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EIGHTEENTH CENTURY NORTHERN SHOSHONI

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Prior to Spanish exploration and settlement in North America, the Shoshoni of the Snake country lived and traveled in relatively small extended family groups. Combining basin and plateau cultural elements, they gathered seeds, pine nuts, and wild wheat in the tradition of Great Basin residents to the south, and dug camas and bitterroot as did Plateau Indians farther northwest. In addition, the Snake Country Shoshoni fished for salmon (typical of plateau culture), but engaged in communal rabbit and sage hen drives--as well as antelope drives--characteristic of basin culture. This blend of basin and plateau traits had a firm geographic origin: as an avenue of communication from the Great Plains to the Pacific Northwest, Snake River Valley cut through a whole series of ridges which, running north and south in the basin and range country of the interior west, interrupted travel across the continent. Cultural interchange, fostered by this natural route of travel, continued from prehistoric times down past the years of the fur trade. Through Snake River Valley, Indians from the Great Plains had access to salmon fisheries in the Boise and Salmon Falls regions.

In the process of utilizing salmon fisheries in their regular seasonal migratory food gathering cycle, inhabitants of the Great Plains came in contact with peoples from the northwest plateau country. From this cultural interchange emerged the Northern Shoshoni with a composite of basin and plateau traits.

In clothing and housing, early day Shoshoni on the Snake River plains favored basin over plateau cultural elements. Women had sage bark dresses, and men wore breech clouts and leggings. Rabbit skin blankets were used in the winter. (In contrast to the Shoshoni and Basin peoples, Plateau Indians would not descend to chasing rabbits or to using rabbit skins.) Northern Shoshoni of the Snake Plains lived in conical grass huts (devised from the beehive shaped cupolas of the Great Basin) prior to the time they imported tipis from the Great Plains. This change--part of a complex of new cultural influences that came when the Shoshoni acquired horses early in the eighteenth-century--came with plains clothing and a plains buffalo hunting economy adopted by man (but not all) of the people of the Snake Plains.

Horses changed the Shoshoni way of life--at least for those who preferred to shift to a newly-developed plains-style culture. Buffalo hunting became much easier for the mounted bands,

although use of the old buffalo jumps in the Challis region continued long after horses gave the Indians greater mobility and a more practical hunting method. Some of the Northern Shoshoni who had horses did not use them for hunting expeditions. But after Great Plains Shoshoni--beginning with the Comanche, a Shoshoni group with close access to Spanish sources of horses in New Mexico, which had been colonized in 1598--had adopted an equestrian lifestyle, that kind of plains culture spread to the Snake River region. Many, but by no means all, of the old extended-family Shoshoni groups at last could organize into bands. Mounted bands could travel in a more extended season hunting, fishing, camas digging, and food-collecting cycle.

When French trappers came into contact with the Shoshoni in the Great Plains of Wyoming or South Dakota in 1742, the Indians with whom they were traveling fled in terror from the dreaded Snakes, as they called them. (To a number of major Great Plains tribes, the Shoshoni were known as Snakes--presumably after sticks the Shoshoni used to paint snakes on to frighten their plains enemies. So French and later English, and Snake River was named in 1812 for the Snake Indians who inhabited that region.) In the middle of the eighteenth century, the Shoshoni dominated much of the Great Plains, ranging into the Saskatchewan River country of later Alberta. Then a smallpox epidemic afflicted the Northern Plains Shoshoni, and their traditional enemies, the Blackfeet, acquired firearms from the French trappers. By the end of the eighteenth century, the once-formidable Shoshoni had retired from the Saskatchewan area and much of the upper Missouri country. But some of the Northern Shoshoni still ventured from Lemhi Valley and Big Hole out to the Three Forks region of the Missouri, and the Eastern Shoshoni still inhabited the Wyoming plains. Farther west, the Northern Shoshoni continued to hold the Snake River Plains. But gradually, some Northern Paiute Indians (closely related to the Shoshoni in language and in basin culture) found their way from northern Nevada and eastern Oregon into the Snake River Plains: obtaining horses from the Fort Hall Shoshoni in a mounted, buffalo-hunting band. By the time that white explorers and trappers reached the Snake country, these Northern Paiute (known as Bannock Indians) had become well-established travelers with the Fort Hall Shoshoni. Over the years, the Bannock gradually merged with the Northern Shoshoni; through intermarriage and close association they developed into a single band.

