

IDAHO STATE HISTORICAL SOCIETY

REFERENCE SERIES

CAMAS PRAIRIE (Camas County)

Number 312

July 1969

Thousands of years before the rise of ancient Babylon and the building of the pyramids of Egypt, people went to work digging camas on Camas Prairie. Men hunted and fished in the valley of the Snake 14,000 years or more ago, and archeological sites document their appearance on Camas Prairie for at least the past 11,000 years. At that time the continental ice sheet extended across the great plains far to the north and east of Idaho, and local glaciers could be found not so many miles from Camas Prairie itself. Lake Bonneville in later Utah discharged an enormous volume of water down Snake River to the south, and the climate of the whole region was a good deal wetter and colder than it is today. Even when the climate got a lot hotter and dryer than it ever has been since, people continued to live on Camas Prairie; they had to leave the nearby lower valleys, but managed to stick it out where higher elevations brought more moisture. Long before white men came, Camas Prairie attracted migratory bands of Shoshoni, Northern Paiute, and Nez Perce camas and yampa harvesters. Sheepeater and Lemhi bands came from the mountains to the north, as did the Boise, Salmon Falls, and Fort Hall bands from the west, the south, and the east. Along with the remote Nez Perce, Northern Paiutes (known as Bannock) also found their way to Camas Prairie, where the spring camas season provided the occasion for an annual get-together and regional trade festival. By the early nineteenth century, Blackfoot raiders from the Great Plains ranged into Camas Prairie. But they were intruding into a region occupied primarily by Shoshoni and Bannock, who regarded Camas Prairie as one of the most attractive spots in their regular seasonal migratory cycle.

Nine years after he had explored Snake River to the south, Donald Mackenzie discovered Camas Prairie in 1820. A North West Company fur trader returning West with a trapping expedition from Lost River, he followed a route that eventually developed into a major road. Alexander Ross came across it with a brigade of Hudson's Bay Company trappers in 1824, and other fur hunters followed. In 1852--a decade after emigrant traffic began to come west over the Oregon Trail along the Snake River--covered wagons started to move over a northern route through Camas Prairie. Military units traveling from western Oregon to Fort Hall to escort immigrant parties back over the Oregon Trail also liked to use the Camas Prairie route. Finally Timothy Goodale brought a

large westbound immigrant party that way in 1862, and the Camas Prairie route gained the designation of Goodale's Cutoff. The next year a gold rush to the South Boise mines around Rocky Bar brought white settlements close to Camas Prairie: seasonal Indian gatherings there made the miners nervous, and heavy traffic on the South Boise wagon road disturbed the natives. Extension of the mining country to the southwest edge of Camas Prairie came May 12, 1864, with the discovery of gold in the Volcano district near Bennett Mountain. White settlers were not bold enough to commence farming Camas Prairie, because Indians continued to come in large bands each spring. But miners demanded removal of all the Indians from southwestern Idaho, and continued Indian use of Camas Prairie promised to lead to trouble.

Pressure against the Camas Prairie Indians mounted after two Shoshoni bands were wiped out in clashes at Bear River, January 29, 1863 and at Salmon Falls less than two months later. Caleb Lyon of Lyonsdale, governor and superintendent of Indian affairs in Idaho, thought for awhile of reserving Little Camas Prairie and the Salmon Falls area for the Indians, but the United States Senate never got around to ratifying the treaties he negotiated with the Boise, Camas Prairie, and Bruneau groups. Lyon's successor, D. W. Ballard, decided not to wait for Congress and arranged to put the Boise and Bruneau Shoshoni on a new reservation he chose for them at Fort Hall early in November, 1866. Then when the Fort Hall Indians came under pressure in 1868 to join the eastern Shoshoni on a proposed Wind River reservation, they refused. Their treaty not only allowed them to stay at Fort Hall, but provided them access to a proposed Camas Prairie reservation as well. By 1868, moreover, an army detachment from Fort Boise went up to Camas Prairie to protect the Indian assembly there that June from some troublesome whites who were out on a horse stealing raid against the Indians. For the next decade, Bannock Indians from Fort Hall came regularly to Camas Prairie as part of their old cycle of migration, but the Boise and Bruneau Shoshoni tended to stay more around Fort Hall.

White stock raisers on Camas Prairie gradually expanded their holdings after 1868, and in 1871 the Bannock reported with considerable displeasure that pigs had been introduced to the camas fields. White efforts to keep the Indians from coming on west from Camas Prairie to the Weiser (the regular continuation of their ancient migratory cycle) contributed further to the Bannock distress, but Governor T. W. Bennett in an 1872 conference with the Indians on Camas Prairie managed to gain that concession from them. Some of the more responsible white leaders, including former Supreme Court Justice Milton Kelly, voiced the hope that if the whites only would apply the law justly to stock raisers and Indians alike, and refrain from attacking the Indians indiscriminately whenever trouble arose, both groups might continue to occupy Camas Prairie without getting into too much trouble. This proved to be a vain hope.

Troubles on the Fort Hall Reservation, coupled with the Bannock need to spend most of their time hunting and camas digging off the reservation, led to friction made more serious by white expansion on Camas Prairie. Regular failure of the Fort Hall agency to provide the Indians the subsistence which they were promised complicated the situation further. After General John E. Smith confiscated 300 Bannock horses at Fort Hall, January 16, 1878, many members of Buffalo Horn's band decided to go to war as soon as they could join the regular assembly on Camas Prairie that spring. Most of the Bannock refused to go with them on the warpath, and headed from Camas Prairie back to Fort Hall when trouble broke out, May 28. The Lemhi band on Camas Prairie also declined to fight. Buffalo Horn's people left Camas Prairie in time to stay ahead of an army force sent out from Fort Boise, and the Bannock War ensued. The campaign ranged over much of southern Idaho and eastern Oregon, but after it ended, whites felt that they could safely settle on Camas Prairie. Indians continued to gather camas there each season until about 1940, but there were no more wars.

With the mining rush to Wood River in 1880, Camas Prairie offered a major road from the Boise region to Bellevue and Hailey. Settlements soon followed. By the following summer a dozen families had farms there, and that fall fifty more farms were opened. Early in 1884, two rival towns--Crichton and Soldier--got started. They were only five miles apart, and with loss of its post office a decade later, Crichton rapidly declined into a ghost town; in 1896, the abandoned site was converted into a farm. Soldier flourished for almost thirty years, getting a flour mill in 1900 and telephone service in 1901. When a railroad was extended across Camas Prairie in 1911, the line ran almost two miles south of Soldier, and soon New Soldier (quickly renamed Fairfield) replaced the earlier community. When Camas County was established by legislative act February 6, 1917, Fairfield became county seat.