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SHOSHONI ACTIVITY NEAR IDAHO'S CITY OF ROCKS IN HISTORIC TIMES

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Not long before European explorers approached their domain, Northern Shoshoni bands whose territory included a City of Rocks borderland gained increased exposure to Great Basin, Great Plains, and Columbia Plateau culture. When they got Spanish horses from New Mexican sources (a mid-eighteenth century achievement), many of them joined in seasonal migratory expeditions to hunting, fishing, and gardening sites (featuring camas, bitterroot, biscuit root, and other edible plants) that sustained their economy. From contacts with three major western cultural areas, they developed a distinctive tradition of their own.¹ With important elements from Basin, Plains, and Plateau culture, they enjoyed a number of advantages of life in a varied environment. Their City of Rocks neighborhood contained important resources--particularly Idaho's only significant supply of pine nuts--that enticed them to return long after emigrant roads disrupted their life there.

Although their City of Rocks campsites occupied a Columbia Basin borderland, a close proximity of only a few miles from Great Basin terrain made that land accessible to Western Shoshoni neighbors who inhabited Humboldt Basin and other Nevada areas. At times, Western Shoshoni peoples had an impact of their own upon emigrant and other transportation development around later City of Rocks sites, so both Shoshoni groups require attention. Although they spoke recognizably different dialects they both formed part of a much larger group of Shoshoni people who inhabited a vast area, ranging from New Mexico and Texas northward to Wyoming and Montana and westward across Nevada and part of California as well as from part of Utah into most of southern Idaho. Early French and English travelers referred to them as Shoshoni (a term of unknown origin), but Spaniards called them Comanche.² (Shoshoni and Comanche simply are two European names for a single large language group.) With horses provided through their Comanche segment in New Mexico, they supplied many different peoples with greatly improved transportation. Before Blackfoot warriors drove them back into Idaho with guns that Shoshoni hunters lacked, Plains Shoshoni expanded into southern Alberta and Saskatchewan.³ Mountain Shoshoni had been active in Idaho for a long time, with cultural antecedents there far older than adaptations associated with horse trading.⁴ Idaho's Mountain Shoshoni did not ordinarily embark upon City of Rocks

tours, but many other Northern Shoshoni travelers came by or settled there.

European exploration of any place close to Shoshoni City of Rocks campgrounds began in September, 1776 when Francisco Atanasio Dominguez joined Silvestre Velez de Escalante in a tour from Santa Fe to Utah Lake (near later Provo) where they camped with some friendly Comanche (meaning Shoshoni) people. Their Shoshoni friends told them about Salt Lake and their Bingham Canyon copper mine, but apparently forgot to mention City of Rocks and its wonders.⁵ More than a quarter century later, Meriwether Lewis and William Clark camped near Lemhi Pass (not too many miles farther than Escalante's Utah Lake base from City of Rocks) in August 1805 with another Shoshoni band. There, a Boise Shoshoni representative told them they ought to wait until well into 1806 and take a later Oregon Trail route to their Pacific Coast destination. But he also neglected to mention City of Rocks and its attractions. Anyway Lewis and Clark were too impatient to wait around Salmon all that time, and selected a more difficult route farther north. But they also recorded still more information about Shoshoni inhabitants (in their case, Mountain Shoshoni) who, like a majority of Northern Shoshoni, had long experience traveling with horses. They recorded a great deal of important material concerning Sacajawea's people, for whom she served as interpreter. In doing so, they preserved a significant account of Shoshoni life that applied to those bands active around City of Rocks in that era.⁶ They also came at a time when major changes were about to affect Shoshoni life in Idaho.

Partly as a protective measure against Blackfoot invaders, large composite Shoshoni and Bannock bands emerged within a decade after Lewis and Clark returned to St. Louis in 1806. One major group of Boise Shoshoni and affiliated migratory bands, with Peiem as their most conspicuous leader, traveled each season through a regular migratory cycle that omitted City of Rocks.⁷ Another large assembly of Bannock and Fort Hall Shoshoni people, with leaders like The Horse in earlier years and Tagi during a subsequent era of unrest after emigrant roads and smallpox epidemics disrupted Indian life in Idaho's Snake country, likewise moved over a wide area.⁸ In addition to those major Bannock and Northern Shoshoni conglomerates, other Northern Shoshoni bands--such as a Cache Valley group often affiliated with Washakie's Eastern Shoshoni of Wyoming and Pocatello's Northern Shoshoni band that spent much of its time around City of Rocks and Pocatello Valley--had their own local orientation.⁹

Because of excellent early nineteenth century horse grazing resources combined with availability of piñon pine nuts, delicacies such as rock chucks and game animals, and opportunities to harvest a variety of vegetable roots, upper Raft River with its City of Rocks had special importance as a Shoshoni seasonal village center. A ceremonial dancing area provided a

special attraction in earlier times. Small numbers of Shoshoni people kept returning there during piñon nut season after 1920, in fact, so their City of Rocks attraction retained some of its traditional significance long after ranching enterprises transformed that area.¹⁰ Shoshoni interest in that feature of their culture has continued ever since, and participation of appropriate Fort Hall reservation authorities in National Reserve planning and management is an essential element for sound development of operations there.

ENDNOTES

¹Brigham D. Madsen, *The Northern Shoshoni* (Caldwell: Caxton Printers, 1980), 18; Robert F. and Yolanda Murphy in Warren L. D'Azeveds, ed., *Handbook of North American Indians: Great Basin* (Washington: Smithsonian Institution, 1989), 11:288. Sven Liljeblad, an internationally prominent ethnologist and linguist who has investigated Northern Shoshoni and Northern Paiute culture since 1940, provided a pioneer identification of an independent Snake area cultural region exhibiting Columbia Plateau, Great Plains, and Great Basin culture. Earlier investigators had gone astray trying to draw basin and plains cultural borders (that they avoided any attempt to make too inflexible or precise) that failed to recognize Snake Plains realities.

²Ernest Wallace and E. Adamson Hoebel, *The Comanches: Lords of the South Plains* (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1952), 4-6.

³John C. Ewers, *The Blackfeet: Raiders of the Northwestern Plains* (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1958), 15-16, 21-22, 29-30, 124-5; and his *Indian Life on the Upper Missouri* (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1968), 4, 11-12.

⁴Earl H. Swanson, "Idaho Yesteryears," *Idaho Yesterdays* (Spring 1965), 9/1:17-24; and his "The Snake River Plain," *Idaho Yesterdays* (Summer 1974), 18/2:2-11.

⁵Herbert Eugene Bolton, ed., *Pageant in the Wilderness* (Salt Lake: Utah State Historical Society, 1950).

⁶Gary E. Moulton, ed., *The Journals of the Lewis & Clark Expedition* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1988), 5:102-164.

⁷While regionally important, Peiem's large band had little or no City of Rocks connection, although it traveled over large nearby areas.

⁸These Bannock and Shoshoni peoples resisted expeditions of fur hunters in Utah and southeastern Idaho in 1824, but they have no record of activity near City of Rocks. Bannock Indian bands were Northern Paiute people from eastern Oregon who began to travel with Northern Shoshoni bands after they obtained horses in late prehistoric times.

⁹Brigham D. Madsen, *Chief Pocatello: The White Plume* (Salt Lake: University of Utah Press, 1986), 3, 16-19.

¹⁰David H. Chance, *The Tubaduka and the Kamaduka Shoshoni of the City of Rocks and Surrounding Country* (Moscow, 1989), 27, 45-46.
(This information has not been edited.)

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