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NORTHERN SHOSHONI INTERTRIBAL TRADE AND FUR TRADE

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In the broad valley of the Snake, two centers of Northern Shoshoni occupation held special importance over a long period of time. Late in the years of the fur trade, each of these had a post of importance: Fort Hall and Fort Boise. Around later Fort Hall, in the vicinity where Blackfoot, Ross Fork, the Portneuf, and Bannock Creek meet the Snake River, horse-owning Indians had an exceptionally good base of operations if they didn't mind the hordes of mosquitoes too much. Here the Fort Hall Shoshoni and Bannock bands maintained their horse herds in luxury.

Farther west, in a zone where the Boise, Owyhee, Malheur, Payette, and Weiser rivers all flow into the Snake, the Northern Shoshoni had an important trading center during salmon season long before the Hudson's Bay Company built Fort Boise. Here the Northern Shoshoni met other Indian peoples from a broad western area for a great intertribal fair during salmon fishing season. Nez Perce and Walla Walla horses, Northern Paiute obsidian arrowheads, Pacific Coast ornamental seashells (brought in by Umatilla and Cayuse intermediaries), and Shoshoni buffalo hides and meat from the eastern plains were bartered there year after year. In addition, Cheyenne and Arapaho bands dragged superior cedar tipi poles from Colorado by the hundreds, and Crows came from Wyoming in search of wives. So did many others: the entire festival formed a grand marriage market as well as a horse market and general trade fair. Ordinary horses served as their standard medium of exchange, each valued at ten red and green painted arrows. Nez Perce horses commanded a premium.

By the end of the eighteenth century, the Northern Shoshoni had entered a cultural golden age. Those who had survived the smallpox epidemic had gained some advantages--principally horses--of remote white contact, unaccompanied by the disadvantages of white settlement in their lands. From contact with Indians of the Great Plains, they had acquired some useful and decorative cultural traits that enriched their lives from that time on. They began to live in tipis, to switch from basin to plains clothing (including feathered headdress for festive occasions), to jerk meat for preservation in winter, to use skin containers in place of their old woven baskets, and had organized, in part, into bands with trusted leaders along the plains model. This whole complex of new living habits, dress, equipment, and political organization helped prepare them for the time when they would have to begin to deal with white explorers and trappers who would promote still more extensive cultural adaptation.

Not counting the Comanche--plains Indians who spoke Northern Shoshoni, but ranged over a different geographical area--somewhere around three or four thousand Northern Shoshoni

lived in the Snake country of Idaho and Wyoming late in the eighteenth century. Some of them overlapped into Montana and Utah, and some of those with horses went on expeditions to New Mexico or Oregon. Considering that the Eastern Shoshoni ranged far into Wyoming; that the Comanche held plains territory farther south; that the Western Shoshoni occupied a large tract in Nevada and Utah; and that the Southern Shoshoni lived in California and Nevada around Death Valley, the Shoshoni as a whole covered a lot of territory even though they had been retrenching for a generation and had pulled back from Alberta and much of the northern plains.

Shortly after Lewis and Clark met a Northern Shoshoni band in Lemhi Valley in 1805, fur hunters began to travel through their domain. John Colter of the Lewis and Clark expedition returned to Shoshoni country in 1808, exploring Teton Valley and upper Yellowstone. Then in 1810, Andrew Henry had to take refuge on Henry's Fork in the upper Snake River Valley after Blackfoot opposition had driven his band of trappers from the forks of the Missouri to the north.

Henry's winter post was abandoned the next spring. But that fall an overland trappers' expedition, representing John Jacob Astor's Pacific Fur Company, turned up at Fort Henry on their way to the Pacific Coast. This band of trappers built canoes in order to descend Snake River. Several trappers decided to stay in the Snake country however. So, from 1810 on, the Northern Shoshoni had some extended exposure to white ways. Late in 1813, John Reid of the Pacific Fur Company built a post at the confluence of the Boise and the Snake--right in the middle of the traditional salmon fishery and summer fair grounds. This intrusion alienated the Bannock, who wiped the establishment out early in 1814. Because the Pacific Fur Company had already failed, Reid's post would have had only a temporary function anyway: he had come, in part, to notify some detached trappers that the operation had been sold out to the North West Company of Montreal. With two unsuccessful temporary posts, the Snake country fur trade had gotten off to an unpromising start. Still, the Northern Shoshoni had a modest exposure to white ways during these less-than-spectacular trapping operations from 1810 to 1814.

