

# Native American Cultures: The Great Basin

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Ute tribal rock art at Arches National Park, Utah. The picture shows stylized horse and rider surrounded by bighorn sheep and dog-like animals. This was carved between 1650 and 1850. Photo: Sanjay Acharya/Wikimedia



There are many Native American groups. One of them is the Native Americans of the Great Basin. It includes several different tribes. The Great Basin Indians lived in a mostly desert area in the western United States. It stretches from the Rocky Mountains to the Sierra Nevada Mountains. The Great Basin includes almost all of Utah and Nevada. It also includes parts of Oregon, Idaho, Wyoming, Colorado, Arizona and California. The area is surrounded by mountains. This creates a low area in the middle shaped like a bowl. It is called a basin. The basin is very dry. It does not have many plants or animals.

## Peoples And Languages

Most of the Great Basin Indians spoke Numic languages. These were common in the western United States. They are also spoken in parts of Mexico. Numic languages are related to the language spoken by the Aztecs long ago.

## Food

The Great Basin Indians were hunters and gatherers. Most groups ate wild plants and animals. In the fall they gathered nuts. They saved some of the nuts for the winter. Some groups did a little farming along the rivers. Groups that lived near lakes fished and hunted ducks.

European explorers introduced horses to North America. The animals probably reached the Great Basin by the 1600s. That was about 400 years ago. Some Great Basin Indians began using horses. This helped them hunt for buffalo, deer and sheep.

## Settlements And Housing

The Great Basin Indians were nomadic. That means they moved around looking for food. The Indians traveled in small groups. They kept moving so they would not run out of food in any one place.

Great Basin tribes built two types of shelters. In the summer, they built walls to keep out the wind. In the winter, they built wickiups. These were simple huts. Tribes that used horses lived in tents called tepees.



## Clothing



Many Great Basin Indians wore little or no clothing. This was especially true during the hot summer. In the winter they wore rabbit skins. Many people went barefoot. Some wore leather moccasins or sandals made from yucca plants.

## Technology And Arts

The Great Basin Indians used many different tools. For hunting, they used bows and arrows. For fishing, they used lines and hooks. They also used harpoons and nets.

Some Great Basin Indians made baskets. Some groups made pots. Tribes that did not use horses made paintings on stone. Tribes that used horses painted their tepees.

## **Society**

Great Basin Indians lived in small groups. A group was often a large family. It might be the families of two brothers. Above the family level, the Indians joined together in bands. Tribes without horses were usually small. They traveled through a given area each year. Tribes with horses could travel farther and get more food. This allowed them to stay together in larger groups.

## **Religion**

The Great Basin Indians had stories about how the world began. They believed that animal ancestors lived before humans. These ancestors could talk and act like humans. They created the world of today.

Great Basin Indians also believed in spirits. Some spirits were animals. Others were creatures with special powers. Some spirits were thought to be helpful, while others were feared.

## **European Contact And Cultural Change**

Over time, European and American settlers moved onto Indian land. They tried to take the land away. The Great Basin Indians fought back. But many of them ended up losing their land. They were forced to live on certain areas of land called reservations. The Indians who kept their land had to give up traditional hunting and gathering. They were forced to become farmers.

## Quiz

- 1 Read the paragraph from the section "People And Languages."

*Most of the Great Basin Indians spoke Numic languages. These were common in the western United States. They are also spoken in parts of Mexico. Numic languages are related to the language spoken by the Aztecs long ago.*

Which question is answered in the paragraph?

- (A) Where did the Great Basin Indians live?
- (B) What language did the Aztecs speak?
- (C) Where is the Great Basin?
- (D) What are Numic languages?

- 2 Read the section "Food."

Which sentence explains HOW the Great Basin Native Americans learned about horses?

- (A) The Great Basin Indians were hunters and gatherers.
- (B) European explorers introduced horses to North America.
- (C) The animals probably reached the Great Basin by the 1600s.
- (D) Some Great Basin Indians began using horses.

- 3 Which of these sections of the article gives information about the tools the Great Basin Native Americans used?

- (A) "Settlements And Housing"
- (B) "Clothing"
- (C) "Technology And Arts"
- (D) "Society"

- 4 What is the purpose of the section "European Contact And Cultural Change"?

- (A) to explain what happened when European and American settlers moved into the Great Basin
- (B) to compare European settlers with American settlers
- (C) to explain why European and American settlers tried to take land from Great Basin Native Americans
- (D) to compare farming with hunting and gathering