With the ascendancy of several mounted Northern Shoshoni bands of buffalo hunters (including many of the Boise, Lemhi, Fort Hall, and some other Shoshoni groups of southeastern Idaho), the Indians of the Snake country had an interesting option. Those who preferred to get into a more ambitious seasonal migratory cycle could do so. But conservative exponents of more traditional ways retained their old customs. Some of the Mountain Snakes (or Sheepeaters, as they were often called)

became the Lemhi band of mounted buffalo hunters; others rejected that innovation. Some of the Boise Shoshoni formed into a mounted buffalo-hunting band, while others found their great salmon-fishery resource in the Boise region adequate and did not make the long annual trip to the buffalo country. Across Snake River, the Bruneau Shoshoni concluded that they could get along just as well without using their horses for buffalo hunting and widespread travel: they did not organize into a mounted band, but moved in a different migratory cycle into territory farther south. Because of this distinctive route of migration and separate geographical location, they developed their own dialect--Western Shoshoni--more in common with other Shoshoni farther into Nevada.

As was the case with the Bannock, individuals and families among the scattered Shoshoni who preferred to go buffalo hunting could join one of the annual expeditions. Band organization, for the Shoshoni who had such an arrangement, remained pretty flexible, and individual Indians or families shifted about rather freely. Band leadership had less of the rigidity typical of the Great Plains tribes: Shoshoni leaders generally thought of themselves as all about equal, and except for the white men's need to have Indian chiefs to deal with, the Shoshoni avoided any such system. So white explorers and trappers identified (had where necessary, appointed) Indian chiefs for the Shoshoni, although the Indians generally remained somewhat unimpressed by the imposition of such a foreign arrangement.

Enabled to cover large distances once they had horses to ride, the Fort Hall Shoshoni developed an annual migratory of 1,200 miles or more. Each spring they headed west to Camas Prairie to dig camas bulbs in May or June. They continued on to the Boise and Snake rivers for summer salmon fishing. After their return to excellent grazing lands in the Fort Hall bottoms, they finally set out in the fall to chase Montana or Wyoming buffalo herds. They usually rode north through Targhee Pass across the Continental Divide to a plains hunting area in Montana between the Musselshell and the Yellowstone rivers. Between fall and spring buffalo hunts, they would spend the winter on the Yellowstone River. Upon returning to Fort Hall in the spring, they would prepare for another Camas Prairie trip and another annual migratory cycle. Or, as an alternative to a Yellowstone expedition via Targhee Pass, they could set out for Green River and join the Eastern Shoshoni of Wyoming. In this case, they would hunt buffalo in the Crow country. No matter which way they went, they saw a lot of territory. In their travels, they had a sequence in which they arrived at the right place at the right time to subsist upon camas, salmon, buffalo, or whatever each area had to offer.

In contrast to these migratory buffalo hunters, the Mountain Snakes--Northern Shoshoni who lived in the Salmon River mountains or in the ranges which extended eastward into the Yellowstone

country of Wyoming--had to travel less. Living on the Nez Perce borderland, they had frequent contact with some of the Nez Perce bands and in any event had essentially a plateau, rather than a desert, culture. As big game hunters, they commanded respect for their unusual ability to pursue mountain sheep. (In later years, they were generally known to the whites as Sheepeaters. Some of these Sheepeaters--who, like the other Northern Shoshoni, also subsisted on camas, salmon, and other products available in their country--formed a mountain band that hunted buffalo in a seasonal cycle different from the Fort Hall pattern. This band, which in later years attracted a considerable number of Bannock Indians, finally was distinguished as the Lemhi because of their Lemhi Valley base. But a small remnant of culturally conservative Sheepeaters kept up their old mountain life long after the time that the other Shoshoni had settled on reservations.