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THE NAME POCATELLO

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The City of Pocatello is named for a prominent Shoshoni leader from that locality. Where he got the name "Pocatello" (or anything similar to that) cannot be determined. The word is not Shoshoni nor Bannock, according to Dr. Sven Liljeblad, who has studied both languages with great care. No derivation can be established at this late date, although there is good reason to believe that the name "Pocatello" is not even corrupted from some Shoshoni origin. Or at least if it is, the change is so great that any Shoshoni word from which it might have come cannot be identified. The first syllable—"Po"—is the Shoshoni word for "road" or "trail," and from that coincidence (if it is a coincidence) it has been suggested that Pocatello's name is Shoshoni for "he does not follow the road." But except for the initial syllable, that derivation is linguistically impossible: the Shoshoni word for "not" (Kae) cannot be combined with the initial syllable, and the rest of the word has no significance in Shoshoni. Modern Shoshoni speakers have a word "Pokendada" which they have borrowed from the English word "Pocatello," but that is a reverse derivation. (Since there is no "l" sound in Bannock and Shoshoni, the word "Pocatello" has to be changed somewhat before it can be pronounced in either of those languages.)

The Shoshoni leader whom the whites called "Pocatello" even before 1860 was the son of a Shoshoni woman who was captured by raiders from the Plains—most likely Assiniboine—on Bannock Creek early in the nineteenth century. Pocatello's mother managed to get back to her husband and family after having been taken east of the Missouri, and Pocatello was born some time between 1820 and 1830. Before the Fort Hall Reservation was provided in 1869, Pocatello's band often spent the winter on the north side of Salt Lake, frequently coming to Bannock Creek (where they were known as wild wheat eaters) in the summer. In early reservation days they spent more time on Bannock Creek, but preferred to camp on Portneuf where the City of Pocatello was established when the railway crossed the reservation. Use of Pocatello's name for the new rail center was natural.

Pocatello had a number of Indian names, the most common of which was the Shoshoni word for "buffalo robe." That word, however, sounds nothing like "Pocatello," and although there have been some later Indian attempts to derive the name "Pocatello" from English words, the best of these is not satisfactory. The best Indian explanation—offered by Pocatello's daughter—is that his name "Pocatello" did not mean anything. The place name "Arimo," used for a community not far from Pocatello, is a similar case of a town named for a prominent local Indian whose name had lost its meaning before being used by whites as a geographic designation.