

IDAHO STATE HISTORICAL SOCIETY

REFERENCE SERIES

SNAKE RIVER PREHISTORY AND HISTORICAL SUMMARY

Number 295

Nomadic peoples have lived along the Snake River for more than fourteen thousand years. Best known for their exploits in hunting elephants, giant bison, horses, camels, giant sloth, and other extinct species--as well as elk, deer, and other survivors--they had followed big game from Siberia across a broad plain that took them into Alaska during an ice age when sea level was so low that Asia and North America were one continent. Coming south past a continental ice sheet and local glaciers, several successive groups of hunters spread out over North and South America. Evidence of their occupation of the Snake region goes back for more than fourteen thousand years.

Conditions gradually changed over six thousand years of climatic modification. After much of their big game had to move to greener pastures when Snake country ranges dried up during a time when hot climate and arid plains gradually ruined their grazing lands, those who continued to occupy Snake River country developed a new way of life. Some eight thousand years ago, a transition from pursuit of big game herds to a regular seasonal migratory cycle gradually occurred. Visits to camas, bitterroot, and other natural gardens preceded trips to salmon fishing spots and buffalo ranges. Traditional winter village sites with house pits became prominent at least five thousand years ago. Pack horses obtained from eighteenth-century Spanish sources made travel easier. A network of established pack trails gave access to all parts of the Snake and Columbia area.

Two different cultural traditions met in the Snake country. Plateau peoples who depended upon salmon fisheries, big game, and root harvests operated from lower Snake and Clearwater bases. Desert peoples with Nevada and Utah associations also hunted, fished, and dug camas, bitterroot, and similar edible vegetables. But they had a desert orientation, housing, and equipment. They used brush shelters as well as tipis, and they learned to survive in country that most people had to avoid. Snake River's extensive plains offered an avenue of communication, travel, and cultural interchange that affected both groups of inhabitants. Mountain Shoshoni and Salmon River Nez Perce also came in contact in Idaho's rugged Salmon River mountain country where Shoshoni specialists in hunting mountain sheep carried on a hesitant trade with their plateau neighbors.

Prior to white contact, Indians from a vast area met each

summer for a great trade festival in a Snake River area where numerous other streams (Payette, Boise, Owyhee, Weiser, and Malheur) converge in an excellent salmon fishery. Lower Columbia peoples, Nez Perce, Cayuse, Northern Paiute, local and regional Northern Shoshoni, and more remote plains peoples such as Arapaho horsemen came in from all directions. This gathering, comparable to similar annual events around The Dalles and Cascades of the Columbia or at Missouri River's Mandan villages, provided increased cultural contact for Indian travelers through the Snake country.

When Lewis and Clark (1805-1806) found an old Indian route from navigable Missouri waters to impenetrable Salmon and Snake River canyons that forced them to detour through a difficult Clearwater mountain overland passage, a whole new cultural element came into a land whose inhabitants had seen no use in farming or similar activities. Fur hunters followed in less than a decade, and half a century of beaver trapping made the Snake country into a disputed borderland between large British companies and bands of mountain men based out of St. Louis. Industrious trapping soon converted Snake River from a major beaver resource into a fur region. Then Oregon Trail emigrant wagons brought thousands of settlers past two Hudson's Bay Company posts--Fort Hall and Fort Boise--to farmland homes farther west. Aside from a few Indian missionaries, scarcely anyone saw much opportunity for building white communities along Snake River.

Gold discoveries in 1860 suddenly attracted thousands of settlers to mountain and valley areas which had seemed quite forbidding only a year or two before. Lewiston emerged immediately as a permanent river town, and Boise followed in southern Idaho two years later. Irrigated farming and rail transportation led to development of a string of new communities along Snake River over another half century. Above Lewiston--a nineteenth-century steamboat settlement which finally became an inland seaport after a century of improvement of Snake River navigation--Snake River resisted a number of ill-advised efforts to extend steamboat services to Boise and Salmon Falls. But with a broad valley which provided convenient rail and highway access connecting Midwestern plains with Pacific Northwest ports, Snake River continued to serve as a route of cultural interchange between regions of somewhat different cultural orientation. Mountain barriers and river valleys still direct transportation, communication, and trade along lines that have been developed for 14,000 years or more.

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