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SHOSHONI PERSONAL NAMES

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Except for Cameahwait, most prominent Northern Shoshoni used names derived from other languages. Aside from Sacajawea, who had a special problem because she gained her English name before anyone else on Lewis and Clark's expedition could speak or understand Shoshoni, such names were mostly of European origin. Explorers needed to find out personal names for Shoshoni leaders, but they had no way to anticipate what problems confronted them. Shoshoni names differed greatly from their European counterparts. Children's names did not continue as adult names for prominent Shoshoni, and adult's names had vision-quest associations that made them confidential. For Shoshoni leaders, revealing their names to strangers could not be tolerated. Since they had to refrain from mentioning their names to explorers, prominent Shoshoni did what they could when asked who they were. Wishing to be helpful and polite without sinking into immorality, they would look around and think a moment before responding to such requests. If a Marsh hawk were flying around, that might provide a good name. Or a nearby current bush might offer a suitable suggestion for a Shoshoni name. But more often than not, important leaders simply adopted designations that fur hunters provided them.

Several examples can make this point clear. When Donald Mackenzie needed to refer to his most important Boise Shoshoni leader--a gentleman even larger than Mackenzie, who weighed over 300 pounds--he naturally called him Big Jim. So from then on, Big Jim used a Shoshoni equivalent of that name when he dealt with foreign trappers. Big could be translated into Shoshoni, but Jim proved far more awkward. Shoshoni speakers, in fact, could not even pronounce it. So they came up with Peiem. Its first syllable is easily recognized as a Shoshoni word for "big," but then a Shoshoni effort to say "Jim" follows. Peiem's son and

grandson (who did not come close to matching him in size) simply followed as Captain Jim--words that they had learned to say after they got to where they could speak English.

A similar difficulty confronted a later Shoshoni leader whose name, Pocatello, also derived from English sources. Again, earlier Shoshoni people could not even pronounce their leader's name: something like Pocendada was about as close as they could come. But Pocatello's people (including his later descendants) still continue to use his English name.

Farther west, a Weiser Shoshoni leader (along with his band) always referred to him by his English name--Eagle Eye--when dealing with their non-Shoshoni associates. That courtesy--which recognized an inability of English speakers to pronounce Shoshoni words--helped bridge a gap between people of very different cultures. Likewise, Andy Johnson--a prominent Shoshoni associate of Eagle Eye--used an English name presumably derived from his early career as a ditch rider for Tom Johnston, who was a pioneer Lower Boise farmer. Andy later was noted for his extraordinary skill in telling Shoshoni folk tales. But even in a Smithsonian Institution professional ethnological publication, he still is identified as Andy Johnson.

When James Duane Doty of Salt Lake and Governor Caleb Lyon of Idaho negotiated a series of Northern Shoshoni treaties (Soda Springs, October 14, 1863; Fort Boise, October 10, 1864; and Bruneau, April 12, 1864), they managed to get more signers to use reasonable approximations of Shoshoni names than those who restricted themselves to English names. Some of these, like Tagi and Tendoy, became really prominent leaders while using adaptations of their native names. But long after those concessions, John Rees noticed that Shoshoni people near Salmon still provided temporary native names for non-Shoshoni users, and many participants in treaty negotiations may simply have responded with provisional Shoshoni names for special occasions.

In any event, allowances must always be made in any explanation of Shoshoni naming practices for cultural differences in that activity.

(This information has not been edited.)

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