

A Region of Plenty

The Northwest Coast, also known as the Pacific Northwest, stretched between the Pacific Ocean and the mountains to the east. It included parts of what are now Oregon, Washington, and western Canada.

The Northwest Indians enjoyed a unique climate. A [Pacific Ocean](#) current would warm the region; which made temperatures rarely hot and it would seldom drop below freezing. At times, cool ocean winds brought heavy rains to the region, so forests grew tall and thick. These forests and the rivers that ran through them were filled with fish and other animals.

People of the Northwest Coast



The Makah whale hunt - The chief harpooner showed his respect for the whale by singing a special song, promising to give the whale gifts if it allowed itself to be killed.

When not hunting whales, men built underwater enclosures and traps to catch huge hauls of salmon and candlefish as they swam upstream to spawn. The women would preserve a year's supply of salmon by drying the fish over a smoky fire and pressed the oil from candlefish. The Indians used large amounts of this oil, dipping dried foods into it at meals. Other important fish were herring, smelt, and cod. People also dug clams along the beach and smoked them just as they did salmon.

Many Native American groups, such as the Makah and the Chinook, lived in this region. Instead of farming, the people of the Northwest Coast met their needs by fishing, hunting, and gathering plants or nuts that were in the forest areas. The coastal waters were an important resource, and salmon was a staple food for most groups.

Whales were an important resource as well. Whales supplied not only food but also fat, which could be melted into oil to burn in lamps. Most groups would "capture" whales that had become stranded on the sea shore. In contrast, the Makah hunted whales at sea in large dugout canoes. These canoes, each made from a large, hollowed-out log, carried up to 60 people at a time.



A young boy from the Chinook tribe finds a stranded whale. He'll likely run back eagerly to share the news with others.

Northwest Coast peoples varied their fish-based diet through hunting and gathering. Families traveled to the mountains, where the men hunted deer, elk, mountain goat, and bear. The women collected bulbs, roots, berries, and seeds.

Resources and Trade

The giant trees that grow in the forests of the Northwest Coast provided many groups with wood for houses, tools, and boats. Makah villages stood near the Pacific Ocean, a common location for many Native American homes in the Pacific Northwest.

Family Shelters

The shelters of the Makah were like those of the Iroquois, but larger. Makah longhouses had a frame made of wooden poles, which could reach 60 feet in length. The walls and floors were covered with wide boards.

3 All the members of a **clan**, or extended family, lived in the same longhouse. Grandparents, parents, aunts and uncles, and children lived together. Each person in the clan held a specific rank. Clans made important decisions about village life. Clans also taught younger members songs, stories, and woodcarving skills.

