

IDAHO STATE HISTORICAL SOCIETY

REFERENCE SERIES

EAGLE EYE

Number 637

1988

Eagle Eye and his Weiser Shoshoni associates had an extraordinary experience in accommodating their traditional way of life to changes imposed by nineteenth century ranchers and farmers who settled in their ancestral domain. More than an ordinarily adaptable group, they had mountain Shoshoni origins that helped them resist pressure to move to a distant Indian reservation in an unfamiliar area. All of Idaho's mountain Shoshoni people went to a great deal of effort to retain their long-established range. Their ancestors had a long tradition of hunting mountain sheep in a wilderness that few other people could penetrate.

Many of them preserved their old customs and continued to occupy their mountain strongholds in Wyoming as well as in Idaho for two decades after mining and ranching commenced in more accessible areas. Others had shifted to adjacent ranges--notably in Idaho's Lemhi and Weiser valleys--after they obtained horses a century prior to gold rush intrusions into their borderlands. More than other Shoshoni peoples, they succeeded in avoiding removal to reservations. That way, Eagle Eye's Weiser group made a surprisingly successful transition to a new way of life without leaving their old homeland. Other Northern Shoshoni people who inhabited reservations after 1867 had a much less satisfactory time. An important lesson in Indian acculturation can be learned from Eagle Eye's successful program of adaptation to life in a hostile mining and ranching environment.

Unlike Wyoming's mountain Shoshoni, Idaho's sheep hunters had a long era of close contact with plateau culture of their Nez Perce neighbors. Occupying a zone of cultural interchange between Great Basin and plateau elements over a long prehistoric period, Idaho's Northern Shoshoni gained additional cultural exposure when many of them began to travel on horseback and to have more contact with Great Plains Shoshoni who expanded from Texas to Saskatchewan and Alberta before 1780. Some mountain Shoshoni adopted more of a plains way of life and added long buffalo hunts to their migratory pattern. These included a Lemhi Valley group that ranged into Montana. In addition, a Weiser group farther west occupied a smaller Idaho area.

Shortly after 1800, Idaho's Lemhi and Weiser Shoshoni had an opportunity to add features of a fourth--and very different--cultural variety to their ever-changing way of life.

Fur hunters based in Montreal and Saint Louis came along with guns, traps, iron utensils, and new economic pursuits. These affected plains Shoshoni more than their mountain neighbors. Eagle Eye's Weiser people avoided much of that impact for a while, and traditional mountain sheep hunters were hardly disturbed at all. But after 1860, when miners and ranchers suddenly rushed into some of their lands, Eagle Eye and his Weiser Shoshoni had to meet serious new challenges.

Mining pressures affected Eagle Eye's Nez Perce neighbors a year or two before his own people were displaced. Eagle From the Light and his important lower Salmon Nez Perce band (a village led by White Bird after Eagle From the Light retired to Montana in 1875) resisted mining expansion into their territory as firmly as possible. But after his call for an all out war against miners in Florence failed to drive all gold hunters from their Salmon River mines, Eagle From the Light headed past Salmon Meadows to join Eagle Eye's Weiser Shoshoni. By 1862, a Boise Basin gold rush brought a worse threat to all Shoshoni of that area.

Farm settlements that grew up around Lower Boise forced a traditional Indian summer salmon fishing festival to move north from that area to Eagle Eye's upper Weiser country, where it continued to attract a variety of tribes for another decade and more. Military raids against Idaho's Indians also proved troublesome after 1862. Generally, Northern Paiute and Northern Shoshoni targets of attack vanished when molesting miners showed up. From early fur trade days, they were noted for their skill in disappearing when intruders annoyed or threatened them.

Eagle Eye could not avoid getting involved in central Oregon's Snake war that affected Idaho from 1866 to 1868, and a decade later, his Weiser Shoshoni experienced more such conflict during General O. O. Howard's campaign against Buffalo Horn's Bannock forces. Eagle Eye's sons took great pride in his diplomatic skill in avoiding excessive embroilment in that unavoidable disturbance. More important, in 1878, Eagle Eye received widespread publicity as a casualty during that conflict.

