

CUJ History, Tradition & Culture

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('house, dwelling, den')

Tribal homes have adapted to lifestyle changes over centuries



TEPEE OF CHIEF HOMLILI MOORHOUSE

Longhouse tule mat lodge of Chief Homli on the Umatilla Indian Reservation. Photograph by Major Lee Moorhouse, source from National Anthropological Archives, Smithsonian Institution.

Traditional Homes of the Columbia Plateau

The Weyíletpuu, Imatalamláma, and Walúlapam peoples, known today as the Confederated Tribes of the Umatilla Indian Reservation (CTUIR), have had to adapt to lifestyle changes over the centuries, including changes to their traditional dwellings.

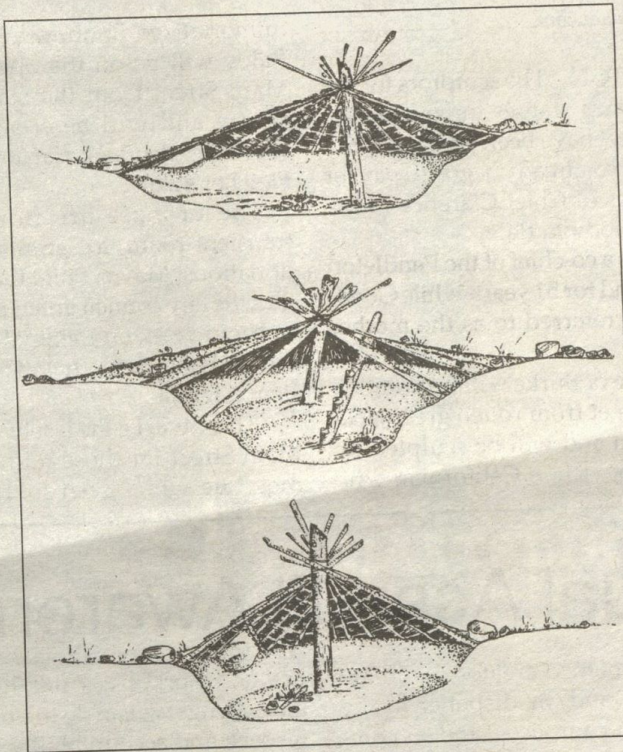
Archaeologists have identified, from archaeological evidence and ethnographic research, four types of dwellings utilized by the ancestors of the Weyíletpuu, Imatalamláma, and Walúlapam. Additionally, archaeological evidence has dated village and campsite dwellings from the traditional homelands of the CTUIR from 400 to 6,000 years old.

The four dwelling types include 1) an early, deep-walled subterranean pithouse design, dating back 1,800 to 3,000 years ago; 2) a later, shallow, saucer-shaped subterranean pithouse design, dating back 400 to 2,000 years ago; 3) simple, above-ground lean-tos, dating back from the early 1800s to 6,000 years ago; and 4) mat and canvas lodges which are still used today. These dates are only from a select sample of dwellings that have been archaeologically evaluated.

There are still numerous archaeological sites within the CTUIR's homelands that have not been recorded that may lead to new information, however development and the construction of hydroelectric dams have destroyed or flooded many of these traditional dwelling sites.

PITHOUSE DWELLINGS

The early, deep-walled subterranean pithouses required substantial construction. These pithouses varied in shape - square, round, rectangular, saucer shaped, and oval - and size, 12-44 feet in diameter and 12-39 inches deep. Benches were found within these early pithouses and were several inches high encircling the inner walls except at the entrance. The entrance had a ramp or ladder descending into the subterranean pithouse and all entrances faced the east.



Drawings of a subterranean pithouse based upon archaeological data from an excavated site. Source Chance, et al. 1977:57.

The shallow, saucer-shaped subterranean pithouses had varying sloping walls that were not very deep. These pithouses also varied in shape - square, round, rectangular, and oval - and size. Most were 23-25 feet in diameter but some were as large as 40+ feet, and only 5-24 inches deep. Some benches were found within the saucer-shaped pithouses, however they were not very tall compared to the early, deep-walled pithouses.

PITHOUSE CONSTRUCTION

Pithouses were typically placed into sand, sandy silt or relatively soft silt areas. It is believed that baskets or basketry scoops were used to excavate the pithouses. Harder soils required other tools to be used, possibly cobble choppers, to soften the dirt. Materials in which pithouses were constructed included plants such as patches of grass or reeds and reed matting, and beams and cross beams in which saplings were tied together for post molds. The early, deep-walled pithouses had larger post molds than later ones, and the central support system suggests that roofing superstructures were more massive with grass adhering to the structural members. These dwellings formed a rectangle in the center of the structure.

OTHER DWELLINGS

The simple, above-ground lean-tos were used for inclement weather and have the longest history of use, from roughly 6,000 years ago until contact with Lewis and Clark in the early 1800s.

Fire pits, roasting ovens, food storage pits, piles of cooking stones and firewood were often used in areas between pithouses and within above-ground lean-tos.

Mat lodges replaced the saucer-shaped pithouses and were recorded at the time of contact by Lewis and Clark in 1805. After the introduction of the horse in the 1730s, mat lodges became easier to transport from camp site to camp site. Often times, poles used to erect the mat lodges were left behind at regular camp sites and reused the returning season. Canvas lodges later replaced mat lodges.

