



IDAHO STATE
HISTORICAL
SOCIETY

IDAHO STATE HISTORICAL SOCIETY REFERENCE SERIES

SALMON FALLS AND THOUSAND SPRINGS

Number 184

Revised 1987

A landmark on the Oregon Trail about halfway between Fort Hall and Fort Boise, Salmon Falls served as a major source of supply for fur hunters and emigrants prior to white settlement in Idaho. Long before white trappers explored the region, upper and lower Salmon Falls had been a major Indian campground; although Boise River provided the main Shoshoni salmon fisheries, Salmon Falls served great numbers of Indians farther up the valley of the Snake, because that was as far upstream as salmon could ascend. Fur hunters appreciated the importance of Salmon Falls right from the beginning: Wilson Price Hunt, whose men explored Snake River Valley late in 1811, came upon the Indian camp there November 11 and 12, and obtained some much needed supplies:

Soon we met two Chochonis. They showed me a knife that they had received from one of our companions. One of them led us by a path that took us away from the river. We crossed a prairie, and arrived at a camp of his tribe. The women fled so precipitately that they had not time to take with them such of their children as could not walk. They had covered them with straw. When I lifted it to look at them, the poor little creatures were terror-stricken. The men trembled with fear as though I had been a ferocious animal. They gave us a small quantity of fish, which we found very good, and sold us a dog. One of these Indians went with us. We were soon back on the river. it was bordered by their tents. We halted nearby. Some fifty men came to see us. They were very civil and extremely obliging. The river, as on the previous day, was intersected by rapids. (26. N.W.) On the 12th, I visited some huts at which was a great quantity of salmon. These huts are of straw, are shaped likes ricks of grain, and are warm and comfortable. We saw, at the door, large heaps of sagebrush which serves as fuel. I bought two dogs. We ate one of them for breakfast. These Indians had good robes of bison skin, which, so they told me, they obtained in exchange for their salmon.

In 1812, Robert Stuart's party, returning east up Snake River, also stopped to trade with the Salmon Falls Shoshoni:

1 Mile more same course brought us to the Salmon Falls, where we found about 100 lodges [of] Shoshonies busily occupied in Killing & drying fish--

The perpendicular pitch is on the north side upwards of 18 feet, but towards the South it might more properly be called a series of Cascades.

The Fish begin to jump soon after sunrise when the Indians in great numbers with their spears swim in, to near the centre of the Falls, where some placing themselves on Rocks & others to their middle in Water, darts on all sides assail the Salmon, who struggling to ascend, and perhaps exhausted with repeated efforts, become an easy prey--With the greatest facility prodigious quantities are slaughtered daily and it must have been from this place that the dead & wounded came which we saw picked up by the starving wretches below; am completely at a loss to conceive why these [poor] creatures do not prefer mingling with their own nation at this immense fishing place (where a few hours exertion would produce more than a months labour in their own way); rather than depend on the uncertainty of a Fish ascending close along shore or catching a part of what few make their escape wounded From these Falls--

Their spears are a small straight piece of Elks Horn, out of which the pith is dug, deep enough to receive the end of a very long willow pole & on the point an artificial beard is made fast by a preparation of Twine and Gum

this point of Horn is about seven inches long and from a little below where the Pole enters a strong string of the same length is attached, which is fastened in a like manner to the handle so that when the Spearsman makes a sure blow the wicker catches, pulls off the point and leaves the salmon struggling with the string through his body While the spear is on one side & the handle on the other-- The string is an excel lent & necessary invention for were they to depend on the Spear without it so slender is their construction that I have no doubt but it would require at least six to make & mend these instruments in sufficient quantities for the use of one Spearer--

Mr. [Joseph] Miller says that he stopped here on his way down-- it was in the afternoon, by far the best spearing time, when to his utter astonishment the Indians in a few hours killed some thousands of fish, and one Salmon in particular leaped in the presence of himself & others from the commencement of the foam at the foot of the pitch clear over all the Cascade which must in my opinion have been upwards of 30 feet

