

The Origin of the Name Nampa

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When the Oregon Short Line was built through Idaho, 1882-1883, the unusual names given to some of the stations along the railroad were believed, according to public opinion, to be of Indian origin. F. G. Cottingham, of Nampa, was interested in learning the origin of his town's name. About 1904 an Indian agent located at Ross Fork had told him it meant "moccasin." When W. N. Shilling, ex-United States employee in the Indian service who had later become postmaster at Rupert, Idaho, gave the origin and meaning of several of the unusual names, Cottingham evidently tried to learn, without success, the origin of Nampa, from him.

He carried on further investigation by writing the United States Indian agents at Ross Fork and Owyhee, Nevada, since both places were occupied by Indians of Shoshoni origin. The replies he received were published in the December 6, 1911, installment of his "History of Nampa and Vicinity" that appeared in the Nampa Messenger. Evan W. Estep, agent at Ross fork, wrote: "I am not able to find the meaning of the word 'Nampa' although the Indians seem to think it is a Shoshone word, Namb, a word very similar in sound, means moccasin."

George B. Haggett, superintendent at Owyhee, Nevada, was more specific. He wrote:

Your letter inquiring as to the meaning of the word "Nampa" at hand. I asked quite a good many of the Indians here and some of the best informed of them say that it, the word, is of Shoshone origin, and primarily means "footprints" as the imprint of the moccasin in the sand or earth. Some use it as implying the moccasin or shoe, but this is probably a secondary use, or borrowed one, as we sometimes speak of the cause for the effect.

Mr. Cottingham concluded that "There may be some room for a question as to whether the word now spelled is pure Shoshone, but there is no room for doubt that the original root was a Shoshone word, and the meaning is either moccasin or footprint." He explained that he had gone into the history and meaning of the word more extensively than he would have done ordinarily since the folklore and tradition of the community had begun to befog the memory with visionary meanings or to defile the name by ascribing to it a putrid definition or a vile epithet in some unfamiliar tongue.

Mr. Cottingham thought it a little hard to see how the definition applied to the Nampa area, and so did I until I learned that the Indians of the region were wont to stuff their moccasins, during cold weather, with sage brush leaves. This would enlarge to unusual size, the tracks of Indians wearing such stuffed moccasins.

No information concerning the name is found again until August, 1919, when Fred W. Wilson, Secretary of the Nampa Harvest Festival, wrote Fred G. Mock concerning publicity proposed for the forthcoming community fair. He stated, "We have decided that a stunt, new and different than anything ever tried here, would be to seek out and find Chief Nam-Puh..." and he wanted Mr. Mock to do just that. Mock, as "Ogal Alla, Chief of the Nampah and Kunah Tribes, "consented to do so and give the name of the Indian sought as "War Chief, Big Foot Nampa!"

In his "A Romance of the Sawtooth," published in 1917, Mock had made extensive use of the Chinook jargon, even translating, by use of a Chinook dictionary, the Lord's Prayer. He again turned to that dictionary and messages in Chinook, with translations "for the palefaces," began to appear in a local paper. The great War Chief would attend the Harvest Festival: in full regalia he would hold a reception before his tipi one night of the Festival and he would ride in the parade. He even made a speech to the assembled crowd. He had become "the doughty warrior after whom this city was named."

Such a fanciful tale caught the imagination of most people who believed from then until the present time that the town had been named actually after an Indian chieftain, War Chief Big Foot Nampa, not from a Shoshoni word meaning "footprints." Yet Mr. Mock was historian enough to preserve, along with Mr. Wilson's letter and his correspondence in English and Chinook concerning it, the Cottingham account of the true origin of the word Nampa. This material is now a part of my file on "Nampa."

Recent linguistic investigation of Shoshoni words by Dr. Sven Liljeblad confirms the footprint interpretation. He reports that a Shoshoni word for foot, pronounced "nambe" or "nambuh," corresponds quite closely with the name "Nampa," and supports the Cottingham account of the origin of the name.

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