

The Sheepater Indians

Number 24

May, 1972

In identifying the different groups of Shoshoni Indians who lived in the Snake River country, one of the most common early mistakes was to regard them as consumers of distinctive foods and to name them for whatever they happened to be eating at the moment. (Some of them did specialize more than others in certain foods, but they all had to have a fair variety in order to survive.) Depending upon where they were at a given time, a Shoshoni group might subsist upon a particular food: a band fishing at Salmon Falls, for example, would be living off the salmon there, and a group digging camas on Camas Prairie might naturally be dining regularly on camas. Moreover, mounted bands of Shoshoni buffalo hunters, when accosted by white explorers or travelers, proudly referred to themselves as buffalo hunters. Most humble Shoshoni groups engaged in hunting rabbits likewise called themselves rabbit eaters, while the very same individuals, if found out gathering seeds or pine nuts became the seed eaters or the pine nut eaters, as the circumstances of the occasion determined. Since any given Shoshoni family or group usually went through several seasonal food-gathering phases, they might in the course of a year have been designated as several different kinds of eaters. This system had some merit for accuracy in designating the various people who might be in a particular place (such as Salmon Falls, or a pine nut area), but it did not accommodate bands or groups at all, since the groups were transient and thus capable of having altogether too many names ending in "eater" to be of much value for identification.

Some Shoshoni groups had become proficient at hunting mountain sheep in parts of Idaho, Montana, and Wyoming, and were referred to as sheep eaters. (They actually called themselves big game eaters, but since their kind of big game proved to be mountain sheep, their name in English was corrupted into sheep eater.) But the sheep eaters of the Salmon River Mountains, when they camped on the Salmon to fish, turned into salmon eaters. One of these Salmon River sheep eater and salmon eater bands gained widespread fame at the beginning of the nineteenth century because it was the band to which Sacajawea belonged: that particular group had acquired horses and advanced to the noble station of buffalo hunters by the time that Lewis and Clark crossed the Continental Divide in 1805; and as horse owners, Sacajawea's band was able to provide the explorers with pack horses to traverse the Lolo Trail on their way to navigable waters of the Clearwater. In later years, after the Mormon Salmon River mission at Fort Lemhi brought a new geographic name to the area, Sacajawea's people eventually became

known as the Lemhi Indians. Other central Salmon River groups, though, continued their skillful and highly-respected mountain sheep hunting, and were known as the Sheepeaters on through the nineteenth century.

Until the end of the Bannock War of 1878, the Sheepeaters lived relatively unmolested in their Salmon River mountain wilderness. Dr. Sven Liljeblad describes them as "less dependent on the gathering of wild crops than the Shoshoni south of them originally were. Their skin products were highly praised by other Indians and by the white fur traders. As the gold prospectors moved into their country and ruined their fishing, many of them joined their relatives among the Lemhi Indians for living and protection." He notes further that "they lived as peaceful villagers under the leadership of trusted headmen; they shared cultural inventory and social traditions with all other Idaho Shoshoni in the early days. In many respects, they were culturally superior to any other Shoshoni groups on a pre-horse level of culture. Other Indians respectfully referred to them as 'hunters of big game.'"

Except for Leesburg and Loon Creek miners, and for a few scattered ranchers on their borderland, whites had not penetrated very much into the Sheepeaters' central wilderness area before the Bannock War. A number of Bannock refugees from the war were thought to have joined them when the Bannock cause collapsed as a military venture, and from that accretion they seem to have gained an entirely undeserved later reputation as a band of outcasts from other tribes. During the Bannock War, an ambush of four whites in Long Valley was attributed perhaps to the Sheepeaters, and the next winter the Loon Creek Chinese massacre at Orogrande was blamed off on the luckless Sheepeaters also. (On the basis of a careful ethnological investigation, Dr. Liljeblad rejects this latter aspersion as false in fact, just as the notion that the Sheepeaters were a band of outlaws turned out to be a gross misrepresentation.) In any event, the army decided to round up the Sheepeaters in the summer of 1879. After a difficult military campaign, some fifty of them--found at the very end of a long search that had to be called off for the winter--agreed to move to a reservation. Other Sheepeaters eluded the army, and a few families continued to live their mountain life unmolested in its ancient pattern for another decade or two.

The information for this statement was provided to the staff of the Idaho Historical Society by: Dr. Sven Liljeblad, Idaho State College, Pocatello, Idaho. April 19, 1962.

Idaho State Historical Society • Idaho State Archives • 2205 Old Penitentiary Road • Boise, ID 83712
Phone: (208) 334-2620 • Fax: (208) 334-2626 • For more information, visit
www.history.idaho.gov

The ISHS reference series was produced over many years by a number of individuals, some of whom devoted more time to their topics than others. Reference series entries are not updated. The series is designed to be a starting point for research.