Missionaries and settlers who came over the Oregon Trail also took an interest in Falls. Many of them recorded their impressions of nearby Thousand Springs as well; the designation of Thousand Springs, in fact, goes back to this time. (In contrast to Thousand Springs and Salmon Falls, almost no one noticed Shoshone Falls and Twin Falls, located off the regular route of

travel. Two men and the guide from an expedition of mounted riflemen, who examined more of the country along the river, heard Shoshone Falls and went to great effort to get all the way down the canyon there, August 15, 1849. They made a relatively accurate estimate of the height of the falls--until then called Canadian Falls--and decided to rename the place Shoshone Falls. (An Indian had shown Canadian, or Shoshone, Falls to the expedition's guide years before.) Beginning in 1852, a route on the north side of the river from a crossing just above Thousand Springs came into use. Some emigrants forded the river, but most who crossed there used a ferry. In 1852 and 1853 the ferry did not amount to much, although those who used it had to pay \$6.00 to take advantage of a better route that avoided a long, dry stretch from Salmon Falls to later Glenn's Ferry. By 1879, improved service was offered there by Payne's Ferry.

Emigrants on the Oregon Trail often wondered where the water came from to maintain the flow of Thousand Springs, and some of them figured out the answer. Before irrigation, around 15% of the water discharged from Thousand Springs (and from many other large springs in the region) came from the Lost River country, where Big Lost River, Little Lost River, and Birch Creek sink into the broad lava-filled plain. Still more water came from rain and snow that fall in the valley above the springs, where the lava beds act as an enormous reservoir for water storage. Most of the water for Thousand Springs came from Snake River at the forks near Rexburg, much of the stream flow goes underground there (as does Lost River in its entirety), and finally reappears a great many years later in and around Thousand Springs. More recently, irrigation on the north side of Snake River has increased the water supply for these springs around 40%.

Many of the emigrants on the Oregon Trail kept diaries of their trips, and their accounts of Thousand Springs and Salmon Falls describe the way these landmarks looked in a bygone day. Some of the better reports follow:

Narcissa P. Whitman, 12 August 1836: Raised campe this morn at Sunrise. Came two hours ride to the Salmon fishery. Found a few lodges of Diggers of the Snake tribe (so called because they live on roots during the winter) who have just commenced fishing. Obtained some and boiled for our breakfast, find it good eating. Had we been here a few days earlier we should not have been able to obtain any fish, for they had just come up. They never go higher than these falls, but come here every season.

Sarah W. Smith, 8 August 1838: Travelled about 14 miles over a barren waste & are encamped on a creek near Salmon falls. Nothing of particular interest has taken place. We find here some Indians who are fishing. They are extremely poor, are called diggers because they get their subsistance from the roots which they dig. During salmon season they fish, but in the winter many of them die from actual starvation. They have nothing to shield them from storms & wintry winds. They are entirely naked except a very small bit of string about the middle of their bodies & many of them not even that. I pity them but it is out of my power to help them. They have nothing here & nothing future to hope for. We

have purchased salmon of these Indians, find it beautiful & we are feasting on it.

Asahel Munger, 17 August 1839: Mon. after riding about one hour we came to the falls--here we got a supply of fish to last us to Ft Boisa [Boise]. Here the Indians have built three houses of willows and grass.

These are not perpendicular falls, but rapids where they catch fish (which run up into places made for the purpose, with stones) with their hands--Stopped for our breakfast on Snake river, under the shade of cedars, very warm, no grass. Horses standing much of the time without attempting to find anything to eat.

