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THE WILLAPA

A SMALL, isolated, Athapascan group occupied the course of Willapa river from the site of Willapa, Washington, to its source, and the prairies between the headwaters of Chehalis river and Cowlitz river. The riverdwellers spoke a dialect slightly different from that of the prairie bands, but they were practically one people. The former called themselves, or their principal village at the site of Willapa, Wilápahiu[1]. The Salish called them Ohwílaph, or Swiláumsh. Another river village was Tsihúwi, a short distance above Willapa. The prairie bands were known to the neighboring Cowlitz as Suwál, but their own name can not be learned. Some of their village sites were Slaghá (inhabited by Slaghátani), Nachántakatsi, Puhph, Nichíuh, Nômakum (a Cowlitz word), and Tsahwásin (probably a Cowlitz word). Nômakum was near the site of Boisfort in a prairie known as Tálaln (a Cowlitz word), which lay between two creeks called in the Athapascan dialect Tápahl and Métcha. Tsahwásin was at the site of Pe Ell.[2]

The linguistic researches of Mr. James Teit have disclosed a noticeable resemblance between the few Willapa words now ascertainable and the corresponding terms of the Athapascan tongue formerly spoken in Nicola and Similkameen valleys, British Columbia, thus apparently proving some former close connection between the two groups and differentiating them from the main body of the more northerly Athapascans. Lexically the Willapa dialect resembles the Navaho rather more than it does the Apache.

Inveterate wanderers were the members of the great Athapascan family. Some of the boldest carried the language across mountain and plain into the inhospitable wilds of Arizona and New Mexico, where they formed the nucleus of the warlike Apache tribes and the populous

1 It has been stated that the "Willopah" were a Chinookan tribe; but Nemah river was the northern limit of the Chinook, and all the testimony of the natives now living in this region disputes the assertion.

2 Pe Ell is a name bestowed upon the locality by white men, probably under the mistaken impression that it was an Indian word. In fact it is an Indian pronunciation of the name of a one-eyed French half-breed, Pierre, who used to pasture horses in this prairie.

Navaho. A less spectacular migration carried a band of the Chehalis River Athapascans across the Columbia, where they founded a village at the site of Clatskanie, Oregon. Only two descendants of the Willapa survived in 1910 - Tónamahl, a woman on Nisqualli reservation, and her aunt Saíshimulut, residing near Rochester, Washington. The latter related the tradition of the Tlatskanai.

"At Puhph was an old medicine-man, whose supernatural power was the fire-drill.[3] He was very old. Some young men asked permission to take his drill when they went to hunt elk, and he gave it to them with the caution that they should not use it for trivial purposes, but only after killing an elk. Nevertheless when they could not find an elk they killed a grouse and tried to kindle a fire to roast it. But the drill wore down to a stump, and the young men in disgust pushed the remnant into the ground and went on. Soon the stump of the drill glowed and blazed, and set fire to the forest. For two years the fire burned, and all the elk were driven away.

After five years grass began to grow again, and some of the hunters came upon the trail of an elk, which they followed to the Columbia river. They crossed the stream on a raft, and sent back a messenger to tell of the abundance of game in that country. So the entire band moved southward and crossed the river. This was long, long ago."

The Tlatskanai were all but extinct in the middle of the nineteenth century.

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3 That is, he was the only one among this band who could use the fire-drill.