

Name: _____

Date: _____

Handout 6A: Food and Drink

Directions: Read the following text. Then, reread the text and annotate three to five things you notice and three to five things you wonder about.

From the Nez Perce National Historic Trail website

Food and Drink

Fish were an important food for Indian families. They were caught in many different ways. Some tribes made hand-knotted nets, both large and small. Some of the tribes in the Pacific Northwest still fish with large dipnets, from a platform built up above the edge of the riverbank. Others use a seine net (pronounced “sayn”) to catch many fish at once. Some tribes made a fish trap from sticks. Others built dams with rocks, dirt, and fallen trees; they would then scoop the fish from the water with baskets.

The Nez Perce and other tribes picked and ate many kinds of wild berries—strawberries, blueberries, wild grapes, huckleberries, serviceberries, currants, cranberries, and many more. Researchers have found there were 36 different kinds of fruit that Indians dried to eat in the winter. They knew what the plants looked like, where they grew, and when they got ripe every year. Berries were carried home in baskets and eaten fresh, but they were also dried and saved for winter.

Huckleberries and other berries—such as serviceberries and currants—were often used by the Nez Perce to make a staple food called pemmican. Meat is sliced very thin, then dried, and then pounded or ground with stones to a dry powder. Chopped dried berries are added to the powdered meat, and then melted fat (such as deer fat or buffalo fat) is mixed in. This mixture, when finished, would keep well and was very tasty and nutritious.

In addition to the staple food pemmican, camas roots and “biscuit root” were other reliable and favorite food sources. Both are small flowering plants that grow in the mountains and hills; when the plants were mature, the Indians would dig up the roots and collect them.

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The roots can be cooked fresh (sort of like a potato dumpling in your stew) or they can be dried and peeled and ground into a flour. A grinding stone was used for this—some grinding stones were small enough to travel with the people when they moved. They were flat, with a kind of hollowed-out section in the middle. A smaller smooth rounded stone was held in the hands and rolled or pounded over dried roots and other materials to pulverize them on the grinding stone.

Thirsty children usually drank ice cold water from mountain streams or rivers. They also had special drinks now and then. For example, honey or maple syrup was mixed with water to make a punch, and leaves were used to flavor other drinks. The dried leaves of snowberry, wintergreen, and spruce and twigs of raspberry, chokecherry, and wild cherry were dropped into boiling water to make teas. Many kinds of flowers were dried and used to make teas. Wild mint leaves were used to flavor teas and punch.

Courtesy of the U.S. Department of Agriculture