

Spokane 2012 Winter Dance Lessons from the Past— Strategies for the Future 65th Annual SRM Meeting

By Hugh Barrett

The Idaho and Pacific Northwest Sections of the Society for Range Management want to extend a warm and early welcome to the 2012 SRM Annual Meeting in Spokane, Washington.

Spokane lies at the eastern fringe of the Columbia Plateau—a vast, unique region bounded on the east by the Rockies, on the north by the Okanogan Highlands of northern Washington and southern British Columbia, to the west by the Cascade Range, and to the south by the Ochoco and Blue Mountain Ranges of Oregon.

The region's geologic history contains a litany of torment and cataclysm that defies the imagination. In Precambrian times the region was open ocean off the west coast of what was becoming the North American continent. As the opening of the Atlantic Basin pushed the continent westward, the subducting Pacific Plate slammed islands and microcontinents into the west coast in a slow-motion collision lasting millions of years. Integral to this ongoing tectonic activity was, and continues to be, active vulcanism that built many of our mountain ranges. During the Miocene, fluid lava emanating from large fissures near the present-day Idaho border intermittently flooded the region, covering it with layers of basalt up to five thousand feet thick.

In Pleistocene times the northern quarter of the plateau was ground and polished by the Wisconsin Lobe of the ice sheet emanating from northern Canada—the outwash from which gave rise to the deep, rich loess soils of the region—best exemplified by the Palouse grassland soils of southeastern Washington. It was during this most recent Ice Age that the great Missoula Floods scoured much of eastern Washington, leaving in their wake the isolated loess islands of eastern Washington and the region's unique Channeled Scablands.

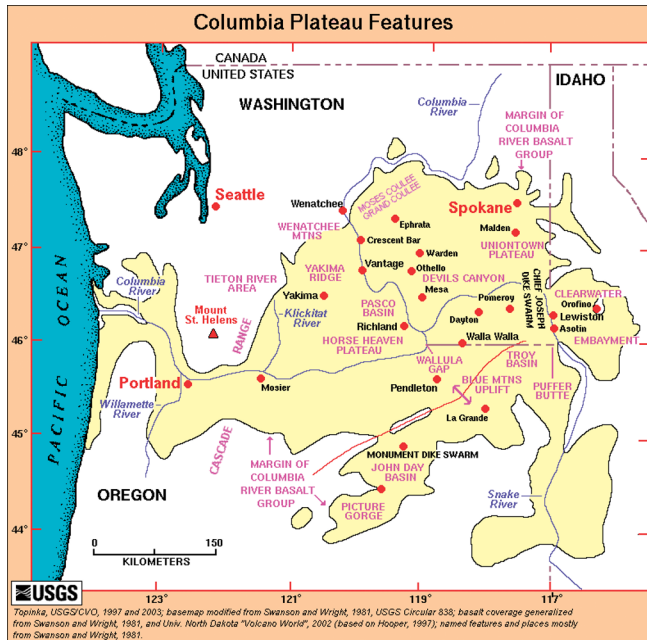
Today the Columbia River and its tributaries—the Snake, the Okanogan, the Wenatchee, the Yakima, the John Day, the Umatilla, and the Deschutes Rivers—connect the region to the Pacific Ocean.

The history of human occupation runs deep in the Columbia Plateau. Recently discovered Clovis-like projectile points found near Wenatchee, Washington, date back to about 14,000 years before the present. But the earliest tangible evidence of permanent human occupation of the Plateau is currently established by the Windust points found in the Windust Caves near present-day Pasco, Washington—dating back about 12,000 years before the present.

The Native culture, here since the waning years of the Pleistocene, is most certainly rich in traditions. It is one of these we humbly employ in hosting the 2012 SRM Annual Meeting—a tradition with too many modern parallels to be ignored.

Winter was and remains the ceremonial time for the tribes of the Plateau. In late winter—January and February—the villages of the many tribes in the region gathered for what came to be called *Winter Dance*. Winter was the quiet time, when tribes subsisted on the stored salmon and steelhead that came up the rivers from the Pacific; on the dried berries gathered in the forests, draws, and coulees; on the grass seeds harvested from the vast prairies; on deer, elk, and bear meat; and on the roots dug from the shallow, rocky soils of the region.

Winter Dance, usually a three- to four-day event, was the most important ceremony of their year—a time when the spirits were felt to be very close. In these gatherings they danced their spirit dances and sang their spirit songs—individuals of like spirit danced their spirit dances together. In “coming of age” ceremonies, the new recipients of their own spirits were recognized and celebrated.



Winter Dance was a time for the tribe to take stock of its collective spirit, to look forward to the coming year, to select those members most capable of carrying out different tasks. It was a time for settling disputes among neighboring groups and planning the communal activities of the coming year—looking forward to spring and the end of the lean time of winter.

It seems appropriate that we recognize this ancient regional tradition and the perspective it offers us when we come together on the Columbia Plateau. Once again, we welcome you to Spokane and *Winter Dance: Lessons From the Past—Strategies for the Future*. Come to Spokane and ... Let the Spirit move you!

Map of the Columbia Plateau courtesy of U.S. Geological Survey Cascades Volcano Observatory (http://vulcan.wr.usgs.gov/Volcanoes/ColumbiaPlateau/Maps/map_columbia_plateau.html).

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