Overton Johnson and William H. Winter, September, 1843: Seventeen miles below these Springs, are the Salmon Falls. These Falls are not perpendicular, except in one or two small shoots on the North side. The great body of the water runs down an inclination of not more than twenty-five feet in three hundred yards. The river here is about one hundred and fifty yards wide, and divided by an Island, commencing at the lower end of the inclination and extending down one fourth of a mile. The Salmon pass over the Falls with ease, when there is sufficient water on them. The surrounding country is very rough, broken and entirely destitute of both grass and wood. The hills are, from the water in the River, about three hundred feet high. On the South side they are cut up by ravines; but on the North, they come bold and unbroken up within a few hundred yards of the water. There is nothing very picturesque or wild about these Falls, compared with the world of waste and wreck around them. The Indians take immense quantities of Salmon here, which they cut into thick slices, dry in the Sun and afterward pack them up in grass cases.

J. C. Fremont, 2 October 1843: Shortly after leaving the encampment, we crossed a stream of clear water [Salmon Falls Creek], with a variable breadth of 10 to 25 yards, broken by rapids, and lightly wooded with willow, and having a little grass on its small bottom-land. The barrenness of the country is in fine contrast to-day with the mingled beauty and grandeur of the river, which is more open than hitherto, with a constant succession of falls and rapids. Over the edge of the black cliffs, and out from their faces, are falling numberless streams and springs [Thousand Springs]; and all the line of the river is in motion with the play of the water. In about seven miles we reached the most beautiful and picturesque fall [Salmon Falls] I had seen on the river.

On the opposite side, the vertical fall is perhaps 18 feet high; and nearer, the sheet of foaming water is divided and broken into cataracts, where several little islands on the brink and in the river above, give it much picturesque beauty, and make it one of those places the traveler turns again and again to fix in him memory. There were several lodges of Indians here, from whom we traded salmon. Below this place the river makes a remarkable bend; and the road,

ascending the ridge, gave us a fine view of the river below, intersected at many places by numerous fish dams. In the north, about 50 miles distant, were some high snowy peaks of the Salmon River mountains; and in the northeast, the last peak of the range was visible at the distance of perhaps 100 miles or more. The river hills consist of very broken masses of sand, covered everywhere with the same interminable fields of sage, and occasionally the road is very heavy. We now frequently saw Indians, who were strung along the river at every little rapid where fish are to be caught, and the cry haggai, haggai (fish), was constantly heard in the road. Very many of them were oddly and partially dressed in overcoat, shirt, waistcoat, or pantaloons, or whatever article of clothing they had been able to procure in trade from the emigrants; for we had now entirely quitted the country where hawks' bells, beads, and vermilion were the current coin, and found that here only useful articles, and chiefly clothing, were in great request. These, however, are eagerly sought after; and for a few trifling pieces of clothing, travelers may procure food sufficient to carry them to the Columbia.

Theodore Talbot, 3 October 1843: We passed several cascades formed by streams precipitating themselves over the high rocky bluffs [Thousand Springs] which still wall in the river on its opposite bank. The river is very full of rapids thousands of salmon are seen leaping up their farther ascent. The river on this side and all the island are lined with shanties and black with Indians all occupied in catching or drying the salmon. Round every hut are high platforms covered with drying salmon. These present quite a gay appearance for the meat of the salmon is of a deep scarlet color. To each hut is attached a sort of store house in which the salmon when dried and bound into bundles with cords of grass, are carefully stored away for winter use. In their huts they have little more than their bow and arrow, fishing tackle and a few pots made of earth or of osiers lined with some resinous substance rendering them water proof. Their favorite method of cooking salmon is to roast it in the ashes. Many of them go about entirely naked. They are of rather low stature and ill made. The women have remarkedly thick crooked legs. They vary much in color from dark copper to light yellow. Their faces seem more like white people than any Indians I have yet seen and occasionally among the young people you see one very handsome. A great many have bad eyes, there is hardly one among the older ones whose eyes are not more or less affected. This, owing probably to the reflection of the sun from the ater, which they so much frequent in summer, and from the snow in winter in a country where there are no trees or other objects to relieve the eyes. It may be also owing in part to the strong, bitter smoke of the absinthe which they use for their principal fuel. There were many Indians in Camp all the evening and we traded a quantity of salmon fresh and dried. There was one of these Indians who had belonged to the better class of Snakes, or to the rich Shoshonees, but he had been reduced by a succession of mishaps and was now abiding with his more abject

brethern. He had known Fitz. [Thomas Fitzpatrick] in former times, and hoped to obtain his sympathy by detailing the misfortunes that had befallen him. He introduced his son a fine young lad, with all the strong emotion of a father's pride in a promising heir, telling us that he was "Very strong in battle against the enemies of their Nation", having already slain a Blackfoot Indian.

