is difficult to determine when people arrived in the Americas, scholars say with certainty that by 12,000 years ago humans lived on the Snake River Plain.
Rising oceans and the changing geology of the rugged North American coastline may have obliterated any evidence of a possible coastal migration from Asia.

THE PALEO-INDIAN TRADITION

The large glacial ice masses had far-reaching effects on the climates of North America. Areas near the masses were cold and moist, with a limited growing season, much like modern Arctic tundra conditions. Farther from the ice sheets, the environment was more hospitable. In some areas, including the Snake River Plain, large coniferous forests grew where there is now desert steppe country.

Little is known about the earliest inhabitants on the plain. The oldest artifacts from the Paleo-Indian period are simple modified bone and stone tools. Because so few artifacts have been found from this ancient period, the lifestyle and activities of these people remain unknown. Archaeologists, nevertheless, have placed them in three cultural periods — the Clovis, Folsom and Plano — based on the tools they made and the places where their artifacts have been discovered. Each of these groupings represents minor changes in technology.

The earliest evidence of human occupation on the Snake River Plain comes from a lava blister near Dietrich known as Wilson Butte Cave. Excavated in 1959–1960 by Ruth Gruhn as a joint Idaho State College–Harvard University museum expedition, the cave deposits suggest almost constant — but irregular — use during the past 15,000 years. In fact, some of the earliest evidence of human presence in North America comes from Wilson Butte Cave. The lowest level, or stratum, dated at 14,500 years old contained retouched flakes, a basalt knife and a bone fragment with cut marks. Archaeologists also discovered the remains of extinct camel, horse and sloth, which suggest somewhat cooler and moister conditions during the period 15,000–6,850 years ago.

The Clovis period, which dates between 12,000–11,000 years ago, was an era of big-game hunting. It has been assumed that the Clovis people hunted with what has become known as the Clovis point, presumably mounted on a spear. Perhaps. But it is questionable whether huge animals such as mammoths could have been seriously hunted by spear-wielding humans. It is more likely that the mammoths were taken only occasionally and opportunistically, such as if one of the giant elephants became trapped in a swamp.

Clovis peoples lived on the plain during a period of relative cold and marginal vegetation. They were hunters who may have lived in caves or temporary rock shelters and who sometimes pursued such large and now absent animals as the camel and bison.

Archaeologists have documented the Clovis period at several sites across southern Idaho, with materials reported as far east as the Portneuf River. The most significant is the Simon site near Fairfield, where archaeologists discovered a cache of Clovis points, bifaces and several partially worked slabs of smoky quartz. Because the cache is isolated and remnants of red ochre covered the points, the site may have been a place used for ritual or ceremonial activities.
Ruth Gruhn began her career in Idaho archaeology as a graduate student at Radcliffe College. Her most significant contribution to Idaho archaeology was her excavation of Wilson Butte Cave, which documented the first major cultural sequence in the state. Importantly, Gruhn documented the association of human artifacts with extinct camel and horse remains dating from 14,500 years ago to relatively recent Shoshonean occupations. Gruhn and her husband, Alan Bryan, spent three decades conducting pioneering research throughout South America. They then returned to Idaho to reinvestigate Wilson Butte Cave. Their second excavation indicated that human activity in the cave may have been more recent than was originally thought, dating from about 10,500 years ago.

Gruhn at Wilson Butte Cave in 1959 (above) and 1989.
Killing a mammoth, a drawing by illustrator and naturalist Charles R. Knight. Knight’s illustration, first drawn for McClure’s magazine in 1897, reflects the 19th-century assumption that Clovis hunters commonly preyed on huge creatures. Today many scholars believe that large mammals such as the mammoth could be killed only when sick, crippled or mired in a marsh.

