

ANTHROPOLOGICAL REPORT ON THE IDENTITY, TREATY STATUS  
AND FISHERIES OF THE SAUK-SUIATTLE TRIBE OF INDIANS

SAUK-SUIATTLE IDENTITY

In the years prior to the Treaty of Point Elliott and for several decades thereafter, the people living on the headwaters of the Skagit River had minimal direct contact with white settlers. The whites knew little about these Indians beyond the mere fact of their existence.

At the time of the treaty it was known that various villages existed on the headwaters of the Skagit River, but as the river system had not been explored by the whites the location of the tributary rivers was not well understood. Information about the upper part of the river system and the Indians residing there was derived from accounts given to the whites by Indians living on the lower portion of the Skagit and in neighboring localities on the Sound.

In 1853 Edward A. Starling, Indian Agent for the Puget Sound district, submitted a report to Isaac I. Stevens, the newly appointed Superintendent of Indian Affairs. Starling's report included a list of the names, approximate locations, and estimated numbers of all the Indians in western Washington about whom he was able to get any information. The following entries are extracted from his list.

<u>Names</u>	<u>Locations</u>	<u>Numbers</u>
Skagit	N. end of Whitby's Island, Skagit R. & vicinity	500
Squa-nah-mish	a small portion of Whitby's Island & vicinity of Kikial- lus R.	60
Sock-a-muke	Head waters of Skagit River	200

Apart from noting that they spoke a common language with other residents of the Skagit river system, the last entry constitutes the sum total of information in Starling's report concerning the people who lived on what is now known as the Sauk River. Both the Sauk River and the Suiattle River rise in the Cascade Mountains and flow into the upper reaches of the Skagit.

The Starling report is not very informative about the Sock-a-muke, or Sauk, but it is important to note that the Sauk River people are listed as a separate entity distinct from the Skagit River people.

The separate identity of the Sauk Indians was consistently recognized in reports referring to them before, during, and after the Treaty of Point Elliott.

In March 1854 George Gibbs submitted a report on the Indian Tribes of Washington Territory to Capt. George B. McClellan commanding the western division of the North Pacific Railroad Exploration. Included was an estimate of Indian tribes in western Washington undertaken in January 1854. The entire Skagit River drainage system was recorded in the following manner.

<u>Names of tribes and bands</u>	<u>Where located</u>	<u>Total bands</u>	<u>Total tribes</u>	<u>Remarks</u>
Skagit	Skagit river & Penn's Cove	300	....	Estimate
N'qua-cha-mish Sma-lih-hu Mis-kai-whu Sa-ku-me-hu	Branches of Skagit river	300	....	Estimate
		—	600	

In this tally the Sa-ku-me-hu, or Sauk Indians, are again distinguished from the residents of the main Skagit River. Gibbs states in the text that his information about the Skagit river system is based on the opinions of the few settlers in the vicinity. They estimated that there were about 300 Indians on the main river and perhaps as many again on the several headwaters. This presumably explains the arrangement above wherein the last four groups appear to be classed together.

Similarly, the apparent classification of all the peoples of the drainage system as a single tribe is an artifact of the tabulation unsupported by any information regarding political alignments. Probably the most that can be drawn from the above tabulation is that the settlers reported to Gibbs those distinct identifying names for groups which the Indians themselves used. Inferences regarding political relationships are clearly unwarranted.

All but one of the five above mentioned groups were listed in the preamble to the Treaty of Point Elliott and each of those so listed was identified with one or more signatories on that document. The Skagit, Sah-ku-mehu, Nook-wa-chah-mish, and Me-see-qua-guilch are each listed as separate entities on the treaty.

Under the terms of the treaties, the Indians were not required to remove to reservations until after the Congress had ratified the agreements. However, in November 1855 temporary reservations were set up in order to separate those Indians who were regarded as friendly or at least neutral from those who were regarded as "hostile". Indians were ordered to come to the reservations voluntarily or risk being taken for combatants.

Several temporary locations were established on Whidbey Island to accommodate the Indian populations of the Skagit, Stillaguamish, and Snohomish drainage systems. One of the critical concerns was to prevent an influx of interior Indians into western Washington. Communication with the interior could be effected through Indian trails across the Cascades leading into Sauk country in the north or, alternatively into Snoqualmie country in the south. Apparently there was no real concern about the northern route. Forts were built in the Snohomish watershed at Snoqualmie falls and the pass carefully watched. There is no record of activity in the Sauk country nor any evidence of a concerted effort to bring the Sauk Indians into the temporary reservations.

It is possible that some of the people living on the Sauk and Suiattle never came into the temporary reservations. Certainly some did and apparently of these, some went to the Penn Cove location with the Skagit while others went to the Holmes Harbour location with the Stillaguamish.

The upriver people evidently came into the reservations later than the people living nearer to the saltwater. Captain R.C. Fay, in charge of the reservation at Penn Cove reported to Stevens on February 11, 1856

...quiet here....except the arrival of about one hundred upriver Indians, they say that they tried to get in before, but they could not till the warm weather opened the river....

