

Spokane Tribe of Indians

A Basic Study Guide

Prepared by the Sierra Service Project

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Introduction

For two summers, volunteers from Sierra Service Project (SSP) have been welcomed into the small rural town of Wellpinit, Washington. This community is a beautiful hour's drive from Spokane. It is a lightly-forested area that sits at an elevation of 2,400 feet and is considered a high desert environment.

This study guide is designed to help you better understand the community that you will be visiting and serving with this summer.

The Wellpinit Community Today

Wellpinit is the main town on the Spokane Indian Reservation. It has a population of about 650 people. Most tribal offices and local reservation businesses are located there.

The Spokane Indian Reservation consists of 159,000 acres of land. Although this is large, it is a small fraction of the area originally inhabited by the Spokane Indians. As of May, 2017, the tribe had an official enrollment of 2,879. Many tribal members live off of the reservation. The population of people living on the reservation is about 2,000.

About the Spokane Tribe

The official name of the Tribe is "The Spokane Tribe of Indians" and it belongs to the larger group of the Interior Salish Indian Tribes, who share a common language – the Salish language. Three distinct indigenous groups – the Lower Spokanes, the Middle Spokanes and the Upper Spokanes – have come together into this federally recognized tribe. Those bands were named according to their location along the Spokane River and although they came together for fishing and hunting, decisions were historically taken at the band level.

Prior to European contact, residents of this area lived off the abundant fish in the local rivers, by hunting and by gathering berries and root crops. It is reported that the first European-Americans to visit the area were LeBlanc and LeGasse, who were two French-Canadian fur trappers sent to spend a winter with natives.

They were followed by trappers, missionaries, ranchers and farmers, notably by explorers Lewis and Clark and members of the Hudson Bay Fur Company. Under pressure from the exploding white population due to the discovery of gold, the Spokane Tribe of Indians signed the Yakima Treaty in July 1855 and ceded the rights to 10 million acres of traditional land in exchange for the retention of 1 million acres of reservation lands.

The Local Experience

By Laura Sieling, 2016 Site Director in Wellpinit

On your way up the mountain into Wellpinit, be present. Take mental pictures of the river to your left, the barn roof supported only by sticks of dry lumber on your right, the trees in the valley, and the way the road splits into a fork, bringing you into the small town of Wellpinit. You don't want to forget these little things by the time your week of volunteering is done.

You will unfold yourself from your cramped car onto the incredible Powwow Grounds. Completed in 2015, thousands of American Indians have now gathered to enjoy festivities there. Another staff member – Siani Beck – and I were lucky enough to experience Powwow in September of 2017, where we were greeted and housed by Terry and Gene Payne (whom you will meet during the week). This was just a taste of the love that we felt the entire week, making us feel just as much a part of the community as the Powwow Grounds itself.

The feeling of community pride that I observed, not just in Wellpinit itself but in Indian populations that arrived from all over America, was overwhelming. During their opening processional, drums were surrounded by families who have played together for generations and children were exquisite miniature models of their elders: beaded, feathered, or belled, and fiercely concentrated on their footwork. I was speechless watching participants circle War Dance Hall (where you will sleep and participate in program), drawn together by these kinds of celebrations held around the central and western regions of America.

Powwow is not a single event that happens in separate tribes as I had originally thought. From what I learned, it is a time for many tribes to meet over and over again along the Powwow Trail, stopping on many reservations to celebrate as an extended community. As more people arrived on campus, it was impossible to distinguish direct family members and those who had grown to be family simply by attending powwows together.

While a lot of the opening ceremony commemorated Tribal history (honoring veterans and ancestors, those who had died since last powwow, and current events that affected contemporary tribes), what I found most compelling were the elders' emphasis on preserving culture into the future. This is a major concern to Indian communities because of the value that many tribes place on oral records.

I learned from Louis Brigman, the cultural speaker who worked with SSP in the summer of 2017, that it is difficult to capture tribal history and traditions for two reasons: first, the average age of people with traditional knowledge and fluent language speakers is so high that masses of cultural information is regularly lost as they die. Second, writing things down is not their traditional way of recording culture. I asked why there is so much resistance from elders to transcribe oral traditions, even if it were done in their native language (Séliš, pronounced

[sell]). Louis explained to me that the importance is not just held in the words; it is the way in which stories are told: fluctuations in tone, rhythms in syntax, and timing of tellings are as important as the characters themselves. This is one of the most challenging aspects of preserving oral cultures. Pay attention to this dilemma when listening to the cultural speakers throughout the week; how might one accurately and respectfully preserve this information, vital to the endurance of orally-based cultures?

As you continue serving through the week, think about how you can help different communities in the way that they need to be helped, not in the ways that you *think* they need to be helped. Listen well, ask questions, and spread what you learn this week to increase respect and awareness for these cultures that are struggling to find solutions to preserve themselves.

Outside Resources

Visit SSP's Spokane page of our website for links to videos of elders telling their stories, 100th Annual Spokane Tribal Powwow, and links to these websites:

[Spokane Tribe of Indians](#)

[Spokane Housing Authority](#)

[Spokane Tribe of Indians Language Program \(Salish\)](#)

[Spokane Indian Housing Authority Case Studies](#)