Wilson Butte Cave and Jaguar Cave, located in the Lemhi Mountains of eastern Idaho, are also significant Clovis sites, although neither contained Clovis points. Jaguar Cave held the butchered remains of 268 large mountain sheep, killed between 11,540 and 10,270 years ago. The remains of domesticated dogs — at 9,400 years old among the earliest in the world — were also discovered at Jaguar Cave. Mountain sheep are not normally associated with the Clovis people, but the dog remains suggest a long-term use of dogs in the hunting of mountain sheep, as depicted in the historic literature for mountain Shoshone.

In contrast to the Clovis, the Folsom period, 10,600–11,000 years ago, is better documented in southern Idaho. The Folsom peoples used smaller fluted projectiles, primarily to hunt the now extinct bison, *Bison antiquus*, which became more prevalent at the end of the Pleistocene.
The Folsom way of life was probably similar to that of the earlier Clovis peoples — a nomadic existence based on hunting of animals. But it also included an increased use of plant foods. Hunting was probably done with spears after game had been driven into compounds or canyons. Like the Clovis, the Folsom peoples probably lived in temporary shelters.

Archaeologists document the Folsom period by many surface finds. At the Wasden site, also called Owl Cave, near Idaho Falls, a lava tube contained the remains of camel, bison and mastadon alongside four Folsom points dated between 10,920–12,850 years ago. The Wasden site, one of the earliest Folsom sites in North America, may have been used as a natural corral for bison that were killed and butchered there. The site is unusual in that mastadons are not normally associated with the Folsom people.
The Plano period, 7,800–10,600 years ago, is well documented from surface finds and excavations. Many, in contrast to the Clovis and Folsom periods, appear to include habitation sites in addition to kill or hunting sites. The Plano peoples used caves and rock shelters as places to live, which suggests greater permanency than the earlier periods. More specialized tools and artistic ornaments also indicate that these people may have been involved in more diverse economic pursuits than simple hunting.

Excavations have uncovered Plano-type projectiles that were used to hunt bison and sheep. Plano materials were recovered from the upper levels of the Wasden site in association with *Bison antiquus* remains. The skeletons of some 70 individual animals suggest two separate kills — at the beginning and end of the calving season.

At Wilson Butte Cave some 120 miles west of Wasden, archaeologists have found a number of Plano-type projectiles along with milling stones. The discovery of a mano, a grinding stone used to process seeds and other wild plant foods, suggests that the Plano peoples began to diversify their economy by using plant foods in addition to the big game they had traditionally hunted.

**ARCHAIC TRADITION**

By the end of the Paleo-Indian period some 7,000 years ago, the glaciers were retreating and the climate was becoming warmer and dryer. With this change in climate came an apparent change in the hunting and gathering patterns of the people. Unable to adapt to differences in vegetation, the elephant, camel and horse had become extinct in North America. Smaller animals better adapted to a dry environment flourished, and the people responded by developing tools to hunt these animals, as well as to forage for plants. This adaptation to a more diverse resource base marked the beginning of the Archaic period.

Known also in the West as the Desert Culture, the Archaic period saw the development of tools not found in the preceding Paleo-Indian culture. Included were grinding or milling stones used to process seeds, woven sandals, moccasins, twisted cords, basketry, and wooden and bone tools including punches, drills, wrenches and digging sticks.

The most significant weapon was the spear-throwing atlatl, a small wooden shaft with a spur on one end, fitted with fingerloops and weights to increase balance and thrust. The end of the spear was placed against the spur shaft, and with the hand on the other end the spear was launched, with more force and accuracy than was possible throwing by hand. The atlatl increased the ability of Archaic hunters to stalk animals such as the antelope.

Decorative, recreational and ceremonial items became more common during the Archaic period. Gaming pieces, ornaments, molded clay objects and figurines have been found in a number of Archaic sites. Olivella shells from California and seashells from the Northwest coast suggest widespread trading among native peoples.

