

RECLAMATION

Managing Water in the West

U.S. Department of the Interior
Bureau of Reclamation

Keller and the Sanpoil River

Lester Herman: This here is the Sanpoil River. In the springtime, salmon came up river. Surrounding villages would camp down there. They would have fish traps; the fish would jump into the traps by the thousands, and I mean thousands! Salmon was the number one resource of food in this valley. The surrounding villages would all come here at salmon time and get their winter supply.

The Sanpoil is a beautiful river with good campsites. But the only fish that come upriver now are the rainbow, that's all. There's no steelhead in the river. It's fun to fish, but it's not living off the river—that's what Grand Coulee Dam took away, living off the river. Surrounding tribes survived on this river. Back in that time, it was very, very important to the tribes.

Alice Irey: I'm Alice Irey, I'm 85 years old. My brothers fished, mostly they did their fishing at Keller. Well, we used to go over there in June, that's when they had the Salmon Days. All the Indians gathered there and they had a celebration there. Of course the men all fished and my two brothers. They had fish traps, and your spears...long poles with hooks on the end of their pole. In them deep holes where the salmon would go, they would hook them out of there.

There would be camps all along the Sanpoil River, the elders, anybody could come, especially the time when the celebration was on. They had races, stick games, and cards. At night that's what they used to do...play stick games and play cards. I remember I had an aunt, she used to get in races and she used to beat them all. You know, they'd win blankets and things like that. There was hardly any money that was bet. It was material things—blankets and shawls and beadwork, even their horses and cows and things. My grandmother used to come back home with a horse, two or three horses. That's the way she got her horses. She got a start in cows by winning them.

My mother and aunts used to dry the salmon that my brothers caught. We had a lot of dried salmon. To Indians you know, salmon was the most important food there was. And just like venison and deer meat, that was important to the Indians, when they preserved and dried it. That was food that would last all winter long. It kept them...I guess it kept them alive.