Even though initial white attempts at fur hunting failed consistently in the Snake country, that setback proved temporary. Donald Mackenzie--who had led the advance party of Overland Astorians through the western part of Snake River Valley--came back to the Pacific Northwest in 1816. By 1818 he got his annual Snake expedition into some extremely rich beaver country in the Boise region. Before the season had ended, he went out to explore Northern Shoshoni territory as far as Bear River and the Yellowstone territory. Convinced of the fur wealth of the terrain, he held a trappers' rendezvous in Boise Valley in the summer of 1819, along the model used six years later by W. H. Ashley for the Rocky Mountain fur trade. This interesting addition to the regular annual summer Indian festival incurred determined Nez Perce resistance.

Mackenzie started to build another permanent post close to the site of John Reid's unfortunate venture six years before. But Nez Perce opposition halted his plan. Mackenzie still did not give up. That winter, he camped with his Snake Brigade of trappers and with a large composite Northern Shoshoni band on Little Lost River in a sheltered valley close to the Snake River Plains. There he held a grand peace rally in an effort--largely successful--to get the Northern Shoshoni and Bannock bands to allow his fur trapping enterprise to succeed. Dealing with Peiem, leader of the Boise Shoshoni, and a number of other prominent band leaders as well, Mackenzie reached an accord with the Indians. His annual Snake expedition, organized

originally for the North West Company, continued under auspices of the Hudson's Bay Company until 1832. Traveling through the country in an annual migratory cycle in search of furs--and for food for subsistence as well--Mackenzie's fur brigade operated essentially in Northern Shoshoni fashion. Taken out by Michel Bourdon for the Hudson's Bay Company in 1822, by Finnan MacDonald in 1823, and by Alexander Ross in 1824, this annual Snake expedition resisted the Blackfeet (who were penetrating Northern Shoshoni territory) without upsetting the Northern Shoshoni unduly. Through the fur traders, the Shoshoni were induced to go into a sideline of beaver hunting. In return they obtained useful white articles of trade: beads, blankets, needles, and other implements along with guns and ammunition, needed to resist the Blackfoot intruders.

When Peter Skene Ogden took over the annual Snake expedition late in 1824, a new element had entered the Northern Shoshoni world. Jedediah Smith and six prominent trappers investigating the country in the interest of William H. Ashley's fur hunting enterprise, based in St. Louis, brought unwelcome competition to the Hudson's Bay Company. Firm Bannock resistance to the St. Louis trappers (whose Indian troubles greatly exceeded the problems encountered by the better-organized British and Canadian operation) led to a fair amount of tension. Yet during these years of competition among white fur hunters, with a substantial resulting impact upon the local Indians, the Northern Shoshoni had their major problem with the Blackfoot intrusions into their Snake country.

As more different companies of trappers entered the Snake country fur trade, the Northern Shoshoni were subjected more and more to alien cultural exposure. As early as 1818, an Iroquois band traveling with Donald Mackenzie had joined the Boise Shoshoni for a season, with a resulting introduction of an Iroquois strain into the Northern Shoshoni population.¹ A number of Scottish and French Canadian trappers had Shoshoni wives and families; after mountain men based from St. Louis entered the Snake country with Jedediah Smith in 1824, this kind of population blend increased. Parties of Rocky Mountain fur trappers often spent the winter in Cache Valley, and the Cache Valley Shoshoni suffered particularly from excessive cultural pressures inherent in this kind of contact. Early trappers' rendezvous sessions in Cache Valley and around Bear Lake brought more than white culture to the local Northern Shoshoni, and the 1832 rendezvous in Pierre's Hole turned out to be a high point of the Rocky Mountain fur trade. Indians and whites from a large western area joined in that summer frolic and trade fair. Aside from white trappers, a variety of Indian tribes made long journeys into Northern Shoshoni country to participate. And after the celebration terminated in a wild battle at Pierre's Hole (mainly between the Nez Perce and Gros Ventre, after an Iroquois with a white trapping party set off the fight), bands of fur hunters set out to trap the more remote areas of the Northern Shoshoni domain. But by that time--partly as a result of Hudson's Bay Company policy to trap out the Snake country so that the Rocky Mountain fur trade would not expand farther into the Pacific Northwest--not enough beaver were left to maintain a strong commercial fur trade. Still, Captain B. L. E. Bonneville built a winter post in the Lemhi country in 1832. In 1834, Nathaniel J. Wyeth founded Fort Hall on Snake River in 1834. Agents for the Hudson's Bay Company retaliated with an early version of Fort Boise late in 1834. So just about the time that the Rocky Mountain and Snake country fur trade had reached a period of decline, permanent white installations occupied the two main Northern Shoshoni centers of the Snake River plains: Fort