The Archaic period probably represents the beginning of seasonal migration patterns known as “transhumance.” For example, groups might spend winters in the stream valleys hunting and fishing and return in the spring to higher meadows where green plants could be harvested. In late summer, they might move to small canyons to collect and process wild fruits and berries, eventually returning to their winter camps to begin the cycle again.

This pattern was characteristic of the historic Shoshone Indians who inhabited much of southern Idaho in late prehistoric and early historic times. The Shoshone scheduled their...
In the traditional view of middle Snake River fishing, groups descended on certain stretches of the river to harvest and store salmon for winter. This view is based on the ethnographic record of the 1930s and earlier historic records of explorers, trappers, soldiers and migrants. The records for southern Idaho are sparse in their depiction of the lifeways of the aboriginal population, however. The few existing accounts reflect the "memory culture" of individuals who did not live the aboriginal lifestyle of the pre-reservation period. Some archaeologists believe that salmon fishing was not the most optimal economic strategy. Although the salmon were often abundant, other kinds of food may have been less difficult to process and store. Abundance alone does not determine usage. Thus, fishing reflected the diversity of aboriginal lifeways in which a variety of factors determined the sources of food.
PREPARING THE FOOD

Camas Roots

In the spring and summer when the camas flowered, women would dig up the roots, then place them in an earthen oven. This oven was a pit lined with hot rocks and filled with alternating layers of camas roots and grass, then covered with soil. The women built a fire over the pit and cooked the roots for several days.

Chokecherries

Indian women valued the chokecherry bush for two things: the stems, brewed into tea, and the bright red berries, which were mashed into cakes. After mashing fibrous berries with a flat, boardlike tool and a hand-held grinding stone, the women would make reddish patties that were then sun-dried.

Seeds

Beaters and winnowing trays were used to collect a range of seeds. These were commonly ground, mixed with other items and formed into cakes left to dry in the sun. Seeds were sometimes parched for storage.
movements according to the availability of specific resources. They depended heavily upon salmon and other fish, particularly when wintering in the Snake River canyon, where they stored root caches and dried meats. In the winter, they hunted sage hen, snowshoe rabbit, grouse and deer. Fish and sufficient supplies of firewood were available year-round near the Snake River. In spring, green plants and roots flourished. Two spring salmon runs provided a principal food source for the aboriginal inhabitants of the western Snake River canyon. Fishing for salmon was a cooperative undertaking, generally within family units and particularly where small villages were located in fishing streams near the canyon. Fish were speared or taken with nets and hooks. Sometimes several families built a dam or weir and in turn distributed the catch among themselves, giving a share to a director who coordinated their efforts.

It is known that the Snake River Shoshone traveled in July to Camas Prairie, some 35–50 miles north of the canyon to collect camas and other root crops as well as to hunt small mammals, like the gray ground squirrel. Many of the root crops were dried, returned to the canyon and stored in cache pits for winter use. At the end of summer the Shoshone returned to the Snake River to harvest fish from the fall salmon run. Much of the catch was dried and smoked on wooden racks and stored for winter use. Sometimes they cooked and mixed salmon oil and formed it into a pemmican and stored it in salmon skin bags. In the fall some Indians traveled to the surrounding hills and small drainages to collect seeds and chokecherries. Chokecherries, like a variety of other foods, were ground or pounded on a metate or mortar, dried into small cakes, and stored in cache pits with other foods. Some seeds were collected and parched to prevent germination during storage. The Shoshone Indians, as well as other historic groups on the plain, did not grow corn.

THE EARLY AND MIDDLE ARCHAIC

The Early Archaic period (5,000–7,800 years ago) marks the transition from the Plano to the Archaic, a time when subsistence and material culture changed substantially.

The Snake River Plain is rich in Early Archaic sites including Wasden, Wilson Butte Cave and Birch Creek northwest of Idaho Falls. In western Idaho, archaeologists have found archeaic materials from the Owyhee Uplands, the Castle and Brown’s creek areas, Reynolds’s Creek drainage, areas along the Snake River near Marsing and in eastern Owyhee County. Northwest of Boise, Early Archaic materials have been found in the Payette River drainage and in the Weiser area.