SEASONS OF OCCUPATION

Pithouse dwellings were typically occupied in the winter season because they were located near larger

Mat lodges were typically shaped like a cone and placed at the time of contact by Lewis and Clark in 1805. After the introduction of the horse in the 1730s, mat lodges became easier to transport from camp site to camp site. Often times, poles used to erect the mat lodges were left behind at regular camp sites and reused the returning season. Canvas lodges later replaced mat lodges.

At regular intervals, the lean-to lodges were replaced by mat lodges.

During the winter months, rivers, how they were used in the summer, late in the season, away from the river, except during the winter months, and reed matting was implemented.

PLACEMENT

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At right, canvas and tule mat covered lodges and lean-to arbor on the Umatilla Indian Reservation. Notice the ladders on sides of the lodges and rocks holding down the skirt of the lodge in the foreground. Lean-to arbor has firewood stacked. Photograph and source by Major Lee Moorhouse.

rivers, however they were also occupied during the summer, late spring, and fall. Most people lived away from the rivers during the spring and fall, except during fish runs, to gather root crops, berries, and raw materials for their stone tools and other implements.

PLACEMENT OF PITHOUSES

Pithouses were constructed as close as possible to the larger rivers, such as the Columbia and Snake, and on islands within these rivers. On the islands, pithouses were constructed near the river's edge – the middle portion of the island was typically not utilized for dwellings. There were larger concentrations of pithouses on one side of an island if it had a narrow channel, sometimes three times more than on the wide portion of the river side of the island. Additionally, these sites were reused more often.

The pithouses were situated in a linear arrangement but randomly scattered along the river. The early, deep-walled pithouses were usually clustered informally in groups of three to five dwellings with two or three smaller dwellings clustered around. The largest structure was typically not lived in and was considered to be ceremonial or communal. The smaller dwellings were occupied by single families and the larger dwellings housed two or more families.

The later, saucer-shaped pithouses had much larger clusters, with the largest structure also used as ceremonial or communal, and the smallest structures being utilized for food storage buildings, menstrual huts, or for other specialty uses.

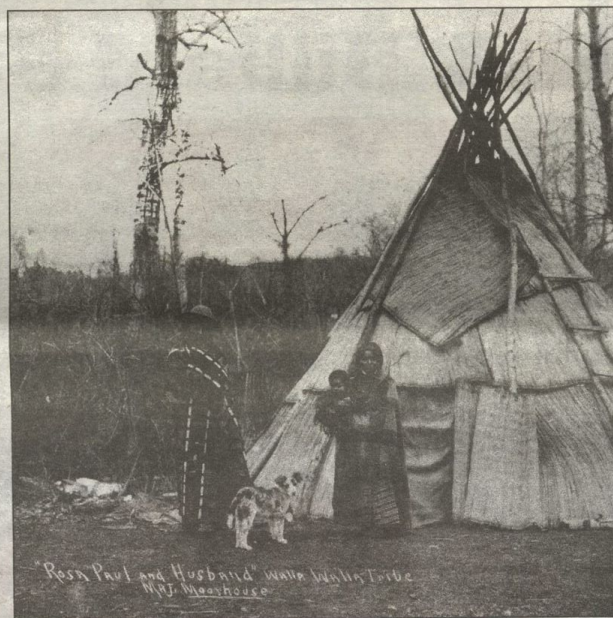
INTERIOR OF PITHOUSES

The interior of the pithouses were commonly the same, from early to late period. Every pithouse utilized by families had either a central fire pit or two fire pits located off center. Artifacts found around and near the fire pits included hopper mortar bases or grinding slabs, pestles or hand-pounding grinding stones, anvil stones and other associated pounding stones used for flintknapping and cracking long bones of mammals to extract bone marrow. Other tools found within the pithouses include cobble choppers, knives, projectile points, scrapers, bone tools (awls), beads, hammer stones, abraders or shaft smoothers, cores, net sinkers, drills, oval flaked tools, and flakes (the byproduct of artifact manufacturing).

Complete and broken animal bones were also found within the pithouses. These were the byproduct of food preparation and eating. Archaeological evidence included bones from fish, mussels, deer, elk, antelope, pronghorn, bear, beaver, otter, weasel, gopher, cottontail and jackrabbits, birds including grouse and waterfowl, ground squirrels, reptiles such as snakes and frogs, and other small mammals.

Personal items of decoration were also found, including shell beads, bone beads, stone beads, drilled or perforated elk teeth, bear and eagle claws, dentium, bird bone beads and tubes, and incised bone fragments and pendants.

Over time and with the adaptation of the horse into tribal culture, earlier traditional dwellings evolved from the more sedentary pithouse structures to lighter, above ground structures that were easier



A single family mat lodge of Rosa Paul and family on the Umatilla Indian Reservation. Photograph by Major Lee Moorhouse, source from National Anthropological Archives, Smithsonian Institution.

to dismantle and travel with on the expanded seasonal migration routes. However, tribal oral histories describe some continued use of in-ground dwellings into modern historical times. These temporary living sites provided a form of emergency shelter from the heat of the summer and the winter cold.



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