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**From:** Leland Gilson [mailto:lelandgilson@msn.com]  
**Sent:** Wednesday, March 15, 2017 11:40 AM  
**To:** SGGA Exhibits <SGGA.Exhibits@oregonlegislature.gov>  
**Subject:** State fairgrounds camas

I am retired as the former (at the time the informal acting state archaeologist) archaeologist with the Oregon State Historic Preservation Office. Any change in the management of the state fairgrounds is of concern. If you need bio info on me: oregon-archaeology.com

Camas was an important staple for the Native Americans who occupied the Willamette Valley. I have measured great camas growing as high as 57 inches in the Oak Grove. I have never seen any camas this high anywhere else in Oregon. The Fair administration has been delaying mowing of the south grass lot and the oak grove until the camas has gone to seed. They have been emailing me to visit the lots and let them know when a significant % have ripened and delivered seed. The giant camas seeds much later than the quamash. This is one of the few remaining camas fields left in the upper valley and ranks as one of the most important. It is a remnant of an ancient way of life.

Here is part of an email from **David G. Lewis, PhD | Ethnohistory Research, LLC**

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I feel Salem is a good area to concentrate studies as we have a number of Oral histories (from Jacobs and other ethnographers) from the Kalapuya tribes that state that Salem was The main area to harvest camas in the area. And camas continues at the State fairgrounds. Is this a prehistoric field that has been allowed to exist through the last 160 years since Salem was placed there, or here. It would good to work on establishing the longevity of these fields that still exist, whether they are new fields, or very old, perhaps rare Camas prairie fields that deserve preservation. There is some evidence (newspapers) that somewhere at the fairgrounds is a historic and perhaps prehistoric camp meeting site for regional tribes.

Here are a few quotes about the importance of camas as a staple:

"Camas was first harvested as soon as its shoots were about one finger high (sometime in

March); however, it was not pit-roasted until farther along in the season. (Jacobs' Santiam notes [1928-36 #83: 135, 137], from Eustace Howard, state the early "fresh" camas, Di'p, was gotten in March or early April, often in gopher burrows where quantities of bulbs could sometimes be found; it was boiled at once and eaten, not pit-roasted.) Camas was considered fully ripe in June, when it was harvested in quantity, pit-oven roasted, dried for winter, and "pounded" into "a sort of bread" (pressed into cakes?). (Jacobs again has similar information from Howard, who indicates that the Santiam harvested the "large camas," mi.'s, in greatest quantity during June.) The camas harvest went throughout the summer. There is some evidence that Kalapuyans harvested well into the fall... (but this may be in error and refer to wapato) (Zenk 1976: 53-54)."

"The day proved to be very warm in the low valley. The Indians our neighbors were out early digging roots this operation is performed by sinking a strong hard stick in the ground near the roots to be dug then taking pry on the outer extremity of the stick a portion of earth containing from 2 to six roots is taken up the roots being the size of a small onion and much resembling the onion in appearance They are then washed and cleansed a hole of suitable size is dug into the earth filled with sticks and stones after the earth and stone become well heated is taken off and a Layer of grass laid over the hot stones the roots piled on the grass and a Layer of grass laid over the roots then a thin layer of earth over the whole and a fire outside of all which is kept up some 24 hours when it is allowed to cool down and the roots are ready for use of for drying and putting away for future use when dry they keep for months or years (Clyman 1960: 153 from his 1845 journal)."

"To maximize food and natural resources in an environment not as naturally abundant as the lower Columbia River and the coast, the Kalapuya followed a seasonal routine. Moving through a variety of task-specific sites and manipulating the environment through the use of fire to insure the availability of food and other resources necessary for their culture. In late summer, when a number of other Pacific Northwest tribes congregated at fishing sites to harvest salmon, the Kalapuya converged on the dry Willamette Valley meadows to set fire to its grasses in order to encourage the growth of camas (*Cammasia* spp.), the staple of their diet. Camas, a member of the lily family, requires open prairie habitat. Because geographical and climatological factors make lightning strikes in the Willamette rare, the valley would naturally have become overgrown with forests, and the camas would have become extinct. But the Kalapuya's intentional burning of the prairies at the end of each summer eliminated the camas's competition: shrubs and seedlings of climax species such as Douglas fir and bigleaf maple. Since the bulb of the camas lies hidden underground and dormant at the end of summer, fire cannot directly affect this vital portion of the plant. During the following spring, the bulb multiplies and sprouts, sending up tall green shoots with spikes of purple, blue, and sometimes white flowers. Grass buds, also underground and thus also protected from fire, sprout in fall and grow during the mild winter and spring, but provide no competition for the camas (Boag 1992: 12-13)."

Here are a few emails regarding the camas at the fairgrounds:

Re: Camas fields on State Fair Grounds

We are writing you concerning conservation and preservation of two populations of Camas on the State Fair grounds.

One population is in the public parking lot south of Sunnyview Road across from Gate J, on the SE corner of the junction of Sunnyview and 17<sup>th</sup> Street. The field has a large population of small camas (*Camassia quamash*). Watershed council members and some local citizens living in the area were surprised to see the camas still in bloom

several years ago, especially because the parking lot is well used during the summer. However, in recent years these camas lilies appear to have been unable to set seed before the site is mowed, so the long-term survival of this population is becoming of concern. When these watershed council members consulted one of the scientists on our council, we found that this population is remarkable both for its purity of /C. quamash/ genetic makeup and its unusual flowering time relative to other /C. quamash /in the vicinity of Salem, OR. Dr. Susan Kephart (Willamette University) first learned of the population through Wilbur Bluhm, a Native Plant Society member and retired state extension agent who knows the flora well. She has documentation of its species status, genetic makeup, and flowering time if helpful. The unusual flowering time may reflect either the long-time compaction of soils there with trailer and fair parking, or might have been seed stock that reflects indigenous cultivation.

The SE Fairgrounds camas is an important population to protect as this small camas field may be a good source of relatively pure /C. quamash/ seed that is rare for the mid-Willamette Valley. Thus, we ask that mowing in the portion of the south parking lot with the camas be delayed until the camas have either released their seed or die back. This seems reasonable as it would still be possible to have summer events there since plants are expected to set seed by the end of June. Some activities in the area could occur on unmowed sections as well, if at least several, reasonably sized, open areas of this camas population are protected from heaving trampling during these activities or use.

The second population of interest has partial protection already and is in the Fairgrounds white oak grove across 17<sup>th</sup> Street from Gate B and Columbia Hall, to the west and adjacent to Silverton Road. This population is a mix of small and great camas (/Camassia leichtlinii/) but has been dwindling substantially in recent years and also shows evidence of habitat deterioration in some sections (e.g. NE section). We would like to work with the State Fair and Parks and Recreation Department and to explore what can be done to preserve and enhance the SE camas meadow and the oak grove.

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