Several finds indicate people during the period hunted modern animals such as bison, deer, elk and mountain sheep. Evidence of plant use is also relatively common. Some of the earliest evidence comes from Wilson Butte Cave and the Owyhee Uplands at Nahas Cave, where milling stones date to approximately 6,000 years ago.

During the Middle Archaic period (1,000–5,000 years ago) people used groundstone implements more extensively, and there is evidence of greater diversity in settlement-subistence patterns. Sites have been discovered in a range of river, foothill and upland
settings. There is some archaeological evidence that indicates that individual sites were used for specific purposes, such as fishing, mussel collecting, seed collecting and grinding or bison hunting.

The first houses on the plain date from the Middle Archaic period. In 1982 archaeologists found eight house structures containing deer and mussel remains at Givens Hot Springs near Marsing. The houses were of two types. The first houses were a series of steep-walled, semisubterranean structures about 23 feet in diameter and 1–3 feet deep. The second and more recent type of houses were also steep-walled, semisubterranean structures 12–21 feet in diameter and about 2 feet deep. Saucer-shaped, they show evidence of hearths and roof supports. One burned house had rafters aligned in a circular fashion around the roof supports and was thatched with heavy grass. These “wickiup” type structures were common in the Late Archaic period, about 1,000 years ago. Both house forms have also been found in the Great Basin and Columbia Plateau.

In western Idaho, the period is best represented at Nahas Cave, a hunting site in the Owyhee Uplands where Early, Middle and Late Archaic materials have been found along with the remains of suckers and steelhead trout. One mile from the Nahas Cave at the Deep Creek Rockshelter, archaeologists have found evidence of mussel collecting. Middle Archaic peoples also collected mussels at Rock Creek and Kueney in the South Hills country near Twin Falls.

### EARL SWANSON

(1933–1975)

A pioneer in Idaho archaeology, Earl H. Swanson Jr. arrived at the Idaho State College Museum in 1957. He began an ambitious archaeological survey and excavation program that marks the beginnings of systematic archaeology in the state. Swanson brought together a team of experienced field archaeologists that included B. Robert Butler, Alan Bryan and Donald Tuohy. Swanson also earned an international reputation for geoarchaeology. His Birch Creek project in northeastern Idaho was noted for the use of geologic data in interpreting archaeological discoveries.
SEASONAL MIGRATIONS

The Snake River peoples followed a seasonal or "transhumant" pattern of migration. In winter they might hunt and fish in stream valleys. In spring they might migrate to higher meadows to gather plants. They might spend late summer in small canyons collecting fruit and berries, returning again to their camps in the lower valleys at the onset of winter. This map illustrates how Archaic peoples moved from the canyons to foothills and meadow, exploiting seasonal resources.

*Brush tepee, a summer shelter.*
Imagine an obsidian spear, knife or arrowhead sharper than a surgeon’s scalpel. Don Crabtree, a self-taught toolmaker, rediscovered the lost art of crafting these razor-sharp points, turning a boyhood hobby into scientific expertise.

Born in Heyburn and raised in Salmon, Crabtree first took an interest in stone tools after a neighbor offered him an arrowhead as payment for running an errand. “I was intrigued,” Crabtree recalled. “It became a challenge to duplicate them.” Chipping at natural glass with a pointed hammer, Crabtree replicated a wide variety of spear-points and blades, the deadly weapons once used on the mammoths, musk-oxen and bison that roamed the Snake River Plain. “Some aboriginal tools are really pieces of beauty,” Crabtree explained. “They had a lot of Michelangelos in those days.”