The weather for several days past has been exceedingly warm affording a strong contrast to the weather when we were at Fort Hall. The thermometer then ranging at 26. Or farther back, when we were on Sweetwater, it was 16.

Wed. 4th. Travelled 10 miles road very hilly. Basalt has disappeared, barren sand hills taking its place. We camped on a hill near the river where the animals obtained better grass than they had for some days. This morning we passed many ingenious snares and wears placed in the river for catching fish. The Indians are frequently at great labor to dam up parts of the river, making these artificial channels which much facilitate obtaining the salmon.

Osborne Cross, 16 August 1849: We soon came to the Big Salmon falls, having traveled about eight miles this morning. These falls are somewhat similar to those already described, except that large rocks are seen projecting above the surface of the water, against which it dashes in parts of the falls with great violence and forms in one place a perpendicular fall of six or eight feet. It was at these falls that we met a few Indians for the first time since leaving Fort Hall. [They] had assembled here to lay in their supply of salmon for the winter, as well as to subsist on them during the fall. There were twelve lodges, if they may be so termed, some oval in form, and others of a semicircular shape, [all] opening toward or from the sun as might be required. These lodges were made of green willow brush, their tops bent over and fastened together. When fresh they look not unlike a willow grove, but when the leaves become withered they resemble, at a distance, bunches of dry weeds and might have been easily passed without being noticed. The men were goodlooking, well formed and appear stouter than the generality of Indians farther north. They are thick-set and well built, and there is nothing sullen about them, a quality you meet with among the northern tribes on the Mississippi [river]. On the contrary, [they] appear pleasant and fond of talking, and from what little I saw of them [they] are a harmless and inoffensive race of people. The women whom I found at the lodges were in appearance inferior to the men. I saw none who possessed the least beauty. All [who] were there are principally the Root Diggers, who live in abject poverty compared with the balance of their nation. They are in fact nothing more than the degenerate portion of the Snake nation, Bonarks [Bannocks] and Nez Perces, who prefer living among the neighboring hills and subsist by digging roots (from whence they take their name) [to] following a more noble occupation of catching beaver and hunting big game. It was amusing to see them watching for fish, [for] they throw a spear with as much precision as an arrow. [They] no sooner caught [one]

than they would plunge into the rapids and make for our side to dispose of it. They appeared to have but little idea of the value of money, as they sold for an old tin cup, partly without a bottom, ten times its value. I purchased as much for two cartridges as they had asked me for a blanket. Their way of estimating the value of [an] article is, not what its real worth would be to them in the way of war, but simply [how it might] gratify their fancy. I presume the tin cup would have made them many trinkets compared with a piece of money ten times its value, which shows they go a good deal for quantity and at the same time still more to gratify their taste. These people were almost in a state of nudity, the men having a covering about their hips made of rabbit skins, while the women had for petticoats dressed skins and for robes either undressed rabbit or squirrel skins, which were a substitute for blankets.

P. V. Crawford, 29 July 1851: This morning, one mile down the creek brought us to the river. Then down the river one mile to where the water pours out of a thousand springs and foams and tumbles down to the river. Then down the river one mile to where the water pours out of a thousand springs and foams and tumbles down to the river. Four miles farther brought us to where the road leaves the river. Here we found Indians, ready to trade salmon for anything we had to spare, but shirts were their greatest want, many of them having only what covering nature furnished. Two miles up a ridge brought us to a high sage plain, over which we traveled ten miles to Dry camp, where we arrived at dark. Here we had to drive down a very steep hill one mile to poor grass, and carry water up to camp. Here, one of our company who had traded his gun and a lot of ammunition for a very fine mare some days before, had her stolen. The Indian now owns both gun and mare.

