Northwest Coast
Native Americans
Did you know?

By Martin Martinez
Did you know that Northwest Coast Native Americans lived in many areas in the Pacific Northwest?

They lived in what are now known as the states of Oregon, Washington, Alaska and the western regions of the country of Canada? It is thought that Native Americans came to North America and settled in the Pacific Northwest approximately 12,000 years ago. That means they were here before the United States and Canada were formed!

Now you know.
Did you know that Northwest Coast people lived in a house with their parents, brothers, sisters, uncles, aunts, grandparents, and cousins?

They shared their food, shelter and helped each other in many different ways. Many families lived together in villages and were governed by a chief. Shamans were men or women in the village who acted as their doctor.

Now you know.
Did you know that Northwest Coast people built large one-room houses called **longhouses** where 40 to 60 people lived?

Longhouses were built in rows usually near a shore or beach. Longhouses were made from large wooden pillars and cedar planks. They would use rocks to keep the roof planks from blowing off in bad weather. Many longhouses had a large fireplace in the middle. When a fire was burning, a roof plank above the fire was moved to let the smoke out.

Many Northwest Coast people lived in their longhouses during the winter, but would build shelters near favorite fishing holes to live in during the summer.

**Now you know.**
Did you know that the cedar tree was very important for Northwest Coast people?

Cedar trees provided shelter, tools, transportation, arts, crafts, and even clothing. The trunks of the cedar tree were used for house posts and canoes. The outer bark of the cedar tree was woven into baskets, screens and sleeping mats. The softer inner bark was made into fine fibers. They then used these fibers to weave ponchos, skirts, capes, hats, and tablecloths. Cedar trees could be split into boards to be used to make boxes, bows, arrows, spears and clubs. The roots of the cedar tree were used to make ropes, cords and baskets.

Now you know.
Did you know that Northwest Coast Native Americans had many ways to gather food?

Beaches, streams, rivers and oceans were very important for Northwest Coast people because they provided an easy way for them to gather food. They gathered clams, oysters, crabs and seaweed from the beaches. They would fish for salmon, herring, eulachon and dogfish from the rivers and streams using nets, traps and baited hooks. They would also hunt and fish for whales, seals, sea otters, porpoises, codfish and halibut in the ocean by using harpoons.

On land, they would use bows and arrows and traps to hunt for elk, deer, and bears. Northwest Coast people would also gather eggs from nests, roots, leaves and berries from the forest.

Some of the food was eaten fresh, however most of the food was preserved in fish oil for the winters.

Now you know.
**Did you know** that Northwest Coast people used tools to help them in their everyday life?

Tools were made from materials they found where they lived. They would use their tools to make longhouses, canoes, arts, crafts, clothing, baskets and items to help them hunt and fish.

They used stones to make hammers. A tool’s handle was made from wood, bone, or deer antlers. Seashells and sharpened flat rocks were used to make the part of a tool that cuts.

Hammers and wooden wedges were used to split cedar logs into boards. They used bark beaters made from whalebones and mauls made from heavy stones to soften and shred cedar bark so it could be used for weaving. They a tool called the adze to cut, scrape and gouge.

**Now you know.**
Did you know that Northwest Coast people made clothing from materials they found in their environment? Women wore skirts, tunics, or sarongs that were made of either deerskin or woven from the soft inner bark from cedar trees. In cold weather, men and women would wear cedar bark robes or ponchos and would also wrap themselves in furs. During the cold season, men would also wear seal or deerskin leggings and moccasins. In warm weather, men wore very little except for a woven hat with a brim to keep the sun’s glare out of their eyes.

Many Northwest Coast people made their clothing from using the soft inner bark from cedar trees. They would first soak the inner bark until it was soft and then beat it until it broke into soft shreds. They would then roll the bark into threads and begin weaving. The threads were woven so tightly that they were waterproof. Many ponchos and hats were made from the soft inner bark and were also waterproof.

