



CULTURAL GROUPS

Native American

The original inhabitants of the Willamette Valley, including the area that would eventually be known as the city of Eugene, were indigenous Native Americans. These natives utilized the Willamette River for transportation, recreation and food gathering. Their activities included large game hunting, tool manufacturing, hide preparation, camas gathering and grinding, diversified hunting, fishing, woodworking, and milling. Their annual subsistence round was divided into two general seasons: summer and winter. The summer months, from about March to October, were spent in temporary open camps, moving about the valley floors and foothills to harvest roots, nuts, seeds, and berries as they ripened. Before the winter rains began in earnest, though, the people returned to permanent villages.¹

Kalapuya culture depended entirely on wild products for all food, shelter, and clothing. The tribe patterned its movements and activities closely on the various seasons when foods became available or ripe. Roots and tubers were exceptionally important, particularly camas bulbs. In addition to the expected vegetable foods and animals, plants like the thistle and cattail were important seasonal foodstuffs. Hunting and fishing took place throughout this section of the valley. The territory now known as Alton Baker Park was part of the range area of the Kalapuya tribe. Its proximity to the river was ideal for fishing and food gathering.

The Kalapuya built different types of structures to accommodate various activities and seasons. During the summer months, little shelter, if any, was built, and camps were set up in groves of trees or in the open.² Permanent wintertime structures usually consisted of "...a semisubterranean or earth-banked structure with a bark roof and a central fireplace. They were rectangular, up to 60 feet on a side, and often housed more than one family."³ Sweat houses were often built near streams or rivers, and were used for purification purposes, to bring good luck, and to promote spiritual feelings. These structures were often small, round and constructed of bent hazel sticks with a covering of fir boughs and dirt. On the interior, fired stones provided the heat for steam baths.

During the summer, the Kalapuya traded goods with neighboring tribes. They also traded with coastal groups such as the Siuslaw, and may have traded with tribes as far north as the Columbia River. Some of the foot trails established by these people later became the basis for pack trails and wagon roads, and eventually roads that are still in use today.

During the winter months, the Kalapuya resided in permanent settlements. Because they were all together during this season, winter was traditionally a time for story telling, a practice which conveyed morals, beliefs, and the tribe's world view to the younger members. Animals played a crucial role in Kalapuya life, and the "...animals and beings represented in mythology also had a real existence for the Indians in everyday life. Many of these beings were guardian spirits or spirit powers, who guided individuals through their lives and provided them with luck, strength, and protection."⁴ As a bridge into adulthood, adolescents were often sent on a vision quest. "After several days of fasting and little sleep, questers were often rewarded with a visit from a spirit power or a dream power. Sometimes during vision quests, a spirit seeker would mound or stack stones as part of the path to a prophetic dream. The remains of these vision quests are still found in the upland regions of western Oregon today."⁵ Those men and women with strong spirit powers became the chosen spiritual leaders (shamans) in the tribe. Shamans gave spiritual guidance, cured diseases and wounds and functioned as fortune tellers, weather watchers, and even helped to locate lost or stolen items.

The Kalapuya significantly altered the surrounding natural landscape by setting fire to the prairie during the autumn of each year. Burning helped create better hunting grounds, allowed for easier gathering of root and grass crops (for the basket makers especially), and the roasted grasshoppers that were left behind by prairie fires were considered a delicacy. As a result of the annual burning, the landscape during this period was one of open grasslands with scattered oak groupings on the valley floor, and open forests on the lower hillsides surrounding the valley. "In 1826, plant explorer David Douglas noted burning throughout much of this part of the Willamette Valley, and it is reported to have occurred in other parts of the Valley as late as 1848."⁶ The land adjacent to the Willamette River, and other streams and estuaries, did not burn, allowing for the maturation of tree and plant species that were indigenous to those areas. This ancient landscape was predominantly open grasslands on the valley floor with light and open forests on parts of the hills surrounding present day Eugene. The periodic burning kept much of Eugene's landscape an open prairie devoid of trees. The Oregon ash (*Fraxinus latifolia*) and the camas bulb were found in scattered patches of those areas flooded by the Willamette River and Amazon stream each Spring. On some of the hillside slopes, and higher and drier sections of the prairie, two species of oaks could be found, California black oak (*Quercus kelloggii*) and Oregon white oak (*Quercus garryana*). The thick bark of these oaks protected them from the periodic burns. These trees could be found singly or in groves and clusters, which the early settlers termed "oak openings." On the higher north and east facing slopes and in stream valleys grew patches of mixed woodland where oaks were joined by the now dominant Douglas fir (*Pseudotsuga menziesii*), Ponderosa pine (*Pinus ponderosa*), incense cedar (*Calocedrus decurrens*), madrone (*Arbutus menziesii*), and big leaf maple (*Acer macrophyllum*). This maple is now a common street tree in many of Eugene's older areas.

