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HAWAIIAN FUR TRADE IN IDAHO

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Trappers came from remote lands and strange places to participate in Idaho's fur trade, but those who emigrated from Hawaii had to make more of an environmental adjustment than was necessary for most of them. Pacific Northwest ocean shipping utilized an Hawaiian base in reaching Columbia River ports from Atlantic origins via Cape Horn, and venturesome natives there saw opportunities for economic gain by accepting fur trade employment. But they came to a strange land of mountains and deserts with a climate that did not always remind them of their homeland. Volcanic peaks were not at all new to them, but vast sagebrush plains and abrupt, extreme changes in temperature had not been part of their island experience.

Some of them participated in lower Columbia River exploration as early as 1792, and by 1810 they constituted a distinctive element among early Pacific Northwest trappers. Donald Mackenzie introduced them to Idaho in 1818, when a detachment of Owyhees (as they were referred to before missionaries adopted a new alphabet for their language that changed Owyhee into Hawaii) went out to explore an Idaho and Oregon River that has been known for them ever since. That party never rejoined him, presumably because of a misadventure with local Indians. As Alexander Ross suggested in his summary of early Hawaiian fur trade, Owyhees and Idaho's Indians did not always get along too well with each other:

It was from this [Hawaiian] people that captains in their coasting trade augmented their crews in steering among the dangerous natives from the Columbia River to Bering's Straits, and from the precedent, the island traders adopted them when their complement of Canadians happened to come short of their demands. They are submissive to their masters, honest and trustworthy and willing to perform as much duty as lies in their power; but are nevertheless exceedingly awkward in everything they attempt. And although they are somewhat industrious they are not made to lead but to follow, and are useful only to stand as sentinels to eye the natives or go through the drudgery of an establishment.

It has often been found, however, that they are

not wanting in courage; particularly against the Indians, for whom they entertain a very cordial contempt. And if they were let loose against them, they rush upon them like tigers. The principal purpose for which they were useful on Columbia as an array of numbers in the view of the natives especially in the frequent voyages up and down the communication, and doubtless they might have been found more serviceable had not a dullness on their part and an impression of their insufficiency on ours prevented both sides from any great degree of intercourse. Being obtained, however, for almost their bare victuals and clothing the difference in expense of them and Canadians forms a sufficient consideration to keep up the custom of employing more or less of this description of men.

The contrast is great between them here and in their own country where they are all life, all activity, for when I saw them there I thought them the most active people I had ever seen. This difference in their habits I am inclined to attribute to the difference of climate, their own being favourable to them in a high degree. When we consider the salubrity of the Sandwich Islands it is hardly to be wondered at that the unhappy native, when transplanted to the snows and cold of the Rocky Mountains should experience decay of energies. From exposure to the wets and damps prevalent at the mouth of Columbia many of them become consumptive and find their graves in the stranger's land.

The Owyhees, however, are such expert swimmers that little of our effects are lost beyond recovery which accident now and then consigns to the bottom of the water in our perilous navigations: and it is next to impossible for a person to get drowned if one or more of them are near at hand: in that element, they are active and expert as the reverse on dry land, on every occasion they testify a fidelity and zeal for their master's welfare and service.

Robert C. Clark presents a more favorable assessment:

The Hawaiians went out with almost every hunting trading expedition. They accompanied Ogden or Work to the Snake River country and on the trips that took them into the Humboldt River region. They were with Work and other traders who led the expedition to the Umpqua and to California. On such trips they proved superior hunters as they were able to bring in game when others had failed. They could also act as boatmen when needed.

Unlike many other employees of the company, the Hawaiians were considered trustworthy and faithful servants. It is said that when John McLoughlin, Junior, was making the fight against his own men at Fort Stikine near the Alaska border in 1842, in which he lost his life, that Owyhees stood by him to the last man. They were also valued for their wit and humor and gave great amusements by their pantomimes, dances and singing. The performance might be ridiculous but would bring peals of laughter from their audiences. On the whole it may be said that the Hawaiians were frank and friendly in their behavior, well liked by their associates. Those in Oregon in this early period, now a century ago, showed ability to learn quickly and profited by their intercourse with the white race.

Although they did not come to Idaho in large numbers, Owyhees continued to lend variety to Hudson's Bay Company fur trade operations for many years. They were active at Fort Boise in particular, and made up almost all of its staff, under French and Scottish management of Francois Payette and James Craigie. Kanaka Rapids in Snake River--John C. Fremont's Fishing Falls--is named for their activity, and some of them continued to dwell with North Idaho as well as with Shoshoni bands long after fur hunting went out of fashion. Recognition of their participation is particularly appropriate considering that their Owyhee country still is recognized as a distinctive Idaho and Oregon area.

REFERENCES

Alexander Ross, Fur Hunters of the Far West (London, 1855) has to be pursued with some caution because its author represented a cultural viewpoint quite different from Hawaiian as well as Shoshoni and Paiute traditions. (Quotations in this summary are from his original text that has been edited by Kenneth Spaulding for a University of Oklahoma publication in 1956, pages 183-184.)

More recent investigations include Robert C. Clark, "Hawaiians in Early Oregon," Oregon Historical Quarterly (March 1934), 35:22-31, and A. R. Lomax, "Hawaii-Columbia River Trade in Early Days," Oregon Historical Quarterly (December 1942), 43:328-338.

HISTORIC SITES IDENTIFICATION

Except for Fort Boise, Owyhee sites (such as any precise location where Donald Mackenzie's 1818 detachment disappeared) do

not differ from other fur trade sites of expeditions that had Hawaiian members. These include all North West Company and Hudson's Bay Company brigades.

CULTURAL RESOURCE EVALUATION:

Fort Boise is a National Register property.

RESEARCH DESIGN AND ARCHAEOLOGICAL INVESTIGATION

If successful archaeological excavation is undertaken at Fort Boise, provision should be made for identification of Hawaiian materials if any distinctive evidence turns up there.

RESOURCE PROTECTION

Fort Boise is a State Department of Fish and Game property and is free from development pressure. Inability to recover an exact site has protected it from pot hunters or similar hazards.