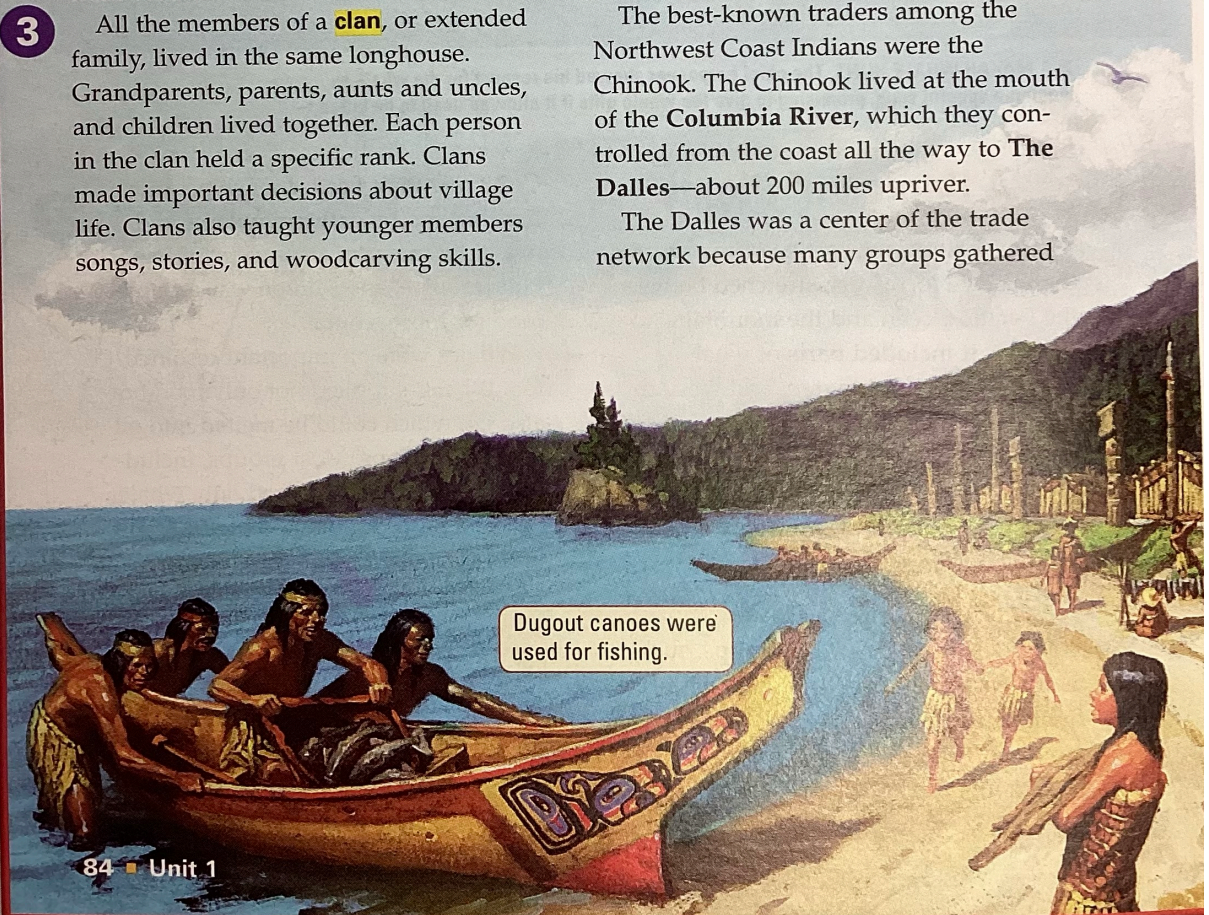
Wood was so useful to the people of the Northwest Coast that they made almost everything from it. Dishes, spoons, and other utensils were made of wood. They also carved totem poles made of wood. These tall posts usually showed one or more characters that were used to tell a story or to welcome visitors or traders.

People traveled long distances on the region's waterways in order to trade. Trading was a large part of the region's economy. An **economy** is the way the people of a state, region, or country use their resources to meet their needs.

The Dalles

The best-known traders among the Northwest Coast Indians were the Chinook. The Chinook lived at the mouth of the **Columbia River**, which they controlled from the coast all the way to **The Dalles**—about 200 miles upriver.

The Dalles was a center of the trade network because many groups gathered



6

there, but the different languages they spoke made communication difficult. The Chinook were able to profit from trading at The Dalles because they developed a unique language for trade. It was made up of Chinook words as well as words borrowed from other Indian languages. This language allowed them to **barter**, or exchange goods, on behalf of two groups who spoke very different languages.

A Potlatch

Trade and natural resources made many Northwest Coast groups rich.

One way they expressed their good fortune was through a celebration known as a **potlatch**. A potlatch was meant to show wealth and divide property among the people. *Potlatch* means "to give." Historians think that the Kwakiutl, who lived along the coast of what is now Canada, helped develop the potlatch custom. A Kwakiutl potlatch was a celebration, with dancing, food, and speeches.