Early eighteenth century contact between natives and Europeans is evident in the appearance of copper, glass and iron items among the Kalapuya artifacts, suggesting a relatively peaceful relationship. As early as 1836, Catholic priests came to the Willamette Valley to "civilize" the Indians through an introduction to Christianity. Many of the Catholic settlements were not successful, however. This was due in part to the

European diseases that ravaged the native population, and the difficulty of integrating western morality and lifestyles on the native population.

The Kalapuya Indians, like other tribal people in Oregon, were decimated by a series of epidemics that were introduced in the 18th and 19th centuries. A smallpox epidemic in 1782-1783 may have killed upwards of fifty-percent of the Kalapuya. Influenza, and malaria epidemics in the 1830s destroyed a large part of the remaining population. Estimates for this outbreak suggest that 75 to 90 percent of the remaining native population was destroyed. The arrival of Euro-American settlers coupled with these population losses undoubtedly led to the decrease in prairie burning in this section of the Willamette Valley.

Overall, the impact of European contact with the Kalapuya was devastating. Joel Palmer, Oregon's first Superintendent of Indian Affairs in the early 1850s, "secured" land for settlement from the native people through the use of treaties. Palmer implemented federal policy with a considerate hand by the standards of the day. In 1854 and 1855 the treaties were ratified by Congress, and the Kalapuya's ancestral land became part of the public domain. This allowed the land to be settled by pioneers through the Donation Land Claim program. The remaining Kalapuya, along with people from numerous other Willamette Valley and Western Oregon tribal groups, were relocated to the Grand Ronde Reservation, near present day Willamina, Oregon.

The Indians who signed the treaties received no compensation, but were required to move onto the reservation. The Rogue Indian War was fought in Southern Oregon, but the Kalapuya showed no resistance to their relocation. This was possibly due to their dwindling numbers and the increasing Euro-American population.

The legacy of the Kalapuya occupation remains almost exclusively in the place names that are recognized today. Skinner Butte was known by the Kalapuya as Ya-Po-Ah, or "high place". This name lives on with the high rise senior citizen housing center by that name, at the southeast corner of Skinner Butte. The Willamette River was originally named by the natives of this river valley. Wal-lamt was the name given to the river near present day Oregon City by the native people of that region, although its meaning is disputed.⁷ There appear to be few obvious indications in the Eugene area that native people inhabited this land for centuries. These place names pay small tribute to their long occupation of this territory.⁸

Euro-American

The first whites to make a place for themselves in Oregon were transitory trappers and traders, primarily French, Canadian, and English. The Hudson Bay Company's presence along the Columbia brought these people into the Pacific Northwest, though they were by no means settlers. The white settlers – those expressly looking to establish homes and lives in the West – came to Oregon in the early 1840s, and moved southward from Portland, down the Willamette Valley to Eugene. Settlers came from the East Coast, often by way of the Midwest states where they lived for a while before giving in to the pressing urge to continue westward. Traveling on the Oregon Trail, they

typically left from Independence, Missouri (before 1850) or Council Bluffs, Iowa (after 1850).⁹ Though the possibilities offered by the Oregon Trail attracted settlers from all over the eastern and Midwestern states, a good many came from the states of Kentucky, Tennessee, and Missouri as well.¹⁰ A



Mounts' pioneer residence in what was to become Santa Clara. Photo courtesy of the Lane County Historical Museum (GN6311)

dominance of settlers from the South was evident in the pro-Southern sentiments that preceded the Civil War, even

though Oregon eventually voted against slavery and remained loyal to the Union. By 1910, the census recorded that the majority of Lane County residents claiming foreign nationality or decent hailed from Germany, Canada, Denmark, or Greece. Similar patterns appeared to continue in the 1920 census.¹¹ With these precedents set, Eugene became and remained a community dominated by white citizens of European descent. This dominance would lead to a history of difficulty for minorities trying to integrate into the area's society.