Now you know.
Did you know that Northwest Coast people lived in different tribes or groups? Each tribe lived in a certain area and had its own language, rules, and beliefs. There were approximately 20+ tribes that lived throughout the Pacific Northwest. Many tribes built canoes made from cedar trees to get around. Tribes would trade with one another to get materials they needed. War would sometimes break out between tribes.

Some of the major tribes in the Pacific Northwest were the Haida, Tlingit, Chinook, Kwakiutl, Bella Coola, and Tsimshian.

Now you know
Did you know that Northwest Coast people told stories and played music?

Northwest Coast people would explain things they did not understand through myths or stories about supernatural beings. Some stories explained the connection between a person’s ancestors and important animal spirits. Other stories explained how animals became the way they are. In many stories, the animals often talked and acted like humans. Stories would often be told during the winter in the longhouse and during celebrations. Stories were passed down orally from generation to generation because they did not have books or a written language.

Singing and dancing was popular among Northwest Coast people. Men would usually play instruments or clapped while women would sing. Some of the instruments they had were tambourines, rattles, whistles, and drums. The instruments were usually carved from wood and rawhide.

Now you know.
Did you know that Northwest Coast people created art and had different ceremonies?

Northwest Coast people could spend a lot of time making artwork because they lived in a mild climate with plenty of food. They made their artwork by carving wood and bone with special designs, usually of animals. Each family used a certain animal design as its clan crest in order to show others it was their property. Artists used certain shapes to make their designs and used the colors black, red, blue-green, blue, yellow and white. Their artwork was usually symmetrical, or same on both sides. Totem poles were large pieces of artwork that were carved with a family’s clan crest that told important stories from their past.

Northwest Coast people also held social gatherings called potlatches for many different occasions, such as to raise a new totem pole, celebrate a new longhouse, or announce a marriage. During the potlatch, the family that was hosting it would feed its guests, danced and sang family songs, and gave gifts to every guest.

Now you know.
Did you know that ancestors of Northwest Coast people live among us in cities and towns in the Pacific Northwest? Some Northwest Coast people live in special areas called reservations. Some schools on the reservations teach children the language and customs of their ancestors, as well as the major school subjects. Artists continue to carve totem poles, boxes, and masks that are used at potlatches and other events. Some Northwest Coast people continue to have ceremonies and remember the customs of their ancestors.

Now you know.
adze: (noun) A cutting tool used for shaping wood.

Bella Coola: (noun) A major language group of early Northwest Coast people. Early Bella Coola people lived on what is now the West Coast of Canada.

clan crest: (noun) The images on totem poles and other items that represent a particular clan.

eulachon: (noun) An oily fish that is also called a candle-fish. Early Northwest Coast people ate eulachon oil at every meal and used it to preserve food.

longhouse: (noun) A long building with one room. Early Northwest Coast people lived in wooden longhouses during the winter months.
**myth:** *(noun)* A traditional story, especially one concerning the early history of a people, or explaining some natural or social phenomenon, and typically involving supernatural beings or events.

**Pacific Northwest:** *(noun)* A region in the northwest of North America.

**potlatch:** *(noun)* Important Northwest Coast ceremony during which the host gives away or destroys material goods. Potlatches were given for many reasons.

**reservation:** *(noun)* An area of land owned by native people.

**shaman:** *(noun)* In early Northwest Coast society, an expert on curing people using animal spirits.

**symmetrical:** *(adjective)* Able to split into two similar halves by one dividing line. Early Northwest Coast art was often symmetrical.
BIBLIOGRAPHY

Hansen Cleary, Elaine - A Thematic Unit About Northwest Indians

Johnson, Michael - Native Tribes of the North and Northwest Coast

McGuire, Margit - Storypath: Early Northwest Coast People (Teacher’s Edition)

Press, Petra - Indians of the Norwest: Traditions, History, Legends, and Life