8

READING CHECK GENERALIZE

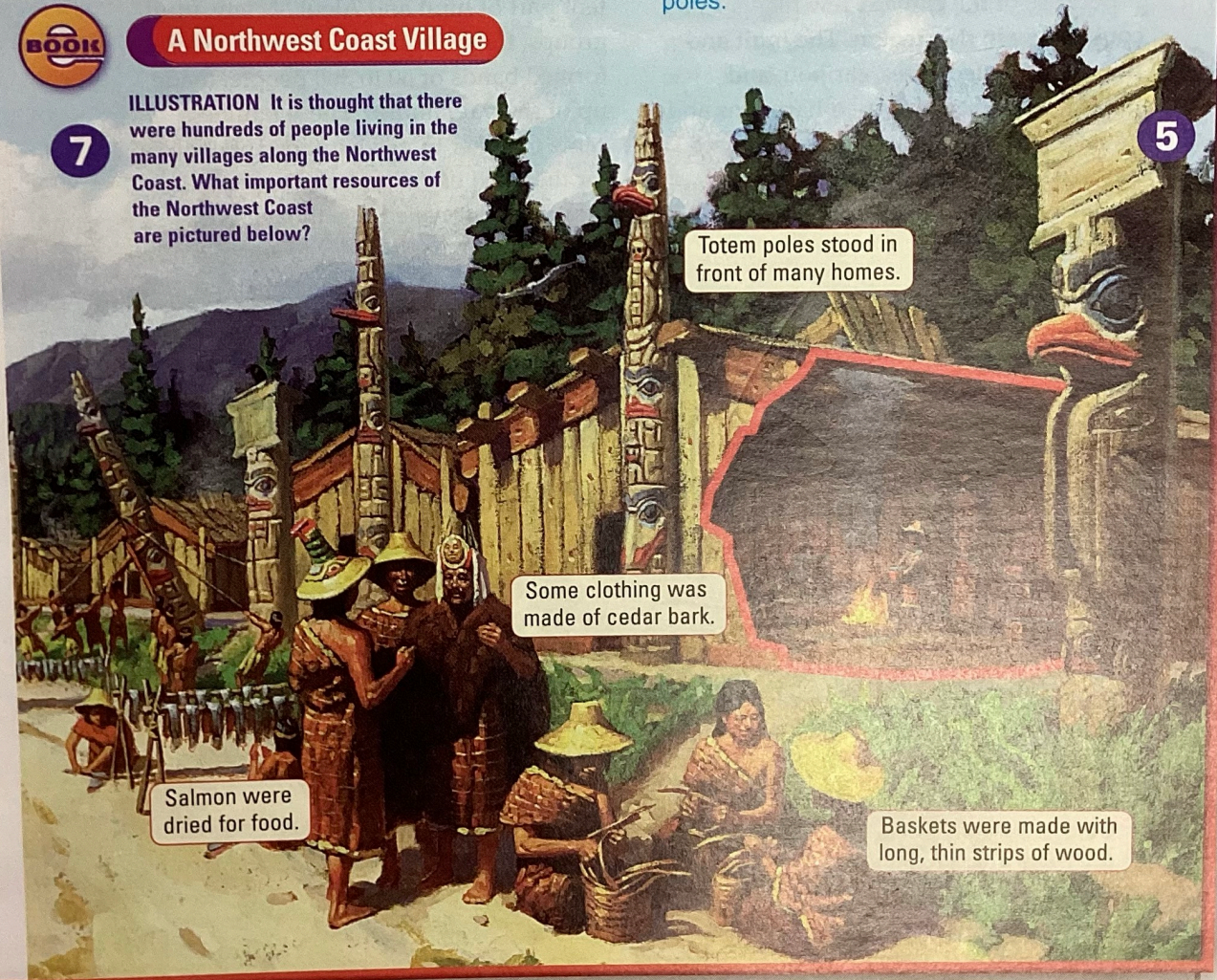
Why was wood important to people of the Northwest Coast? Wood was used to make homes, canoes, tools, utensils, and totem poles.



A Northwest Coast Village

7

ILLUSTRATION It is thought that there were hundreds of people living in the many villages along the Northwest Coast. What important resources of the Northwest Coast are pictured below?



5