

IDAHO STATE HISTORICAL SOCIETY

REFERENCE SERIES

DONALD MACKENZIE'S 1819-1820 CAMPSITE

Number 902

1988

Southern Idaho's most significant early fur trade site (prior to 1824) was Donald Mackenzie's Little Lost River campground around Fallert Springs. After widespread Snake country exploration in 1818, Mackenzie settled there for his 1819-1820 winter camp. Some large composite bands of Boise and Fort Hall Shoshoni, led by Peiem (a Shoshoni translation and rendition of Big Jim) Lemhi Shoshoni and Tukudekas (Mountain Shoshoni or Mountain Sheepeater), and Bannock (led by The Horse) were assembled there at a traditional site, together with Donald Mackenzie's Snake brigade of French Canadian, Iroquois, and Owyhee (Hawaiian) trappers, they made up four adjacent camps that may have totaled a thousand or so inhabitants. Mackenzie recessed his winter fur hunting campaign for a week in order to conclude a notable peace agreement with each of those bands in order to facilitate trapping. He already had reached a similar agreement with Nez Perce bands farther north, and if he had been able to incorporate Blackfoot intruders into his peace congress, his large beaver hunting operation would have had a still more favorable prospect. His extended commercial and peace ceremony represented a landmark in North West Company operations in Idaho's Snake country, which from 1818 to 1821 was administered from Fort William and Montreal.

Located in a drainage known as John Day's Defile, Mackenzie's camp had good access along an important traditional Indian route via Pass Creek Summit to Birch Creek, then referred to as Cote's Defile. (John Day, an old Astorian and North West Company trapper who worked with Donald Mackenzie, was buried at his campground, February 16, 1820, and his grave has also been a site of fur trade interest during that era.) Fallert Springs occupies part of a large alluvial fan extending toward Little Lost River in an area of sorted deposits of shale and limestone boulders, gravel, sand, and silt. Arid vegetation (mostly sage and rabbit brush) with water birch in its stream and spring area persists there--somewhat changed because of a warmer, drier climate than that of 1820. Herds of buffalo and mountain sheep provided for superior hunting there in 1820, and beaver resources attracted Mackenzie's trappers.

Minor evidence of more recent activity, including a prospect hold, a ditch, and a pipeline, attests to later activity in that area, but really conspicuous modern intrusions are absent. Ranching along Little Lost River immediately west of Fallert Springs has led to cultivation there, but settlement is sparse in that entire valley. Buffalo no longer roam there, but deer and antelope still occupy John Day's Defile.

Publications--450 N. 4th Street, Boise, ID 83702--208-334-3428