John S. Zeiber, 26 August 1851: Tuesday--Was a day of dust and wind, exceeding unpleasant. We had started early in the morning and about noon reach[ed] the most beautiful falls in the river that we have seen. I had bought a salmon of an Indian on Monday, and John Gallagher bought a dry one, and at this place we purchased three more. One very large and fresh. Nearly half of this was stewed and consumed at supper, having again made a dry camp.

Henry Allyn, 25 July 1853: Soon after we start we come to the ferry, over a rocky, hilly and crooked road and find 10 wagons there waiting to cross before ours. Whereupon we unharness, throw our harness into the wagons and prepare to swim the mules. James hires an Indian to swim one of the mares ahead of them. We drive in the mules after him and they all get over safe, thank God. This is a dangerous place to swim beasts, as Salmon Falls is about a mile below, which roars like thunder. But places where the river is accessible on both sides at the same place are scarce, as far as we have traversed it. Yesterday part of a drove of

cattle went over these falls and 15 drowned. After our turn came to cross it was late in the P. M. The boat was small and could take but one wagon at a time and the process of crossing very slow. The sun was low when we got over, but we harnessed up as soon as possible and went about 1 ½ miles to a large spring that gushed from the rocks in a large steam which ran down toward the river and along its margin was good grass. Here we pitch tent. We also had sage for fuel. John W. finds a human skull. Soon after we discover a grave on an eminence not far from the spring that had been dug open and a number of human bones scattered around it. Made but 5 miles today.

David or John Dinwiddie, 30 July 1853: Crossed the creek near its junction, travelled near the river, along here a mighty rushing torrent. In two miles we passed a warm spring to the right of the road, before coming to it descended a very steep rocky hill, dangerous for waggons being broken. Three miles to Bannack [Salmon Falls] Creek, a beautiful stream, about two rods wide, eighteen inches deep, clear water, swift current, good crossing, after crossing passed a very high bluff of lava and cinder, a regular volcanic eruption. About three miles brought us opposite to the springs, they are a prodigious body of water pouring from the rocks, from the height of from fifty to three feet, and falls in the river below with a great noise, for about half a mile it is almost one entire sheet of water pouring from the rocks. A short distance farther down the river is a subterranean river rushing from the rocks, and dashing down into the waters below.

Along here the surface of the river is smooth and placid. About four miles brought us to the Salmon falls, they are a great series of falls, the water descends about six hundred feet in about seven miles, it rushes over the rocks furiously, the salmon can ascend no higher and great numbers are caught by natives in the river below. Just above the first falls, the French, Creoles and Indians have a ferry, they charged four dollars per wagon for crossing, a great many emigrants were crossing and going down the north side of the river, grass is said to be better on the north side. We camped just below the first falls, found grass about two miles out among the mountains, it had been eat by the Indians' horses close by, we kept the south side, caught some fine salmon fish this evening

.....

Celinda E. Hines, 10 August 1853: Went to the ferry, a short distance. This family that were with us, Mr. Russel, lost an ox in the morning. Mr. Beak left our company. Mr. Russel had three yokes of oxen and one span of horses. Their ladies have walked nearly all of the way. Saw at the ferry a horse that had been bitten by scorpions, dying. A short distance below the ferry is Salmon Falls. They are perpendicular . . . but not very high . . . very scraggy and . . . very pretty and interesting. Crossed the ferry, paying \$6.00 per wagon. They paid \$10.00 on swimming the cattle over on account of the difficulty of so, for the swiftness of

the current and the width of the river and also the weakness of the cattle. Went about four miles and camped in a valley by a small stream, very beautiful. Good grass, sage, wood and water. Bad and rocky road.