Apparently the upriver Indians experienced considerable difficulty in adjusting to the provisions available to them on Whidbey Island and they departed soon after their arrival. Under date of March 9, 1856, Fay reported to Stevens

...the upriver Indians have all left; they could not subsist on clams and such fish as are caught hereabout, they make use of deer and elk as well as small river fish for food on their own ground and were much disappointed that they did not get fresh beef and pork constantly. I had but little flour while they were here....

Some of the Indians who initially came onto the island reservations undoubtedly returned to their own territory and remained there. Others returned temporarily to catch and cure fish, to hunt and collect berries, and to plant and tend their potato crops. Under Stevens' express directions, the agents actively encouraged those Indians whose homes were distant from the "war ground" to return periodically to procure food supplies. The Indians were expected to bring provisions back to the temporary reservations. However, in some cases they were not permitted to return. On May 7, 1856 Fay reported to Stevens

...The Indians belonging to this Location are scattered around the shores of Pens Cove and Oak Harbour, I have prevented them coming in, in some instances, having no provisions on hand for them....

Agent N.D. Hill, in charge of the location farther south on Whidbey Island at Holmes Harbour noted the arrival and departure of Sock a bute people through the spring and early summer of 1856. Evidently a number who had been on his reservation were permitted to return to their homes in April to do their planting. Among these was a man named Sky-oois who was identified as their chief. When he returned to the reservation, he brought with him five men with their families who had never previously been down. Among the records is preserved a roll of the Sock a bute families at the Holmes Harbour location. According to Hill, some of these people later transferred to the Penn Cove reservation.

These records are instructive in several respects. First, they show that the Sauk River Indians were consistently referred to as a distinct group, variously rendered as Sock-a-muke, Sakhumehu, or Sock a bute. Second, they make it clear that upriver Indians were accustomed to a different diet from that obtainable on the saltwater. Third, it is evident that travel from the foothills country to the Sound was difficult, if not impossible, during the winter months.

The upriver peoples, like the Sauk and other foothills groups shared a generally similar culture with the coastal dwellers but there were also some fairly basic contrasts in their modes of living. Some of the differences related to the radically different environments to which the coastal people and the foothills people adapted. Others

resulted from cultural influences reaching the upriver groups from interior peoples like the Methow and Wenatchee with whom the Sauk married and traded.

The contrasts between the Sauk River Indians and the peoples on the lower reaches of the drainage system were sufficiently important to justify speaking of two distinct subcultures. Before pursuing the implications of this situation, some elaboration of the foregoing statements is in order.

Let us begin with the basic similarities in culture which the Sauk people shared with their downstream neighbors on the Skagit and Stillaguamish river systems. First of all, they spoke mutually intelligible dialects of the same language and there was relatively easy movement along the river to the downstream Skagit and overland by trail from Sauk country to the upper reaches of the Stillaguamish valley. At treaty times there was considerable intermarriage of Sauk with Upper Skagit and Sauk with Stillaguamish. The Sauk, like their downstream neighbors, depended primarily on salmon for food and located their villages along the rivers and streams where they had access to productive fisheries.

Reference to some of the contrasts has already been made. Although salmon (including steelhead) was the food staple, other elements of diet contrasted sharply. The Sauk were accustomed to a higher proportion of meat from land game in their diet, whereas their downstream neighbors had access to a wide variety of molluscs and seafood unavailable to the Sauk except through trade. Related to the different resources were distinctive technologies for taking and processing meat, skins, etc.

Quite apart from these readily visible contrasts relating directly to ecological differences, there were sharply differing orientations in social structure and world view. The Sauk were cut off from the coast during the winter season. This was the period of intensive ceremonialism on the coast when political, social and religious aspects of the culture were elaborated at community and inter-community feasts and winter dances. It was at this season that the prerogatives of wealth and power were displayed among the coastal peoples.

The Sauk did not participate in this. They spent the winter in their own territory and appear to have been much influenced by their Plateau neighbors with whom they shared a number of specific traits. Like their interior neighbors, they did not hold slaves. There was a premium on maintaining peaceful relations and aggressiveness was regarded with disfavor. In all this, they contrasted with their coastal neighbors.

The experiment of coming to the temporary reservations on Whidbey Island and attempting to live in a new environment in close proximity with culturally different peoples must have convinced the Sauk of the stress they could expect if they removed to the permanent reservation at Tulalip. Apart from the discomfort of adjusting to dampness, salt air, and life at sea level, they would have to adjust to people whose basic values were utterly at variance with their own. In my opinion, these factors may have played an important role in their decision to return to and remain in their own territory.

Whatever the reasons, the record is clear that some of the Sauk people, if not most, continued to live along the Sauk and Suiattle rivers where their descendants still reside. Others removed to the Tulalip reservation, or attempted to do so. Apparently some of these were driven away by the agent in charge, Father Chirouse, who was a missionary priest, because of religious differences.

#### TREATY STATUS

The Sah-ku-mehu are named in the preamble to the Treaty of Point Elliott and one of the signatories to that document is identified with that group. The signatory is listed as Daht-le-de-min, a name which it has been asserted belonged to a Skagit River Indian. It is a matter of controversy whether the individual who purportedly signed the treaty was correctly identified as to village affiliation.