Pragmatic and largely self-educated, Crabtree was a University of Idaho research associate who worked closely with Idaho State University and lectured widely in Idaho, Washington, Canada, Central America, England and France. Writer, teacher, curator, craftsman, a giant in the emerging field of lithic technology — Crabtree remained, above all, a dedicated experimenter. During an experimental lung operation in 1976, Dr. Bruce Buck, a Twin Falls surgeon, cut into Crabtree’s chest with one of his patient’s tools, a fragile obsidian blade. Years later the toolmaker from Salmon unbuttoned his shirt for a Statesman reporter and dared her to find the scar.

“He could have taught ancient man a thing or two about toolmaking,” said Francois Bordes, a French archaeologist. Crabtree, however, was modest about his achievements: “They [the ancient craftsmen] were doing things with this rock or volcanic glass that nobody knows how to do today.”

At Bachman Cave in western Owyhee County, there was evidence of extensive ground stone use during the Middle Archaic. Further evidence of economic diversity includes the partially butchered remains of an immature bison, dating from 4,000 to 5,000 years ago, in the Snake River canyon near Bliss. Sites in the Payette River drainage date from 5,000 to 10,000 years ago.

Burial grounds located near Weiser suggest a growing social complexity in the Middle Archaic society. The sites feature burials and cremations, with exotic grave goods buried with the individuals. The dead were often buried with large stone blades called “turkey tail” points. Other grave goods included pipes, hematite crystals, marine shells, dog remains and extensive use of red ochre. The inclusion of exotic, sometimes “imported” materials in burials and selection of sandy knolls and terraces as burial locales indicate preferential treatment of the dead.

The western Idaho Archaic burial complex is especially important because it documents a trend toward greater trade networks and suggests that Middle Archaic populations were becoming more socially complex.
THE LATE ARCHAIC

During the Late Archaic era (340–1,000 years ago) life on the Snake River changed as new technologies were developed and introduced. The bow and arrow and ceramic technology were introduced during this period, and the economy became more diversified as people made more extensive use of the Snake River.

Beginning about 1,000 years ago, the use of small corner and side-notched projectiles referred to as Desert Side-Notched and Rose Spring-Eastgate points became increasingly common. These points are believed to represent the widespread replacement of the atlatl by the bow and arrow and presumably mark a shift toward the hunting of smaller mammals.

An additional, important contribution from the Late Archaic period is the introduction of pottery. Though evidence of fired clay technology dates as early as 6,000 years ago in the Owyhee Uplands, pottery does not occur in archaeological contexts until approximately 1,000 years ago. The common pottery type found throughout the Snake River Plain is a rather poorly made and largely undecorated, flat-bottomed vessel resembling a flower pot that is referred to as Shoshone Ware. This pottery or a knowledge of pottery making may have been brought to southern Idaho by Shoshone peoples migrating from the southwestern Great Basin.

The recent discovery of additional pottery-bearing sites and the reevaluation of ceramic collections have led to considerable debate regarding the origins, variation and cultural affiliations of the ceramics of the Snake River Plain. There may be some relationship between Idaho Shoshone Ware and Fremont pottery associated with the relatively sedentary horticulturists of northern Utah. Northward-expanding Shoshones may have carried with them Fremont-type potteries or more probably a knowledge of Fremont ceramic technology and styles. There is some evidence from Wilson Butte that the Fremont people may have occupied a portion of the eastern Snake River Plain. Fremont basketry also is present at a number of sites in the eastern plain.

By the Late Archaic, aboriginal populations had expanded and a number of new settlement-subsistence regimes were well established. Indeed, it appears from the archaeological and ethnographic records that some groups focused more on single resources. Such may have been the case with salmon fishing on the middle Snake River. Archaeolo-

“At Salmon Falls [we] saw Shoshonies busily engaged killing and drying fish ... Indians swim to the center of the falls, where some station themselves on rock, and others stand to their waists in the water, all armed with spears.”

