



IDAHO STATE
HISTORICAL
SOCIETY

IDAHO STATE HISTORICAL SOCIETY REFERENCE SERIES

IDAHO PREHISTORY

Number 179

1979

Intelligent, highly skilled people have lived in Idaho for the past twelve or fifteen thousand years. These early inhabitants, some of them ancestors of modern Indians, had to develop special skills in order to live through all the changes that came over the country during the hundred or more centuries of human occupation of Idaho's mountains and valleys. Even the earliest of these people hunted big game--ancient horses, camels, elephants, and grand sloth, now extinct, as well as buffalo, mountain sheep, elk, and deer. This kind of hunting required considerable talent. Prior to the eighteenth century, Idaho's big game hunters had to manage without horses. (Idaho's ancient wild horses disappeared after settlement began, and replacements from Spanish sources arrived not long before the time that white men turned up.) Getting around the country proved to be difficult in those early days. But hunters, fishermen, camas diggers, and seed gatherers came and went as the country changed in climate and in appearance.

Fifteen thousand years ago, Idaho did not resemble the land we know today. These early inhabitants lived in a decidedly different world. And twenty thousand years ago, the mountain west looked even more different. At that time Lake Bonneville covered much of Utah, along with a substantial part of Nevada. Gradually Lake Bonneville rose higher, particularly after lava flows diverted Bear River away from Portneuf Canyon and the Snake River into Lake Bonneville. Finally about 18,000 years ago, Lake Bonneville overflowed through Red Rock Pass into Snake River. A great deluge came into the Snake for a short time as the level of Lake Bonneville dropped abruptly. At one time or another, great pluvial lakes (arising from a cold, wet western climate associated with the continental ice sheet that covered vast tracts of the northern plains) appeared in other broad valleys of the intermountain west. And farther north, an ice blockade projecting from the continental ice sheet stopped Clark's Fork at modern Pend d'Oreille Lake. Geological Lake Missoula backed up to great depth over much of western Montana before the ice dam suddenly began to melt and wash out around 12,000 years ago. Lake Missoula abruptly discharged through later Pend d'Oreille Lake into Spokane River and across eastern Washington. With the gradual emergence of a hot dry climate of around 7,000 years ago, most of Idaho's earlier people had to leave for country farther north and east where they still could find the climate to which they were adapted.

Aside from gradual, but striking, shifts in climate, life in Idaho over the past ten or twelve thousand years has been affected by vulcanism at times. Lava flows, especially in the Snake plains, continued to change the land. And about 6,900 years ago, a truly colossal volcanic explosion in western Oregon--in which the top of a large volcano blew off, forming Crater

Lake--afflicted Idaho as well. A layer of volcanic ash from that disaster covered all of Idaho. By that time, Idaho had been settled for at least several thousand years. Somehow, they preserved a cultural continuity in spite of that disaster. In higher elevations, at least, they kept their old ways of life regardless of the hot dry climate that drove everyone out of the lower deserts that had transformed a land that had bordered on an ice age when settlement began.

Around 4,500 years ago another colder, wetter era gradually set in. Some of Idaho's people managed--particularly in the Salmon River mountains where adjustments in climate could be made simply by going up and down in elevation--to stay in spite of these changes. Two groups of new settlers from the northwest coast, presumably to be identified with the more recent Nez Perce and Coeur d'Alene peoples, came into Idaho during this time. Altogether, about six major Indian tribes inhabited Idaho by the eighteenth century: Shoshoni and Northern Paiute (Bannock) in the south, and Nez Perce, Coeur d'Alene, Kalispell or Pend d'Oreille, and Kutenai in the north. Linguistically, Shoshoni and Northern Paiute are related, as are Coeur d'Alenes and Kalispell or Pend d'Oreille. But Shoshoni, Coeur d'Alene, and Nez Perce differ as much as English from Chinese, and in that respect, Idaho's early peoples (typical of the Indians of North America) show startling diversity. In many other cultural aspects, though, the Indians of Idaho, north and south, developed a surprising similarity. They had to adjust to climatic changes as late as the time of the fur trade era, when Idaho's modern climate gradually emerged. They also had to adjust to new ways of life when the effects of white contact began to have an impact upon the people of Idaho even before Lewis and Clark brought an exploring expedition to the region.