

# Boundaries

by Jack Nisbet



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In the spring of 1822, Finan McDonald kept the journal for the Spokane House trading post, just downstream from the present city of Spokane. During much of April tribal people gathered along the river for an early fish run, but toward the end of the month they began to slip away.

*April 26th . . . A few Indians tented off to go and collect roots. fine mild weather.*

*Sunday 28th . . . A party of Indians removed off some to gather roots and a few to go in search of beaver . . .*

*Monday 29th . . . A few Indians removed off toward the plains to gather roots . . .*

These small bands were heading off to the open country of the Columbia Basin to gather the roots that would provide the majority of their carbohydrate calories for the year. It was a ritual that had been repeated for untold generations, and over time created a remarkable complex of botanical expertise, seasonal timing, taste preferences, and cooking methods among the tribes of the Columbia Plateau.

Two of the staple roots, blue camas lily and pink bitterroot, sport beautiful blooms and are known to many people from spring wildflower walks. But no genus reflects the subtle turns of tribal knowledge more than the *Lomatiums*, a large group of less flashy flowers known variously as biscuit-roots or desert parsleys.



The genus name of *Lomatium* is derived from a Latin word meaning "winged seed," after the severely flattened edges on their seeds. Most have lacey leaves, and all produce many tiny white or yellow flowers that gather into the umbrellas shapes typical of the family *Umbrelliferae*; these traits are instantly familiar to gardeners who grow carrots, parsley, and dill from the same family. There are around forty different species of *Lomatiums* in the Plateau region, and professional plant taxonomists and wildflower experts find them bewilderingly difficult to identify.

Yet Sahaptin-speaking bands of the southern Columbia Plateau and Salish speakers of the north Columbia country have long been able distinguish subtle differences between *Lomatiums* because they form an integral part of their lives, both past and present. Nez Perce people kept the Lewis and Clark Expedition alive with "cous" (*Lomatium cous*), pronounced "kows" and derived from the Nez Perce word for the root. University of Washington Eugene Hunn has interviewed elders on the Yakama

Reservations who recognize up to 14 different species of *Lomatiums*. Sanpoil, Nespelem, Colville, and Spokane groups continue to travel to the scablands each April to dig the roots of "white camas" (*Lomatium canbyi*) and dry them on strings for winter consumption. Several area tribes send children out to dig "little white camas" (*L. farinosum*), because although it is smaller, it teaches them how to accomplish the often-difficult feat of extracting a whole root from the mix of shattered basalt rocks and fine volcanic ash where most kinds of desert parsleys grow.

Many Yakama people still get their first spring dose of vitamin C from Gray's Desert Parsley (*L. grayi*) by clipping the fresh young sprouts just as they emerge from the ground. The taste of this "Indian celery" is refreshing spicy and somewhat bitter, clearly distinct from at least four other species of *Lomatium* also referred to as Indian celery - the difference lies in where they live, soil types, weather conditions, and simple taste preferences. Many Thompson people of the northern Plateau enjoy "Indian carrot" (*Lomatium macrocarpum*) above all its other relatives; Yakama elder Elsie Pistolhead, who preferred cous, said that if you ate wild carrots you would be troubled by lice.

The first shoots of the very large and vigorous plant called chocolate tips (*Lomatium dissectum*) were favored by some groups, but considered "famine food" by others. The pungent roots of chocolate tips are so potent that some families rub them on cattle to kill lice, while others pound and steep them to prepare an infusion potent enough to stun fish. Chocolate tips and many other *Lomatiums* also have medicinal uses that are specific to different bands and tribes. It seems as if there is no end to either the variety of tribal names for the different *Lomatiums*. The green winged seeds of barestem desert parsley (*L. nudicaule*) and others are chewed for their sharp, anise-like flavor; when dried, their strong anise scent works as a moth deterrent. But it is as a root crop, dug by men and women and children all over the Columbia country, that the interrelationship between this genus and Plateau people is most clearly revealed.

*Lomatiums* are perennial plants Ð that is, the rootstock persists to produce new shoots, stems, flowers, and seeds each year. The roots of plants such as cous and white camas contain their highest levels of carbohydrates during their dormant period, so that is naturally when the tribes want to dig them. As the energy of the rootstock flows upward to the visible blooms, the tubers become "soft" and wrinkly like prunes; they don't taste as good, and lose much of their valuable nutrition.

The hot winds of early summer quickly dry up the flowers and shrink the stems to nothing, and the energy begins to flow back down to the roots, and as the seeds of these *Lomatiums* near maturity the tubers approach full capacity. By tracking the progress of different sites through the spring, the tribes can make the rounds of digging at just the right time to get the most nutrition out of the roots. Each time a person digs a root, he or she snaps off the top of the plant and replaces it in the digging hole, thus ensuring the distribution of viable seed. In this way, favorite sites can be visited on a regular basis for years.

In late April or early May of each year, when the white flowers of *Lomatium canbyi* have dried up and the seeds are beginning to toast in the sun, members of the Spokane tribe still slip away to certain rocky scablands to dig white camas and other roots. Students from the Wellpinit School on the Spokane Reservation join in for one special day of gathering. People of all ages arrive carrying their favorite digging sticks and woven flat bags on their shoulders. Elders offer prayers to begin the work. Clumps of smaller children gather around to watch the learned skill of loosening the dirt and rocks just so, then leaning on the curved stick to pop a root out of the ground.

As they move through the sagebrush and antelope bitterbrush, across rocky mounds of patterned ground and escarpments of worn basalt, all the other elements of the Columbia Basin come into play. Several different kinds of sparrows hop up on bunchgrass tussocks to sing their songs. Harvester ants

carry seeds across bare sand to their small conical mounds. A horned lizard puffs up at the shadow of a second-grader's hand. Another student helps his mother with a particularly stubborn white camas that seems to be entwined with the root system of an ancient sagebrush. "This bush," whispers the mother, "does not want to share with us."

Some of the round roots that pop out of the ground are as large as pingpong balls, but most look closer to the size of a thumb joint. Quick fingers peel off the first dirty layer of skin to reveal firm white flesh beneath. Some of the kids eat them raw, while others only nibble. Back at home the roots are strung like popcorn on threads of Indian hemp, to be eaten over the winter. Many people describe the texture then like that of popcorn, and say the longer the white camas dries the better it tastes. They are fondly looking forward to days when they can sit around and snack on the strung roots, each bite recalling the crisp delight of spring in the open country.

Further Reading: *Nch'i-Wana, The Big River: Mid Columbia Indians and Their Land*, Eugene Hunn and the James Selam family. UW Press, Seattle.

*Food Plants of Interior First Peoples*, Nancy Turner. Royal British Columbia Museum, Victoria, B.C

*Illustration: Gray's desert parsley, Lomatium grayi, whose shoots provide the first spring "Indian celery" for many members of the Yakama Nation. Photo by Ron Taylor.*

Article can be found at:

<http://www.northcolumbiamonthly.com/boundaries/boundaries0708.shtml>