

IDAHO STATE HISTORICAL SOCIETY

REFERENCE SERIES

THE LEMHI IN EARLY NINETEENTH CENTURY

Number 486

1978

When Lewis and Clark came to visit the Lemhi-Shoshoni homeland in the summer of 1805, they already had become aware of white men and had responded to the impact of white culture. As a distinctive band, in fact, they owed more than a little of their identity to a series of cultural adjustments of Spanish and French origin. Horses obtained from the southwest had changed the Lemhi way of life. Through the Comanche (who, like the Lemhi spoke Northern Shoshoni, but spent their time on the plains much closer to Santa Fe), many other Shoshoni peoples had adopted a horse economy with increased mobility and superior facility for buffalo hunting. Others had proved more conservative, not bothering to acquire horses. Among the Shoshoni inhabitants of the Salmon River mountains, whose specialty and skill in hunting mountain sheep led later whites to identify them as Sheepeaters, some retained their ancient ways and remained Sheepeaters. Others organized into mounted bands and hunted buffalo over a wider area. (Actually, they had all subsisted on buffalo as well as mountain sheep and other game animals.) But chasing buffalo with horses modified the Shoshoni way of life considerably: scattered smaller groups could assemble into larger bands and travel over more country in their annual migratory food-gathering cycles.) Of the earlier Sheepeater population, those in the Salmon River country who adapted to a horse culture emerged as the Lemhi Indians. They occupied Lemhi Valley and some of the upper Missouri country across the Continental Divide, but traveled widely in their annual visits to important subsistence and trading areas. Each summer they fished for salmon in and around Lemhi River, following a spring tour to Camas Prairie or Camas Meadows to dig camas. In addition, they ranged from trading expeditions in the Boise region to buffalo hunts into old Shoshoni country around the Three Forks of the Missouri River. By the end of the nineteenth century, Blackfoot expansion made the Three Forks region a dangerous hunting ground for the Lemhi band: armed with guns from the Canadian fur trade, the Blackfeet advanced against the Shoshoni who in the mid-eighteenth century had occupied lands extending far into the great plains, and as far north as the south Saskatchewan. Because of the Blackfoot menace, Sacajawea (captured in 1800 by Blackfoot raiders at Three Forks) eventually became a member of the Lewis and Clark expedition and finally emerged as by far the most notable of the

Lemhi Shoshoni.) By that time, some preliminary impact of white culture upon the Shoshoni (as well as upon the Blackfeet) had shaped those changes in Shoshoni traits and territorial holdings that led to identification among others of the Lemhi band.

In company with other mounted Shoshoni bands that hunted buffalo, the Lemhi Shoshoni took great pride in that occupation.

They referred to themselves as kutsendeka (buffalo eaters) in contrast to the more conservative tukudeka (mountain sheep eaters) who retained their old ways in the Salmon River mountains. (Even after a generation or two of white contact, these sheepeaters--as the whites called them--preserved their ancient culture and continued to occupy a vast tract of rough country extending across southern Idaho into the Yellowstone region of Wyoming. Even after Idaho's Indian wars--which concluded with the Sheepeater Campaign of 1879--some of the tukudeka avoided confinement on a reservation, and Eagle Eye's Payette River country until the end of the nineteenth century before relinquishing their independent existence as nonreservation Indians.)

Thus, although they had a common cultural origin and hardly could be distinguished prior to the eighteenth century, the Lemhi diverted from the Sheepeaters when they formed a mounted, buffalo-hunting band that traveled more widely. A similar situation developed in the Boise region and in other parts of traditional Shoshoni country, as well as among the Northern Paiute farther west. In the latter case, these mounted buffalo hunters traveled with the Fort Hall Shoshoni and emerged as the Bannock Indians of Idaho in a geographical setting somewhat distant from the original Oregon and Nevada homeland. Some of the Bannock Indians joined the Lemhi at times: individual Shoshoni and Northern Paiute families often shifted from one band to another--a flexibility that often confused white observers who had a hard time keeping track of such tangled arrangements.

In later years, major Shoshoni bands sometimes were identified as buffalo eaters, salmon eaters, sheep eaters, or pine nut eaters (as well as an assortment of other foods), but that system of designating Shoshoni bands worked out rather poorly over the years. One day a Shoshoni group might happen to be rockchuck eaters; another day the same Indians might be camas eaters, or deer eaters, or fish eaters. While the Indians often designated sub-groups as various kinds of eaters, geographical association has proved a more useful identification in the long run. So on that basis, a number of major, loosely organized Lemhi Shoshoni--may be identified. All of these geographic names derive from the nineteenth-century fur trade and missionary era.

Lemhi Valley did not get that name until the Salmon River Mission of 1855-1858 finally became known as Fort Lemhi after the Mormons abandoned the area during the tumult that accompanied Albert Sidney Johnston's military expedition to Utah just before the Civil War. Even at that, Lemhi is a misspelling of a name

Limhi from the Book of Mormon. So the kutsendeka of the Salmon River mountains finally emerged, after a lot of tribulation, as the

Lemhi Shoshoni occupying the Lemhi Reservation late in the nineteenth century. By that time, some of their Sheepeater associates had joined them in the mountain valley home.

