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Snake River Lore

Where the Snake River forms the border between Idaho and Oregon it has cut, rim to river, the deepest gorge in North America - Hells Canyon. It is a dynamic canyon, both in terms of its natural and geologic history and its human history. The visitor today sees graphic evidence of both.

About 15 million years ago, massive lava flows covered much of the land near Hells Canyon, and the landscape became monotonously flat. In the last 5 million years two periods of deformation occurred, forming the Seven Devils and Cuddy Mountains. The uplifts may have blocked the old Snake River (which then possibly flowed through northern California to the sea) and formed Lake Idaho. The hypothesis continues that a south-cutting stream breached the northern lip of the lake about a million years ago, causing the lake to drain down a tributary of the ancient Salmon River. As the massive lake drained, the downcutting formed the present Snake River drainage.

The Shoshone Indians lived along the Snake River in ancient times. Because they painted snake heads on sticks to terrify their enemies, and possibly because a sinuous movement of the hand was used as sign language to signify their tribe, Indian neighbors and early trappers spoke of the Shoshone as the "Snakes." Flowing through Snake country, the river acquired that tribal name.

Miners, stockmen and settlers began establishing land claims in Hells Canyon in the 1870's and onward. It was a rugged land and wore out many a man. In 1862, President Lincoln signed the Homestead Act, which has been called the "greatest democratic measure of all history." It was this legislation that was primarily responsible for bringing settlers to Hells Canyon. It allowed the head of a family to stake a homestead not exceeding 160 acres. Title to the homestead could be acquired after five years of continuous residence and improvements and some minor payments. Though miners and stockmen left their imprint on the Canyon of Hell, it was the homesteader who made the most significant impact. Most of their holdings have been reacquired by the Forest Service for the National Recreation Area, and some are preserved today for the visitor.

On our Snake River trips, we will stop and visit several sites of great interest. We'll look at Indian pictographs (rock paintings) and hear stories of their culture. We'll imagine them fishing the great river for Salmon and hunting for the Big Horn Sheep. We'll stop at a couple of historic ranches, now preserved as museums of living history. We'll wonder how they survived such a harsh environment.

Together with the excitement of the rapids, spectacular scenery and natural and cultural history, your trip to Hells Canyon will be one you long remember.

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