African-American

The arrival of African-Americans in Oregon followed that of white settlers by a number of years and their numbers were few. In 1860, 128 African-Americans lived in Oregon, though only one was recorded as a resident of Lane County. Many in Oregon favored the South as the Civil War loomed, however, the state voted against slavery in 1857. It also voted to prohibit the residency of free blacks, which made settlement for African-Americans difficult. Blacks were definitely not regarded as equals by the white population. In Eugene, African-Americans primarily served as laborers and domestic servants, though it is likely that more kept to rural areas and perhaps pursued agricultural occupations. In 1862, African-Americans (along with other minorities) became subject to a poll-tax that required them to pay a fee of five dollars annually. If this tax was not paid, the subject was punished with forced labor for the state until the tax could be paid off.¹² This was one incidence of open discrimination against minorities at an early date.

The African-American population of Eugene began to grow after World War I. However, even in 1930 only sixteen African-Americans were counted in Lane County and only a family of five lived in Eugene itself. The first permanent black residents of Eugene were the family of Leo and Pearl Mae Washington. Both Leo and Pearl Mae held domestic and service related jobs, maintaining the traditional roles that African-Americans had played in Eugene since early settlement. However, they became prominent in the black community, owning a house and providing lodging for other African-Americans in the area.¹³ In fact, many African-Americans that were able to

obtain employment and housing subsequently assisted those less fortunate; finding housing and jobs for others and strengthening the bonds of the black community.

After World War II, the African-American population in Eugene began to grow at a more notable rate. Many African-Americans had come to Oregon from places like Texas, Louisiana and Arkansas to work in the defense plants near Portland.¹⁴ After the war they dispersed to other metropolitan areas throughout the state. New families moved into the outskirts of Eugene and a few were able to purchase or rent houses in town, though deed transfer restrictions limited most non-white people from purchasing property. Those who could not own a house established a tent village on the north bank of the Willamette River near the Ferry Street Bridge. This settlement grew up around a small house occupied by the Reynolds family, who had obtained the property from Sam Reynolds' white employer. The people who came to live in the tent village were unable to find housing, because most white residents of Eugene were unwilling to sell or rent to black families. By 1948 the tent village, consisting mainly of wood frame structures with canvas roofs, grew to house more than fifty people in eleven tents and three houses. At this time, African-Americans were regarded with an inconsistent mixture of intolerance and sympathy by white Eugene residents. Though some aid was given to them, they were largely excluded from society. Religious guidance was provided to them by a local Christian church, which sent student ministers to conduct services in the tent village.¹⁵

In the late 1940s, the tent village was displaced by replacement of the Ferry Street Bridge. Despite a general sentiment of intolerance in the city, many community groups came together to help relocate the evicted African-American residents of the tent village. These people were moved to economically depressed or isolated areas where their presence was inconspicuous to the white population of Eugene. One particularly isolated settlement was located to the far west side of the city around Sam Reynolds Road south of West 11th Avenue. Residents here had very little in the way of amenities, though they established a church and a strong sense of community among themselves. It was not until the mid-1960s that any real attempt to integrate the black community was made. With the help of various civil rights groups, African-American families were assisted in relocating to decent housing in any area of the city they chose to live.¹⁶

Danish

The Danish were particularly influential in the River Road area of Eugene. These settlers came to Oregon from Denmark by way of the Midwest. They had left their European homeland for various reasons, including the unavailability of land to farm in Denmark and the political oppression of German rule brought on by the end of the Franco-Prussian War in 1870-71.¹⁷ Established on a farm purchased from E.C. Smith, the Danebo (Dane Borough) community became a haven for Danish settlers from Iowa, Nebraska and other Midwestern states. Here they could continue to speak Danish and practice the customs and traditions brought with them from the Old World. In the 1890s, Reverend P.L.C. Hansen arrived in Eugene from Portland where he had been a pastor of Bethany Church. He obtained 1,250 acres of land west of Eugene and invited Danish

settlers to take up shares of the tract.¹⁸ He also established a new congregation of the United Danish Lutheran Church in Danebo on December 15, 1900.

