

# IDAHO STATE HISTORICAL SOCIETY

## REFERENCE SERIES

### SHOSHONI RESISTANCE TO CALIFORNIA TRAIL TRAFFIC AROUND CITY OF ROCKS

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Shoshoni unrest arising from Oregon and California emigrant traffic arose over a long stretch of wagon roads west of South Pass as far as Fort Boise toward Oregon and Lower Humboldt Valley toward California. City of Rocks disturbances formed part of that hostility.

Shoshoni bands had faced severe problems across much of southern Idaho long before 1860 when their resistance to California Trail Traffic at City of Rocks grew more intense. Major cultural differences accounted for serious conflict. People whom Anglos disparaged as horse and cattle thieves had a very different standing in Shoshoni or Blackfoot society. Rounding up and making off with trappers' or emigrants' horses (or those belonging to anyone else, including other Indians) reflected important moral virtues displayed by upright civic leaders engaged in highly commendable activities. Fur hunters or emigrants generally did not concur in or understand that attitude, but they quickly learned to guard their horses and cattle day and night. Aside from what Shoshoni people regarded as appropriate and legitimate activities, a number of Anglos disguised themselves as Indians and engaged in horse stealing too. Such incidents complicated an already complex situation.<sup>1</sup>

Shoshoni and Bannock peoples who lived along Idaho's emigrant roads that followed their own traditional migration routes had early problems when Oregon and California travelers ruined campgrounds and grazing areas. Emigrants had difficulties with loss of grass resources for their oxen and horses too. But they were headed on for new farms. Shoshoni people near City of Rocks were losing valuable homeland resources.

An additional complication, fairly distant from City of Rocks, came with expansion of Mormon settlement into places like Cache Valley, an area important for Shoshoni peoples who also inhabited City of Rocks. Mormons had a special interest in conversion of Shoshoni peoples to their religious faith, so their missionary activities led them to try to avoid hostility. Brigham Young believed in trying to furnish food to Shoshoni people whose lands were ruined for traditional sources of subsistence, but expansion of his settlements caused great difficulties.<sup>2</sup>

Yet another source of friction between Shoshoni people and

emigrants came from a small but devastating minority of travelers who went about on occasion shooting up Indians who were not threatening anyone. Other nervous gunmen would fire away in tense situations. Either kind of attack naturally provoked retaliation, often against people unconnected with previous incidents. That kind of misfortune did not occur too often, but Shoshoni resentment during times of starvation and trouble could bring about disaster. Emigrant losses because of Indian menace did not compare with hazards from accidents, disease, or even river crossings. More than a few widely publicized emigrant road Indian battles never occurred. But as time went on, even City of Rocks emigrants experienced serious conflict.

When Colonel Albert Sidney Johnston's Utah expedition in 1857 and 1858 brought United States military intervention against Brigham Young's government, an incidental result of that campaign was increased Oregon and California trail terrorism. Humboldt River clashes with Western Shoshoni and Northern Paiute extended to Pyramid Lake, and by 1860, City of Rocks travelers no longer were spared. Johnston sent military patrols in June from his Utah post to South Pass to guard Oregon Trail parties as far as Salmon Falls and California Trail emigrants as far as Upper Humboldt hazards that emerged west of City of Rocks.<sup>3</sup> By that time Pocatello and his band, who camped each year at City of Rocks, really cracked down on emigrant parties there. In an attack September 6-9, that Pocatello took credit for, a California emigrant party lost all their property along with 150 cattle.<sup>4</sup>

A separate incident at Castle Creek on Snake River, in which Western Shoshoni from Nevada attacked Elijah Utter's party, September 9, 1860, brought a great deal of hostility a long ways west of City of Rocks, just when another emigrant band, after a twenty mile flight to hide behind some rocks at City of Rocks lost six members, September 12, while seven survivors escaped to Utah settlements after a long trip without food.<sup>5</sup> Altogether, some five or six emigrant parties were attacked at or near City of Rocks that season. Colonel G. S. Howe recommended that a summer military camp be stationed at City of Rocks,<sup>6</sup> but Fort Boise was built instead. In 1861, Indian resistance was strong west of Salt Lake, but City of Rocks escaped that kind of hardship.<sup>7</sup>

Pocatello's pressure returned to City of Rocks in 1862, with battles there against some Methodist emigrants, August 3. By that time Colonel Patrick Edward Connor was on his way to Salt Lake with an army of California Civil War volunteers who managed to massacre Bear Hunter's large band of Cache Valley Shoshoni, January 29, 1863. After that Pocatello and his people, though deeply resentful, decided to join in a treaty settlement and to quit blockading California Trail emigrants near City of Rocks. A difficult era of Shoshoni resistance to California Trail parties there finally ended.<sup>8</sup>

## ENDNOTES

<sup>1</sup>Brigham D. Madsen, *The Shoshoni Frontier and The Bear River Massacre* (Salt Lake: University of Utah Press, 1985), 46-7, 55, 112-13, 161-63.

<sup>2</sup>*Ibid.*, 38-9, 47-50, 61-2, 171.

<sup>3</sup>Brigham Young to W. H. Hooper, May 31, June 7, 1860, cited in Madsen, 117, 249; *Deseret News*, June 13, 1860.

<sup>4</sup>*Deseret News*, October 3, 1860, in Madsen, 118.

<sup>5</sup>*Deseret News*, September 24, 1860, in Madsen, 118.

<sup>6</sup>Madsen, 119.

<sup>7</sup>*Ibid.*, 133-155.

<sup>8</sup>Brigham D. Madsen, *Chief Pocatello, the White Plume* (Salt Lake: University of Utah Press, 1986), 45-7, 56-8.

(This information has not been edited.)

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