

IDAHO STATE HISTORICAL SOCIETY

REFERENCE SERIES

INDIANS OF THE BOISE REGION

Number 989

September 1992

People have lived in Idaho for well over 10,000 years. For several thousand years before about 1840, they enjoyed a cooler climate with more snow and rain than more recent inhabitants have experienced. Such changes came very gradually, but they made notable differences in life in the Boise Valley. Spanish colonial expansion into New Mexico after 1598 also had an important if gradual impact upon Boise-area peoples. Mountain and plains Shoshoni bands (whom Spaniards identified as Comanche--their name for Shoshoni) got Spanish horses and trade goods. They brought both to the Boise area--doubtless because they were attracted by opportunities for salmon fishing--a half-century before fur traders arrived.

By the late eighteenth century, Indians in the Boise area relied upon local salmon as their main food source in the summer, but they ranged over a wide area during other seasons. Prior to their summer salmon festivals, they could go to Camas Prairie for a spring camas harvest. A fall buffalo hunt attracted them to more remote upper Snake plains and Wyoming ranges, where many other Northern Shoshoni flourished. Hunters also depended upon deer and elk, and aside from camas they had other vegetables--such as bitterroot and biscuit root--available locally. Rock chucks were a special delicacy.

After the transformation of Shoshoni culture by the availability of horses, an energetic Northern Paiute group overcame Northern Shoshoni resistance to their penetration into the Boise Valley. (In their later tradition, informants explained that an exceptionally powerful Northern Paiute leader, to whom they referred--in English translation--as Mr. Foote, had enough diplomatic skill to surmount Shoshoni reluctance to accept Paiute travelers in their lands.) Some scattered Northern Paiute activity continued in the Boise, Payette, and Weiser valleys, with a small camping area utilized near later New Plymouth.

Two large composite Northern Shoshoni bands emerged shortly after Lewis and Clark's initial contacts with a Lemhi Shoshoni band. One had a Boise orientation; the other, which was accompanied by Northern Paiute immigrants--generally far more militant than their Shoshoni associates--was based in the area that later became the Fort Hall Reservation but traveled to the annual salmon fair in the Boise region. Nineteenth-century explorers and trappers had difficulty distinguishing Shoshoni

from Paiute peoples, but the Northern Paiute associates of Fort Hall Shoshoni travelers were eventually known as Bannock.

The Snake River tended, downstream from its northward bend to pick up several smaller rivers (Boise, Owyhee, Malheur, Payette, and Weiser), to divide Northern Paiute from Boise Shoshoni lands. In the area of confluences, both groups assembled to fish for salmon and to conduct a summer festival that attracted other tribes as well. As a result, some more remote peoples often were identified with the Boise, Owyhee, Malheur, Payette, and Weiser valleys. Among earlier Boise Shoshoni, Peiem attracted notice as a most conspicuous leader. His son, Captain Jim, succeeded him by gold rush times. (Peiem got his name--a Shoshoni translation of Big Jim--from North West Company fur hunters after 1816.) A gifted Northern Paiute leader, Howluck, also ranged at times into the Boise Valley from his base farther west in central Oregon.

When the Boise Valley became a United States possession in 1846, Hudson's Bay Company agents had to keep up their fur-trade activities with local Shoshoni peoples, most of whom regarded beaver hunting as an absurd occupation that no one with any intelligence would pursue. But those who survived European diseases benefitted from access to fur-trade products.

The next wave of Anglo presence was less peacefully received. Even before gold mining brought farmers to the Boise and Payette valleys, clashes between emigrants (headed for lands farther west) and Indians foreshadowed trouble. Two decades after Fort Boise was established in 1834 at the confluence of the Boise and Snake rivers, Oregon Trail hostilities forced Hudson's Bay Company officials to abandon that outpost. Captain Jim and his Boise Shoshoni remnant wound up in a refugee camp, where they were confined for two years after a reservation was established for them at Fort Hall in 1867. Although they had agreed in 1864 to relinquish some of their lands, Congress never ratified their treaty of Fort Boise and they were exiled anyway. Some Boise Shoshoni ended up on another reservation at Duck Valley, on the Idaho-Nevada border, while others found their way to the Fort McDermitt Reservation in Nevada. Their Boise region holdings made them a particularly prominent Indian group prior to 1860; their scattered situation after 1862 left them influential in a number of locations but deprived them of recognition that they might have gained if they had been awarded a large reservation in their homeland.