

IDAHO STATE HISTORICAL SOCIETY REFERENCE SERIES

THE SNAKE WAR, 1864-1868

Number 236

1966

Location of new mines in Boise Basin in 1862 and the Owyhees in 1863 contributed to Indian unrest and brought on a war with assorted Northern Paiute-Pit River Shoshoni bands in southwest Idaho, eastern Oregon, northern California and northern Nevada. Called "Snakes" by contemporary observers, the Shoshoni led the fighting in southern Idaho. They had grown increasingly troublesome to Oregon Trail emigrants since 1854, especially after Hudson's Bay Company officials who kept the Indians under control by providing foodstuffs and supplies to Boise Valley Shoshoni, closed the trading post at Fort Boise at the mouth of the Boise River. Already uneasy by the continuous westward march of the Oregon pioneers through the Boise Valley, the Shoshoni were in no mood to tolerate the expansion of the white man's domain into cherished hunting and trading grounds in southern Idaho. As prospectors and freighters after 1862 added to the white traffic to south western Idaho, the Indian unrest increased proportionately. Sporadic raids on traffic to and from the mines led Boise Basin miners early in 1863 to organize a company of volunteer Indian fighters under Jeff Standifer. Standifer's men located a group of Indians and fought a couple of successful skirmishes, but there were no major battles and the volunteers returned to Idaho City having wiped out a Snake Band at Salmon Falls. Small parties of marauders, some of whom were led by a seven-foot Indian named Ouluck who later was to be known to the whites as Big foot, continued to harass travelers in the region. Under pressure from miners and merchants alike, the War Department finally took long-awaited action. Sent out from the Department of the Columbia's headquarters at Fort Vancouver, Washington with two troops of Oregon volunteers, Major Pinckney Lugenbeel located a post forty miles above the mouth of the Boise River in order to provide military protection to whites in the area. Located at the crossroads of the Oregon Trail and the Owyhee-Boise Basin traffic, Fort Boise was ideally situated for commercial as well as military purposes. Within a few weeks a small business and farming settlement grew up which would eventually become Boise City. Indian raids did not lessen with the establishment of Fort Boise. The small force of inexperienced non-professionals at the post were at a loss to cope with the sporadic assaults on cattle and horses by numerous small, nomadic Indian bands. Even if the Indians could be located in their vast uninviting deserts of eastern Oregon or southern Idaho, volunteers or professional soldiers alike were not certain they had the perpetrators of a given raid. Due to increased demands for action, the Columbia Department decided to transfer headquarters of the First Oregon Cavalry to Fort Boise under command of Colonel R. F. Maury, August 28, 1864. By that time the Indian troubles had become known in the newspapers as the Snake War. Despite Indian harassment, merchants on the west coast stepped up inland enterprises as the mining frontier expanded in southwest Idaho-eastern Oregon. Keen competition between Portland and northern California firms for the lion's share of the inland trade brought increased

freight and stage traffic over two major routes. Oregon merchants who used the older route from Umatilla on the Columbia to Olds Ferry on the Snake were threatened by the competition from California firms that shipped goods overland on two roads which ran from Chico in northern California to the Owyhee River crossing at the mouth of Jordan Creek. By the spring of 1865 the California routes were in heavy use; to protect merchants and stage lines from the stepped-up Indian depredations which accompanied this expansion, California and Idaho interests demanded the establishment of new military posts along the lines. They were mollified by Major General McDowell, Commander of the Department of the Pacific, who ordered a new post to be set up on the Owyhee River. On June 27, 1865, Lieutenant Charles Hobart and a company of Oregon Cavalry erected Camp Lyon on Cow Creek, just twenty miles from the Owyhee mines. Then Hobart proceeded to try to recover over 50 head of horses stolen by the Indians from Hill Beachy's Chico-Idaho stage line. But despite the efforts of the troops from Camp Lyon, the Indian depredations continued.

Late in 1865, the Oregon volunteer troops in the area were replaced by regular U.S. Army troops freed from duty in the east with the close of the Civil War. To speed up operations against the Snakes, Major General Steele of the Columbia Department sent Major L. H. Marshall in May, 1866 to take command of the reorganized military district of Boise, which included Camp Lyon, Camp Alvord at the base of Steen's Mountain, Camp Reed at Mountain Meadows, Camp Lander near Fort Hall, and newly established Camp C. F. Smith on White Horse Creek in southeastern Oregon. Most of these camps received new complements of troops at the same time. Marshall personally led an expedition to the Owyhee, although at the four-hour battle of Three Forks on the Owyhee River, May 11, he was routed by the Indians. Remarkably only one trooper was killed. A few days later, while Marshall was recovering from the battle, the Indians ran down two groups of Chinese miners on their way to Boise and rode away with between 50 to 150 scalps. In desperation Owyhee merchants and miners organized a volunteer company to supplant the work of the military, which was coming under increasing criticism from irate business and mining interests in Idaho, Oregon, and California. Under Captain Jennings the volunteers succeeded in getting themselves trapped on Boulder Creek July 2, and had to withstand a six-day siege before help arrived from Camp Lyon. By that time the Indians had disappeared. More successful was the eastern Oregon campaign led by Lieutenant Reuben F. Bernard, who killed at least a dozen Indians and destroyed the provisions of 300 during operations in July. Despite these limited successes in Oregon, the Indians were as troublesome as ever. Continued white protest prompted both General H. W. Halleck, Commander of the Division of the Pacific, and his subordinate, General Steele of the Department of the Columbia to make personal inspections of Snake War operations late in 1866. Steele re-established several older camps and ordered the construction of Camp Warner on Warner Lake and Camp Three Forks on a tributary of the Owyhee. Late in December, 1866, Marshall was relieved by a famous Indian fighter, Lieutenant Colonel George Crook. Reaching Fort Boise in December, Crook immediately set off on a winter campaign, taking with him "one change of underclothes, toothbrush, etc. . . . intending to be gone a week. But I got interested after the Indians and did not return there again for over two years." On the California Road near Owyhee Ferry in January, he surprised a large band, killing 60 Indians and taking 30 prisoners. Crook spent two

more weeks wandering over the country, stamping the ground to keep warm at night. He reached Camp Lyon around January 25, where he found conditions of "drunkenness" and disorder. From there he headed east and spent the spring and summer of 1867 chasing Indians in the vicinity of Camps Warner, C. F. Smith, and Harney. In late summer, discovering that the Oregon Indians were being supplied by allies in northern California, Crook marched south and found hostile Indians among the treacherous lava beds on the Pit River. In a narrow canyon bounded by high lava walls in which the Indians had constructed a fort, Crook staged a two-day fight which has come to be known as the Infernal Caverns Battle, September 27 and 28. Around 15 Indians were killed, although eight soldiers were lost and twelve wounded in the process. Despite the charges of some critics that Crook deliberately took unnecessary pursuit of the Indians until winter, which he spent at a relocated Camp Warner on the west side of Warner Lake. Although Indian raids on stage coaches and livestock in the Boise and Owyhee country continued unabated, by the spring of 1868 Crook had softened the force of Indian resistance. Late in May, after a battle at Castle Rock, the Indians sent peace feelers to Crook at Camp Warner. Promising federal protection from white harassment but not promising a reservation or an annuity--in contrast to most Indian negotiators--Crook made terms with Wewawewa, who the Army recognized as head chief of at least one of the bands involved in the fighting. By September, 1868, the terms of the peace had been disseminated and the scattered bands not part of the first negotiation were rounded up.

Publications--450 N. 4th Street, Boise, ID 83702--208-334-3428