Whatever the facts may be, the United States has always regarded the Sauk Indians as parties to the Treaty of Point Elliott. According to George Gibbs (1877:180), the Sakumehu were signed for by Goliah as head chief for the Skagit River populations in any event. The relevant section reads in part

4th. The Skagits, including the Kikiallu, Nukwatsamish, Tow-ah-ha, Smali-hu, Sakumehu, Miskaiwhu, Miseekwigweelis, Swinamish, and Skwonamish....They altogether amount to 1,475, and have been assigned Goliah as head chief.

The assignment of a head chief to represent an entire drainage system and all the people living on it was consistent policy at the Treaty of Point Elliott.

## FISHING SITES AND FISHING TECHNIQUES

Because white penetration to Sauk territory came relatively late, it is not possible to document specific fishing sites used by the Sauk Indians in 1855 by means of written records.

Information regarding fishing and food preparation was collected in the 1950's from elderly Indians by Sally Snyder in the course of ethnographic field work for a doctoral dissertation. According to Dr. Snyder's notes, the Suiattle River was a salmon hatching ground and a Sauk fishing ground. She noted that Buck Creek was a salmon spawning area and that the Sauk camped there in June and July to dry early springs.

This information is corroborated and amplified by present members of the tribe who specifically mention the following creeks, all tributaries of the Suiattle River as old and favored fishing sites of the Sauk Indians. Big Creek, Tenas Creek, and Straight Creek were particularly noted as steelhead streams. Milk Creek was a favorite place for taking Dolly Varden. Springs were taken in Downey Creek and Tenas Creek. Other favorite streams included Lime Creek and Sulphur Creek.

According to Dr. Snyder's information, which is confirmed by tribal elders today, salmon were taken by spearing, in dipnets, and in traps. Several kinds of traps were used; some for salmon, others for trout. Weirs were built across smaller streams tributary to the Sauk River. One location was about seven miles up from the mouth of the Sauk. People who arrived first at the site helped to build the

weir. On its completion, all the men who had helped to build it were entitled to use it, but later arrivals were also welcomed as co-users.

Apparently the sites along the Sauk and Suiattle rivers were considered to be the fishing grounds of the Sauk-Suiattle group, although others might sometimes join them in fishing there. In similar fashion some of the Sauk people went to the Cascades on the Skagit River to fish and to Baker River to fish with Upper Skagit friends and relatives there.

Evidently Bedal Creek, a tributary of the Sauk River, was a favorite steelhead fishing ground. Other fishing sites mentioned in Dr. Snyder's notes were along Baker River and Cascade River.

There is some historical evidence to suggest that there were either permanent villages or else fishing camps in these areas in the 1880's. References to people living in these locations occurs in correspondence preserved in the National Archives relating to early surveys in the region. Since the matter is somewhat tangential to present concerns, full documentation is not provided here.

In addition to procuring salmon (including steelhead) and other fish in the foothills region, the Sauk people travelled to the saltwater to procure marine life, particularly shellfish, unavailable in their own territory. At least in historic times, the beaches around Tulalip were a favorite resort.

#### FOOD PRESERVATION

Salmon and steelhead were eaten both in fresh and cured form. Curing was by smoke drying only. Smokehouses were erected at all important fishing places.

Dr. Snyder was told of two methods of preparing steelhead livers. One of these was also said to be used for spring salmon livers. This method involved roasting the livers on a split willow stick about three feet long and one and one half inches thick. The stick was split part way down and the meat tied in the fork thus created.

The other procedure was said to be used only for steelhead livers and was described as follows: The bag from the neck of the steelhead was cleaned and turned inside out. The little steelhead livers were put in the bag and the bag was hung by the fire and roasted.

The second process sounds more to me as if a smoke-drying technique were being described. Dr. Snyder's recipe came from an elderly woman in the 1950's. I was unable to obtain confirmation of her data from middle-aged male Indians at the present time.

#### CONCLUSIONS

1. The Sauk-Suiattle Indian Tribe is composed primarily of descendants of the Sakhumehu and other Indians who lived on the upper reaches of the Skagit River system in 1855.
2. The Sakumehu are named in the preamble of the Treaty of Point Elliott, January 22, 1855. One of the signatories is identified as Sakhumehu on that document.
3. The Sauk River Indians known variously as Sakumehu, Sock-a-muke, and Sock a bute have resided continuously since pre-treaty times on the headwaters of the Skagit River.

4. The Sauk have always regarded themselves as a distinct and separate group and have been so regarded by other Indians and historically by whites.

5. The principal fisheries of the Sauk Indians included Sauk River, Cascade River, Suiattle River and the following creeks which are tributary to the Suiattle River -- Big Creek, Tenas Creek, Buck Creek, Lime Creek, Sulphur Creek, Downey Creek, Straight Creek, and Milk Creek. Bedal Creek, tributary to the Sauk River was also a Sauk fishing ground.

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