As in other minority communities, the residents banded together to provide for their peers. During the Depression this was particularly prevalent. New settlers joining the Danebo colony were often given employment at the Booth-Kelly Lumber Company. Dairy farming was another prosperous industry for the Danish residents of Eugene. The land where Danebo was located, however, was difficult to farm. Being marshy, it required a great deal of labor for settlers to drain it for cultivation and the establishment of dairy farms. They were successful, nonetheless, and sold butter to the residents of Eugene. The Eugene Farmers Creamery was a cooperative founded by Danebo farmers in 1914, based on cooperative farming ventures that were popular in Denmark. It was located in an existing facility that had previously been owned by a small independently owned creamery. Danish farmers also raised poultry in large quantities, especially during World War I.

With no official government structure, the Danebo community centered around the church, a focus harkening back to community structure in Denmark and encouraged by Reverend Hansen's initial leadership. The Bethesda Lutheran Church was the center of the community, with services presented entirely in Danish until 1920. Not without its problems, the church experienced the ups and downs of the community. In 1914, some controversy was experienced in the congregation over the matter of establishing two satellite churches in Eugene, and a later rivalry between two pastors cause 300 people to leave the Bethesda Church.¹⁹ However, on the whole the church flourished. In 1950, a large Parish Hall was built to accommodate the growing congregation and the activities it hosted. Church Park, which had been constructed on church grounds in 1945, honored Danebo citizens who had fought in World War II.²⁰ An early Danish school also acted as a civic focus for the community. Known as the Kompp School for the family on whose land it was located, the one room school house accommodated eight grades, with 40 children enrolled at the peak of the school year. Often students were kept out of school to help with farm work back home, however.²¹

Schooling and commerce, though helpful to the Danebo community, also resulted in a dilution of Danish heritage. As time passed, English became more prevalent among Danish residents of the area and marriage with those outside the community has acted to integrate Danebo with the rest of Eugene. The expansion of Eugene city boundaries has also brought Danebo closer to the urban center, melding the Danish colony's land with various residential developments and nearby neighborhoods.

Asian

Like African-Americans, Asians arrived in Oregon a few years after the territory's initial settlement. Thus, the Chinese made up one of the first minority groups to settle in the area. They emigrated to the West Coast of the United States due to agrarian hardship as well as foreign and domestic conflicts in China. Their primary intent was to make money through labor and return to China.²² Though indentured servitude was not

prevalent, the return to China was not easily accomplished and many settled permanently in Oregon.

A large influx of Chinese immigrants arrived in conjunction with the California Gold Rush in 1849, and by 1860 there were approximately 425 Chinese living in Oregon. In 1878, there were twelve Chinese and one Japanese resident of Eugene. Though mining was the dominant draw, those Asians who lived in Eugene worked primarily on the railroad, in laundries, or as laborers. In more rural areas, farming was a successful occupation and many Asians were able to gain control of the land they worked, even though land ownership was heavily restricted. Asians, like African-Americans, were required to pay the five dollar annual poll tax of 1862 that was levied against all non-whites.²³

Starting around 1910, a certain distrust of Oregon's Asian population came to the fore. Reports of Chinese and Japanese residents congregating and inciting rebellion were numerous. In localities where particularly strong Asian communities were situated the fear and hostility expressed by the white population was intense.²⁴ Anti-Asian sentiments continued to grow in the years leading up to World War II. For Chinese and Japanese, a break with Old World traditions resulted and Asian Americans in Oregon had to adjust to new concepts of their place in society. After World War II, Asians continued to emigrate to Oregon, though their numbers were small. Some came to teach at the University of Oregon, while others worked or owned small businesses and restaurants. A good portion of the Asian population also consisted of Asian women married to American servicemen, who returned to the States after the wars fought in Asia.²⁵

Hispanic

In more modern times, Eugene has seen an influx of immigration from Mexico. Starting in the 1930s, the Depression brought Hispanics to Oregon looking for work. Even in times of economic hardship, the Anglo population avoided hard farm labor, leaving these jobs open for migrant Hispanic workers. In a seasonal cycle, they were employed harvesting fruits, nuts and other crops.²⁶ Because of the agricultural focus in the River Road area and a predominance of filbert orchards and other fruit crops, the area may have been a prime location for Hispanic workers to settle. The current ethnic mix of the nearby Whiteaker neighborhood may also be evidence of the draw that area had on Hispanic farm laborers.