Because of their location in the Salmon River mountains and Lemhi Valley to the north of the Snake River Plains, the Lemhi Shoshoni differed from their neighbors, the Fort Hall Shoshoni, in some important ways. Living on the border of the Nez Perce country, they were exposed to plateau culture of the farther northwest more than to desert culture of the Great Basin. Plateau culture--based on salmon fishing and camas digging in the early days--fitted the Lemhi country well, while desert culture--with seed gathering and communal rabbit drives, along with antelope drives or sage hen drives--became more appropriate for the Upper Snake Plains, especially as the climate grew warmer and drier in the era preceding white exploration and fur trade. So, in contrast with the Fort Hall band, the Lemhi Shoshoni imposed a horse economy on their traditional plateau cultural elements. Both groups introduced interesting plains cultural traits in the eighteenth century with their experience in buffalo hunting among Plains Indians. Clothing, ceremonies, and political organization into mounted bands, among other plains cultural traits, came with the new cultural orientation. But the Lemhi and Fort Hall Shoshoni incorporated these new cultural elements onto a different base so that they continued to differ even after both groups responded to plains influence after they shifted into a mounted band economic and political arrangement. With larger herds of horses, the Fort Hall Shoshoni--individually, as well as collectively--had a more developed, plains-style band organization compared to the Lemhi.

Unlike the Fort Hall Shoshoni, the Lemhi buffalo hunters did not hold to a single, seasonal migratory cycle in which the entire band proceeded from camas digging to salmon fishing to buffalo hunting and to other food gathering activities. Some of the Lemhi would have departed on a Great Plains buffalo expedition ahead of the summer salmon run, while others would have gone west to Camas Prairie to dig camas roots and trade with other Indian bands and peoples. Coordination of these complex migratory movements developed a more experienced leadership and "resulted in a communal unanimity as nowhere else among the Idaho Shoshoni." [quote from Sven Liljeblad] Family groups, in their earlier Sheepeater tradition, might spend a winter away from their home territory at times, perhaps on Wood River near Camas Prairie. But they normally avoided dangerous country in which an entire band would have to hold together for protection. Those who went through Lemhi Pass and continued past later Virginia City and Bozeman to the Montana plains set out in May and got

back to Lemhi Valley in October, so that they could spend the winter at home. (In contrast, the Fort Hall Shoshoni went out on that kind of expedition in the fall.) Those of the Lemhi group who ventured to Camas Prairie in the spring traveled in small parties of five to ten families--or even in individual family groups. Because the route to the Montana plains ran through dangerous Blackfoot country, a large single band--with as many as a hundred tipis--would hold together for that hazardous trip.

When Lewis and Clark met up with the Lemhi Shoshoni after a long search in the summer of 1805, they found a band of about 400 camped in Lemhi Valley. Sacajawea's brother had assumed leadership of the Lemhi by that time, and the exploring expedition obtained horses and the services of an elderly Lemhi guide to show them the Lolo Trail so that they could reach the Clearwater and the navigable waters of the Columbia. In return, the Indians really wanted some guns and ammunition so that they could hold their own against the hostile, resurgent Blackfeet. Lewis and Clark, anticipating expansion of the fur trade to the Lemhi country, assured them that weapons would come from white sources. By the time that white fur hunters got around to operating in the Lemhi country, though, Shoshoni band organization had gone through a remarkable change. Instead of bands, the Shoshoni had consolidated into two large composite bands, one of which included Bannock leadership and people. Within two decades after Lewis and Clark had come through Lemhi Pass, Blackfoot raiders were following the old Indian road through Lemhi Pass and other access routes to the Upper Snake with sufficient strength to force the Shoshoni to join together for protection, even in Idaho territory. By the time that Donald Mackenzie organized the Snake county fur trade for successful operation by the North West Company of Montreal, the Shoshoni were assembling in a large winter camp. In 1819 and 1820, Mackenzie and his Snake Brigade of trappers camped with a large composite Shoshoni band on Little Lost River, directly west of the high ridge separating the Lemhi and Birch Creek valleys from the Pahsimeroi and Lost River country. Here the Shoshoni and their trapper friends had less reason to fear a Blackfoot challenge. In 1822, the trappers' expedition came into the Lemhi country, and fur hunting parties showed up often in that area for more than a decade. In 1823, Finnan MacDonald responded to a Blackfoot attack in a ravine not far west of Lemhi Pass by burning out the Blackfoot intruders. Blackfoot parties continued to come that way, but showed considerable respect for the Hudson's Bay Company expedition after that misadventure with MacDonald. The Shoshoni had to continue to travel in their two large composite bands as long as the Blackfeet continued to pose a threat to smaller bands such as the Lemhi and Fort Hall Shoshoni had organized into prior to the coming of Lewis and Clark.

With access to useful white tools and supplies during the

fur trade era, the Lemhi Shoshoni made out relatively well for a generation or two after initial white contact. They did not suffer so much as the Cache Valley Shoshoni did from overexposure to fur hunters' winter camps. And fur traders' expeditions, whether based from St. Louis or Fort Vancouver, operated in parties that approximated their own migratory bands, both in organization and in subsistence through hunting rather than farming. In the fall of 1832, Captain B. L. E. Bonneville's party erected a winter post just north of the Lemhi at Carmen Creek on the Salmon River. Other trapping parties also spent some time in their country, but trapping did not disturb the Lemhi way of life too seriously. By the end of the fur trade era, the Blackfeet posed less of a threat, so the Lemhi band could resume its traditional way of life. Under the leadership of Snag, a relative of Sacajawea and her brother who had led the Lemhi early in the nineteenth century, the band made another cultural transition at the end of the fur trade when declining fur prices reduced Lemhi opportunities to trade for white goods.

Because emigrant roads serving settlers headed for Oregon and California, ran some distance from their lands the Lemhi escaped some of the tribulation that came to the Shoshoni farther south.

Finally a Mormon mission that came to Lemhi Valley in 1855 brought a new era of close white contact that continued with the mining advances to Bannack in Montana in 1862 and Leesburg in Idaho in 1866. White missionaries and miners lived in a way very different from the trappers who had visited the Lemhi country in the early nineteenth century. And with new white settlements came a series of major cultural changes that brought serious problems for the Lemhi people.