Journal of a trapper
August 25, 1812
Late Archaic peoples adapted to an increasingly hot and arid climate with brush shelters, woven clothing and baskets, and new kinds of weapons like harpoons with detachable tips and the bow and arrow.

gists have documented the earliest use of salmon at approximately 7,000 years ago at Bernard Rockshelter in Hells Canyon. In the Owyhee Uplands, steelhead remains have been dated at 3,000 years ago at Nahas Cave.

Along the Snake River there is greater evidence of fishing during the Late Archaic. At Schellbach Cave No. 1, south of Boise, archaeologists have found chinook remains and fishing gear, including net sinkers, rope and fishhooks. Two fish traps have been found in the Snake River canyon near Twin Falls, as well as a number of aboriginal fish weirs between Shoshone Falls and the Owyhee River in Oregon.

Recent excavations at Three Island Crossing near Glenns Ferry have recovered more than 19,000 fish remains associated with a house structure and storage pits, a locality described in the historic literature. The use of salmon as a major resource probably resulted in some Late Archaic populations becoming more seasonally sedentary. Evidence of this comes with the discovery of Late Archaic houses at Hagerman Valley, Big Foot Bar, Indian Cove and, as noted, Three Island Crossing.

The Late Archaic period was also rich in petroglyphs and pictographs, rock art that gives us a glimpse into the culture of these ancient peoples.

Though presumably present in the Early and Middle Archaic periods, rock art is notably more common in the Late Archaic. Petroglyphs — figures pecked or pounded into boulders or rock walls — are perhaps most common on the western plain, with examples along the Snake River at Wees Bar, in the Owyhee Uplands and in the Bennett Hills. Much of the petroglyphic rock art is typical of the Shoshone styles found in California and Nevada.

Pictographs — figures painted using a variety of natural pigments — are relatively more common in the eastern plain and depict a greater variety of naturalistic and historic period motifs. Rock art probably served a number of purposes, from magico-religious functions to the marking of hunting trails.

Hunting facilities — rock alignments formed by stacking stones into circles, walls and rimrock enclosures — are also common on the Snake River Plain. In the Owyhee Uplands, rimrock enclosures were used as corolling devices. Bison jumps have been reported near Challis in eastern Idaho and in eastern Owyhee county, although the latter most probably were used to hunt deer and antelope.

How long have the Shoshone lived on the plain?
While some archaeologists believe that the Shoshone peoples have inhabited southern Idaho for thousands of years, others, noting the similarity between Snake River dialects and desert languages to the south, say Shoshone peoples arrived about 700 years ago. The Snake River Shoshone consisted of small bands of hunters and gatherers whose nomadic lifestyle and use of diverse resources scattered them about the plain.
Breathtaking cascades such as Twin Falls were important spearfishing sites. Englishman Edmond Green, a commercial artist, sketched this native spearfisher at the base of the falls on a trip to Idaho in 1880; below, Boise State University archaeological field school at another fishing site on the Snake River near Three Island Crossing, 1987.
While Native Americans had been slowly adapting to environmental and technological changes for 15,000 years, the influence of white Euro-Americans precipitated sudden and rapid changes.

The first influences were created long before Indians in Idaho ever encountered Europeans. By 1750 A.D., the beginning of the Equestrian period, many of the Shoshone groups in southern Idaho had acquired horses, which were introduced by the Spanish in the Southwest and spread north through trade with the Utes. The horse vastly changed the way of life for those Indians who adopted the animal. With expanded territories, these peoples used new resources and developed wider trading networks. With horses, they could travel greater distances in search of food, giving them a competitive advantage over unmounted Indians. This may have threatened the monopoly of some resources by resident bands and, in other instances, encouraged a reliance on new resources, such as the salmon. The arrival of the horse had a great impact on some groups. The Bannock, for example, are Northern Paiute from western Idaho who moved to eastern Idaho after acquiring the horse. They hunted bison on the fringes of the Great Plains. Such interaction between Idaho Indians and peoples on the Great Plains resulted in the adoption of many items of material culture, such as saddles, tipis and clothing.

