

# Indian Burning in the Willamette Valley

By Henry J. Warre & Thomas Miles Richardson, Jr.

The earliest illustrations and written descriptions of the Willamette Valley, like the 1845 painting, *Valley of the Willamette River*, by Henry Warre reproduced here, depict a landscape of grasslands interspersed with occasional oak and conifer stands. The Willamette Valley was dominated by this oak savanna for more than 6,000 years prior to white resettlement. While climatic factors probably explain the initial development of this vegetation type, Indian burning practices played an important role in maintaining the oak savanna well into the nineteenth century.

The Kalapuya, the dominant Native group in the Willamette Valley, used fire as a tool to aid both in hunting and in plant cultivation and gathering. They used fire in hunting drives to concentrate deer, making them easier to hunt; to clear underbrush from around oak and hazel trees in order to increase nut production; to stimulate berry and root production, especially in the once extensive camas prairies; to gather insects, particularly grasshoppers; and to fertilize cultivated tobacco plots.

Fire was probably the most important tool the Kalapuya used to manage the land prior to white resettlement. They were not simple hunter-gatherers living off the land's "natural surplus" as many scholars once thought. Native peoples throughout North America actively managed their environments, playing key roles in determining the structure and composition of forest and grassland ecosystems across the continent.

**Further Reading:** Boyd, Robert, ed. *Indians, Fire, and the Land in the Pacific Northwest*. Corvallis, Oreg., 1999.

Towle, Jerry C. "Changing Geography of Willamette Valley Woodlands." *Oregon Historical Quarterly* 83, 1982: 67-87.

Johannessen, Carl, et al. "The Vegetation of the Willamette Valley." *Annals of the Association of American Geographers* 61, 1971: 286-306.

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