Oregon became one of the largest supporters of interstate migratory labor. Hispanics were also readily employed by the railroads to maintain tracks. When food production became a booming business during World War II, Hispanic farm labor was a critical element in the effort to produce supplies for both domestic and foreign distribution. During this time the U.S. government recruited around 15,136 Mexican laborers to cure labor shortages on American farms. Undoubtedly, many of these people were placed in Oregon's agricultural areas. They worked on a contract basis, with wages, healthcare, and housing provided. Many stayed on after the war, even though their labor contracts were discontinued. They were able to find plenty of other agricultural work that was not

preferred by Anglos and found opportunities for employment in food processing and warehousing as well.²⁷

Because of their employment focus, Hispanic residents of Oregon tended to settle in agricultural areas, especially the Willamette Valley and Lane County. Oregon provided better living and working conditions as well as plentiful opportunities, and so became a desirable place for settlement. Hispanics retained a strong sense of cultural identity, continuing to practice their dominant faith, Catholicism, speak Spanish and observe their native traditions. They were seen as an influential minority, and rather than being discriminated against, they were readily integrated. A good number attended the University of Oregon, while others found employment in the lumber mills and railroads. In 1965, Club Latino Americano was founded and worked to provide social and civic interaction for Hispanic Americans in Oregon as well as reaching out to bring the culture to the rest of the population.²⁸

Cultural Endnotes

¹Toepel, Kathryn Anne, "The Western Interior", *The First Oregonians: An Illustrated Collection of Essays on Traditional Lifeways, Federal-Indian Relations, and the State's Native People Today*. Portland, Oregon: The Oregon Council for the Humanities, 1991, 20.

²Toepel, 18.

³Toepel, 18.

⁴Toepel, 20.

⁵Toepel, 20.

⁶Lawrence, Henry W. "A Natural Landscape History of Eugene." *Lane County Historian*. Spring 1981, Vol. 26, 3.

⁷McArthur, Lewis A. *Oregon Geographic Names*. Portland, OR: Oregon Historical Society Press, 1992, 909. "The meaning of the word 'Willamette' is not known, although there are several theories, including Mackey who says Wallamet means 'spill water' and was applied to the river above the Willamette falls. Lewis and Clark did not observe the stream on their westward trip, nor on the eastward trip either until their attention was called to it by Indians after they had gone as far as the Sandy River. Clark went back and entered the Willamette on April 2, 1806, calling it the Multnomah."

⁸Carter, Elizabeth and Michelle Dennis. "Native Americans and Early Exploration: To 1845." *Eugene Area Historic Context Statement*. [Native American sub-section reproduced from this source, which was tribally approved in 1996.]

⁹Carter, 13.

¹⁰Carter, 27.

¹¹*Thirteenth Census of the United States, 1910, and Fourteenth Census of the United States, 1920.*

¹²Carter, 33.

¹³ Wright, Sally and David Pinyerd. *Eugene Modernism, 1935-65*. (City of Eugene Planning & Development, 2003), 10.1.

¹⁴League of Women Voters of Eugene. *The Negro in Eugene*, 2.

¹⁵Wright, 10.2.

¹⁶Wright, 10.3.

¹⁷Lindley, William R. "Danebo Development Centered Around the Church," *Lane County Historian*, 4.

¹⁸Lindley, 4.

¹⁹Lindley, 8.

²⁰Wright, 10.3.

²¹Lindley, 6.

²²Carter, 33.

²³Carter, 33.

²⁴Carter, 72.

²⁵Wright, 10.4.

²⁶Wright, 10.4.

²⁷Wright, 10.4.

²⁸Wright, 10.4.