In general, populations increased during the Equestrian period, though it is not clear if this was directly related to the horse. So-called “villages” noted by explorers and later described by anthropologists may represent nothing more than communal seasonal camps for hunting, fishing or food gathering. Historic population estimates for western Idaho suggest no more than one person per 15 square miles. Though native groups congregated in some areas to seasonally use certain resources, the view that many peoples commonly found themselves on the edge of starvation may not be fully warranted. Resources were plentiful and the groups who relied on them were very small.

During the Equestrian period native peoples began to use Euro-American materials. Archaeologists have uncovered metal items at sites in the Birch Creek Valley and along the Snake River. A brass projectile was found at Three Island Crossing, and copper artifacts were discovered at Big Bar in Hells Canyon. At the Rattlesnake Canyon site near Mountain Home, copper fragments were recovered in association with cremated remains. Eventually, most Indians quit making and using arrows altogether in favor of newly acquired rifles.

Many groups on the western plain did not acquire horses and continued to practice earlier lifeways but the influx of explorers, trappers, traders, settlers and, eventually, the military ended the aboriginal way of life for all but the most remote groups. Living and traveling in small, dispersed bands, the Idaho Indians could not take a unified stand against the Euro-Americans. However, that isolation and independence may have saved them from the worst affects of smallpox and measles epidemics that devastated larger, more settled tribes, such as the Mandans and Pawnee of the Great Plains. But the environmental impact created by the invading white culture may have caused far greater havoc. By the middle 1800s, whites were clearing the river bottoms of trees for firewood and lumber. Huge herds of horses and cattle were overgrazing the grasslands in some areas of the plain.

Initially, such actions would have reduced the populations of deer and bison that comprised the main diet of the Indians. But the damage certainly would have resulted in erosion and the silting of streams and rivers, as well as a change in the plant life of the
THE HORSE

Introduced to North America by the Spanish conquistadors, the horse reached the Snake River Shoshone in the mid-1700s, radically changing their lives. One authority believes that the Shoshone and Bannock peoples had more than one horse per capita by the time of Lewis and Clark, but some tribes had more horses than others. The Lemhi Shoshone selectively bred horses while, to the west, the Boise and Bruneau bands continued to forage on foot.

By 1800 the mounted Shoshone ranged widely, hunting the buffalo to near extinction in southeastern Idaho and crossing the Rockies to chase buffalo on the Wyoming plains. Contact with equestrian buffalo-hunting Great Plains Indians brought new technologies and fashions: tipis, tailored clothing with ornamental bead work, buffalo robes, feathered headdresses, food preservation techniques, leather saddles, horseshoes and the horse-drawn sled with netting suspended between two poles, a “travois.”

Horse culture changed Shoshone politics as influential chiefs took command of the buffalo hunts. The horse also revolutionized trade. By the early 1800s the highly mobile Lemhi Shoshone had made contact with the natives of the Glenns Ferry area, trading buffalo robes for fish. Each summer during salmon season the Boise Shoshone returned to the Weiser area for a trade festival. Paiutes rode in from Oregon and Nevada. There also were Nez Perce, Crow, Cayuse, and Umatilla traders. Some scholars believe these Indian festivals were the precursors of the trapper rendezvous of the fur-trade era.
Chief Little Soldier, Shoshone, about 1870.

The Indians may have been adapting to these changes when the first whites began recording their observations of the native people. Thus, these first ethnographic records may represent an already drastically changed life from that of Indians just 100 years earlier.

By the end of the 19th century, the Indians of the Snake River were being forced onto reservations, where the U.S. Bureau of Indian Affairs tried to turn hunters and gatherers into farmers and herders. After 15,000 years of adapting to evolution on the Snake River Plain, the Indians were forced to make changes that were neither natural nor of their choice.

Red fox hide quiver (replica)

Wild cane and rosewood arrows fitted with wild turkey and goose feathers; mountain mahogany bow (replicas).