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BANNOCK WAR AT CAMAS PRAIRIE

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Along the highway between Mountain Home and Fairfield are areas where it does not take much imagination to believe that Indians are skulking behind rocks to pounce on travelers. Camas Prairie and its adjacent hills are, indeed, Indian country of historic significance. The Bannock War of 1878 began there, and it was from a camp in the forbidding lavas a few miles away that Buffalo Horn led his war party on a campaign that lasted several months, killed at least forty soldiers and civilians, spread terror in several states, and cost the government half a million dollars.

The Nez Perce War of 1877, fought mostly in northern Idaho and Montana, was a longer and more expensive episode in lives and property. But in the southern area the Bannock uproar was number one. Facts about the outbreak of the Bannock War are scarcely red-hot news today, having been related and rehashed for more than ninety years. There were running accounts of the war in The Statesman of 1878. Selected portions of those articles, plus other pertinent information, are contained in a book, The Bannock Indian War of 1878, by George F. Brimlow.

Causes of the war were rooted in many factors. The immediate spark was the rooting of hogs on the prairie. Indians objected strenuously to running of pigs by settlers on the fields where Indians had for years dug camas as a staple of their diet.

It was cattle ranchers, however, that suffered the first blow. On the morning of May 30, 1878, Indians shot Lew Kensler and George Nasby at the cattle camp of Will Silvey and Tom Silvey on Big Camas Prairie. Tom was away at the time, delivering beef to Atlanta. Will escaped unharmed. Fighting intention of the Indians having been demonstrated beyond the arbitration point, volunteers organized for battle. Troops trotted out from Fort Boise. Expecting more attacks near the camp where the fighting started, settlers prepared for the worst.

Commodore Jackson built a stone fortification at Rattlesnake Station on the Overland Road north of present-day Mountain Home.

Women and children took refuge there. Obediah Corder took similar steps at his Mayfield store to fend off the Bannocks. It turned out the forts were not needed. The Indians withdrew from the prairie and from their camps in the lavas. Rather than risk a battle with troops, they gathered their trappings, stole all the cattle and horses they could find in a hurry, and hit for

Snake River, intending to cross Owyhee County and join forces with the Paiutes of Oregon and Nevada. The party of about 100 Indians burned a wagon train and sank the ferry at Glenn's Ferry. They stole horses and cattle in Bruneau Valley where settlers had found refuge in a cave.

Then the Bannocks moved on toward Juniper Mountain. On June 8 they were met by volunteers from Silver City in the battle of South Mountain. In that fight O. H. Purdy and Charles Stueder were killed. So was Chief Buffalo Horn. Without their war chief, the Bannocks lost steam but continued their devastation. Aided by Paiutes under Chief Egan, the Indians burned and pillaged across southeastern Oregon, suffered a defeat at Silver Creek, and fell apart in the Blue Mountains. Throughout the summer and fall they trickled back across Idaho, causing incidents on the Payette and Salmon rivers and attacking wagon trains on Lost River. There were sporadic episodes at Cape Horn and Bonanza. Troops finally rounded up the last elements of the hostiles in Yellowstone Park. That was in September. Length and severity of the war made accurate a prediction by The Statesman in June shortly after the action on Camas Prairie. It said: "Should the number of Indians be as great as estimated the summer and autumn will probably be consumed before they are subdued and tranquillity and safety secured to the country."

One of the ironic events of the war occurred at Dixie. Early in the excitement, volunteers captured an Indian at the Dixie ranch. He was probably the most surprised person in the area. He said he was from Oregon. He had come over to trade and make talk with old friends on the camas-digging grounds. He wanted to know where all the Indians were. He didn't know there was a war.

A white schemer who got a good deal of blame for stirring up the war was one of the first victims. James Dempsey had negotiated with authorities for guns and ammunition for the Indians. After obtaining guns he traded several to Buffalo Horn for an Indian woman. When the war started he attempted to join the Indians in their uprising. They killed him and left the body on Camas Prairie. If the place where they split his skull with an ax is still known geographically there will probably be little chance of finding artifacts at that camp. Both Indians and whites promptly removed all reminders of the scene. Double dealers were mutually despised.

By Dick d'Easum, for The Idaho Statesman, Sunday, July 20, 1969

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