Hall and Fort Boise.

Within two years, Nathaniel J. Wyeth--after an unsuccessful attempt to enter a joint fur trading enterprise with the Hudson's Bay Company--had to try to sell out to his rivals. Eventually the British took over management of Fort Hall in 1838, and the Northern Shoshoni remained under British influence at the end of the fur trade. Declining fur prices led almost all the independent mountain men to retire from the fur trade by 1840. With their departure, the Northern Shoshoni had less white contact. Richard Grant, who managed Fort Hall for the Hudson's Bay Company from 1842 to 1852, induced his sons to establish large Shoshoni families, so British influence among the Indians was increased. Yet by 1849, with the continued decline of beaver prices, the Northern Shoshoni fur trade practically had ceased: Richard Grant reported that "the Indians have become careless, and still more indolent than they ever were in hunting furs . . . some old ones no doubt might yet be enticed to hunt beaver . . ."² Yet Grant really could not anticipate much in the way of revitalizing his Northern Shoshoni fur business. A temporary price increase in 1850 helped briefly, but the Fort Hall Shoshoni had gone back mainly to big game hunting for subsistence and for emigrant trade. As might have been expected, the Northern Shoshoni never had seen very much sense in hunting beaver when plenty of deer, elk, antelope, and buffalo were around. Sometimes they had tried to divert white trappers into big game hunting as an obviously more rewarding business than anyone with intelligence enough would pursue. In any case, by the end of the fur trade, the Northern Shoshoni emerged with an improved way of life that preserved most of their traditional values and brought a few appropriate conveniences and luxuries which gave them an easier existence. If their legacy from the fur trade era had included nothing more, they would have come out reasonably well off. But the beginning of white migration over emigrant roads to Oregon and California--also a heritage of the fur trade-- introduced another, quite different, consequence of their exposure to white culture.

By the later years of the fur trade era, Blackfoot intrusions into the Snake country no longer offered a serious menace to the Northern Shoshoni. Blackfoot expansion and incursions had resulted from an earlier stage of the Canadian fur trade. But by 1836, the Blackfeet had suffered enough through white contact--and particularly through white diseases--that they no longer threatened fur hunters in the Snake country, who drove them out after more than a decade of hostilities. So the Northern Shoshoni no longer had to travel in large composite bands for protection. Resuming their earlier way of life, they continued their migratory cycles as a number of mounted bands. Or, for those who never had organized into major traveling bands, they continued their old pattern of existence, no longer molested by fur hunters or hostile Blackfoot parties. The Northern Shoshoni still were a somewhat diverse group. The Boise Shoshoni, the Lemhi, and the Fort Hall Shoshoni and Bannocks continued to travel about the land. And the Bruneau Shoshoni, Cache Valley, and Bear Lake bands, and the isolated Sheepeaters or Mountain Shoshoni preserved their traditional ways as best they could. Until white settlers came into their midst, they did not have excessive difficulties.

¹A band of Iroquois trappers remained active in the Snake country until 1836, when John Grey led them down the Missouri to settle in a retired trappers' community. One of these

mainly-Iroquois founders of Kansas City was a Shoshoni (or possibly a Bannock) member of Grey's party.

²Richard Grant to George Simpson, February 22, 1850, quoted in Louis Seymour Grant, "Fort Hall on the Oregon Trail" (M.A. thesis, University of British Columbia, 1938), 92.