That helped him considerably during his later career, because hostile army authorities ceased to look for him when he disappeared with his Weiser survivors into Idaho's mountain wilderness. Gradually he and his extended family underwent a remarkable cultural change that few other Northern Shoshoni could match.

Eagle Eye's consistent and determined refusal to accept reservation life in a distant land enabled him and his people to acculturate much more successfully than most other Northern Shoshoni who could not avoid that alternative. Even though reservations were supposed to promote acculturation, they generally failed to do nearly as well as Eagle Eye's alternative approach. Eagle Eye preferred not to go through a difficult ordeal of acculturation in order for his people to survive. But

they were resourceful enough to go into a mining and lumber business with settlers who eventually got established in Eagle Eye's Dry Buck basin refuge near their ancient Timber Butte obsidian tool industrial center. A few Nez Perce refugees joined them in an isolated, non-reservation community that lasted until a little after 1900. Eagle Eye, who survived there until 1896, emerged as a highly respected Shoshoni leader who succeeded largely because he got so little publicity. His descendants--well educated and capable of operating in a new culture as well as in their traditional ways--finally wound up as Fort Hall reservation leaders.

Many Northern Shoshoni had gained prominence through their success in developing large mounted bands that impressed early trappers and settlers by their size and power. Many other Northern Shoshoni, particularly mountain Shoshoni, chose a less spectacular way of life. Eagle Eye's people represent those who followed a more conservative approach, but who finally adapted more successfully because they avoided reservation life and retained their ancient homeland with a tenacity characteristic of their mountain Shoshoni heritage. Their variety of cultural experience gave them an importance that most of their neighbors could not duplicate.

by Merle W. Wells

"Bvt. Col. Jas. B. Sinclair Capt. 23rd Inf. returned to Fort Boise on the 12th August. On the morning of the 22nd July surrounded & captured "Eagle Eye" & his entire band 41 in number including 13 "Bucks" well armed OWS & Rifles 13 horses & 10,000 lbs. of dried Salmon & Camas Roots."

S. Hammond, 1st St. 23rd Inf. Fort Boise Sept 1868

"Starting on the morning of the 26th of July with nine (9) enlisted men, the Chief of Scouts, Sierra Hills, seven Boise scouts and eight days rations, he arrived on the Wiser, where had recently been encamped a band of thieving Snakes on the 19th ult.

Finding the Indians had taken the alarm, he with his command took to the trail and persistently following it through the mountains until he captured Eagle Eye and his entire band forty one (41) in number, including thirteen (13) men, twenty-one (21) horses and a large quantity of dried salmon and camas root, near the confluence of the Little Salmon, with the Salmon river."

General Order No. 9, August 19th 1868.

Ft. Boise, I. T.

Hd Qrs Dist of Owyhee

August 19th 1868

General Orders No. 9

The Col. Comd'r the District desires to make special mention of a recent scout made under the Command of Bvt. Col. James R. Sinclair Capt 23rd Inf.

Starting on the morning of the 10th of July with nine (9) enlisted men, the Chief of Scouts, Sonora Hicks, seven Boise scouts and eight days rations, arrived on the Weiser, where had recently been encamped a band of thieving Snakes on the 19th ult.

Finding the Indians had taken the alarm, he with his command took the trail and persistently following it through the mountain until he captured Eagle Eye and his entire band forty one (41) in number, including thirteen (13) men, twenty-one (21) horses and a large quantity of dried salmon and camas root, near the confluence of the Little Salmon, with the Salmon river. Not satisfied with this capture, he still remained thirteen (13) days in this country, until he convinced himself that there were no more hostile Indians in that portion of the country. Having satisfied himself of this fact, he returned to Fort Boise, bringing in with him the captured Indians, arriving on the 12th inst., having been about twenty-eight days; 20 (20) of which he was without provisions, excepting such as [he] could procure from the supplies of the Indians, consisting of dried roots and salmon.

For skill in execution and tenacity of purpose, this scout has seldom been equaled and is deserving of much praise. The Col. Comd'g feels satisfied that this capture puts an end to Indian hostilities in that portion of the country.

By order of Bvt. Col. Otis L Hammond
1st Luet. 23rd Infy A. A. A. G.