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BIG FOOT

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In the years prior to white settlement of Idaho and eastern Oregon, those Shoshoni and Northern Paiute Indians who occupied the country spent much of their time traveling over vast areas in search of food. Among their truly distinguished leaders, Howluck (known later to the whites as Bigfoot) ranged with his band from the Boise region to Klamath Lake and the Warm Springs reservation of central Oregon. Anyway, when the reservation was attacked in June, 1859, the agent (A. P. Dennison) blamed the trouble on Howluck, although Superintendent Geary did not concur that Howluck, "the noted chief from the vicinity of Fort Boise, was present with his warriors, and in command of the assailants." An 1860 military map located Howluck's band in Boise Valley, and a small butte is named for him near Steen's Mountain in eastern Oregon. In 1860, though, Howluck had a hundred Snake Indians on Klamath Lake, in September, where his band menaced wagon trains coming from California. Like most of the Snake Indians, he really got about the country.

Shortly after 1860, mining in eastern Oregon and southern Idaho brought thousands of whites into a previously unsettled part of the Snake country. Indian restlessness already had been stirred up by white traffic over the Oregon Trail. Now white towns sprang up all over--on Powder River, in Boise Basin, South Boise, Owyhee, around Canyon City, and on Willow Creek in Oregon between the Owyhee mines and Canyon City. Shoshoni and Northern Paiute resistance soon took the form of raids and outright warfare against the white intruders. Among the most energetic Indian leaders to oppose the whites was Howluck, "a considerable chief of the Snake Indians" who was reported by Lieutenant Colonel C. S. Drew of the Oregon Volunteers as trying to induce the Klamath Lake, Modoc, Goose Lake, and other neighboring bands "to join him in his warfare upon citizens." Howluck at that time operated mainly around Canyon City, and it was not long before Drew, preparing for trouble over a wide front, noted an attack in that area, June 24, 1864. Four years of hostilities followed. Howluck's associates were scattered from the upper Weiser and the Owyhee country westward into Oregon in a region where the army generally could not find them; operations proceeded only with great difficulty in the campaigns of the resulting Snake War. After Howluck was noticed over on Sprague River in the summer of 1865, an Indian agent in Oregon sent out another noted leader,

Paulina, to persuade Howluck to forget the war and settle down on the reservation. This move failed. Howluck tried to talk Paulina and his Northern Paiute band into joining the fight against the whites. Paulina, though, came back to the reservation and offered to join the whites in a campaign against Howluck. In the end, nothing came of any of Paulina's efforts to pacify Howluck, and Paulina ended up a casualty in Howluck's Snake War.

Howluck (or Oualuck, in C. S. Drew's spelling, or Oulux as he was called by a well-known mountaineer named Reid who had fought a personal encounter with him) was a large, tall man distinguished mostly for his oversize 14 3/4" foot. By 1866 the whites (generally unaware of any Indian name for their adversary) were calling him Bigfoot. When General George Crook took over military operations in the Snake War late in 1866, Howluck (or Bigfoot) was on hand to oppose him in his first battle on the Owyhee, December 26. Indians captured by General Crook in a second Owyhee train battle early in 1867 reported that Bigfoot had not survived that encounter. But before long that misleading bit of news was discredited. Popular interest in Bigfoot, especially in Owyhee, led John and Joe Wasson (editors of the Silver City Avalanche) to note, April 13, 1867, that "Of late we have been asked many questions about Bigfoot, but having no intimate acquaintance with the aboriginal gent, we were unable to answer them." So they prevailed upon a friend "whose chances for learning all about the hero and his 'compatriots' generally have been usually good" to prepare a full account. After presenting Reid's identification of Bigfoot as Oulux, their informant noted that Bigfoot was still at large: in the middle of March, George Hill's party, Chasing some Indians who had captured some stock, were searching near Owyhee Ferry (at the mouth of Jordan Creek) when they "discovered the unmistakable mammoth foot-tracks which bore evidence of having been impressed by something more substantial than Bigfoot's ghost."

More than a year went by before Bigfoot with his band of sixty-one Indians was captured in eastern Oregon by a military force and an independent party of Willow Creek miners early in June, 1868. By that time, one of his associated bands had been wiped out on May 26 by an expedition from Camp Lyon, and another was out of reach on the upper Weiser. Bigfoot and his people were tired of their four year war and wanted to quit. So Bigfoot was encouraged to set out to bring in the two other bands still at large in eastern Oregon. Major General W. L. Elliott soon noted that a total of 130 of Bigfoot's friends (including the band originally captured) had come in. But the Weiser band, still hostile, was not inclined to give up the advantage of terrorizing the settlers with "Bigfoot" tracks simply because Bigfoot had decided to quit the fight. They resorted to using huge stuffed moccasins to make menacing footprints during Colonel J. B. Sinclair's operations against them on the Salmon in July

and August. They may have been directing their threat against the Nez Perce also: at least there still is a strong Nez Perce tradition that about ten years before the Nez Perce War the Bannocks were trying to scare the Nez Perce with oversize footprints--and even yet there is a Nez Perce saying that "Even little Bannocks have big feet." After attending a conference with A. B. Meacham at Camp Warner in November, 1869, Bigfoot finally settled with Paulina's band (now led by Ochocho) on an Oregon reservation. There he still was noted for his ability to run down and capture jack rabbits equipped only with his cane, "incredible as it may seem, when the fleetness of these animals is considered. He would actually run out to them and knock them down with the cane."

Within ten years after the end of the Snake War in which Howluck, the real Bigfoot, was a leading figure, a Bigfoot legend grew up in the Northwest. Something like a partially developed Paul Bunyan legend, it was produced by road agents instead of loggers. In the legend, Bigfoot became a refugee, part-Cherokee desperado from Oklahoma who stole horses and robbed stages in Idaho and Oregon country. More than that, the legendary Oklahoma Bigfoot served as the chief figure in a fantastic tale that included a cast consisting mainly of Northwestern bad men, for whom Bigfoot seems to have become something of a folk hero: the tale, in fact, seems to have evolved among stage robbers imprisoned in Oregon. The legend identifies the Oklahoma Bigfoot as a certain Starr Wilkinson, who may or may not have existed in Oklahoma, but for whose existence in Idaho there is no historical evidence at all--at least in the literature which has grown up around the legend. The text of the Bigfoot legend appeared originally in the Idaho Statesman, November 14-16, 1878, as a contribution of W. T. Anderson. Six years later, it was republished in Elliott's 1884 History of Idaho Territory. By then, Bigfoot, the legendary half-breed, was turned into a man quite different from Howluck, the real Indian with big feet, who was "represented as being an extraordinary specimen of Snake Indian."