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COMPOSITE SHOSHONI BANDS OF THE FUR TRADE ERA

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When Lewis and Clark entered Lemhi Valley in 1805, they found a well-organized band of some 400 Indians equipped with horses. The band was managed by a council of leaders with a temporary head in a system compatible with Shoshoni tradition. They also found other Shoshoni Indians who did not possess horses and who were not involved in any such band organization. Horses made a loose band organization possible, as well as desirable.

Twenty years later when Ogden came through the same part of the country, the situation was different. The Lemhi band, along with other such bands (which may have existed at the time of Lewis and Clark) had joined into much larger composite bands. Ogden, in fact, met two such great composite bands on their way from buffalo hunting grounds to Salmon Falls. One of these he identified as the Lower Snakes; the other as the Plains Snakes. Ogden's Lower Snakes are the Bannock (led by The Horse); his Plains Snakes are Peiem's Northern band and Eastern Shoshoni. Traveling with the latter were the Cache Valley and Malad River Shoshoni who were south of Snake River but not far from the Green River wintering grounds of the Eastern Shoshoni. Such large Shoshoni Composite bands were loosely joined groups of bands which congregated periodically for protection while traveling from one food area to another. They operated under some kind of joint leadership provided perhaps by the leaders of the bands that made up the composite. These two large composite bands did not include all the Shoshoni: those without horses and therefore not organized into small local bands naturally would not join into one of the composite groups. Their purpose in assembling into large composite bands seems to have been to protect their horses from Blackfoot raiders. During the winter these seasonal composite bands broke up into the smaller bands of the kind which Lewis and Clark had found two decades earlier. Ogden was impressed by the order maintained by the two composite bands he met, and their equipment. Their organization, though, did not compare with that of the stable units of the Plains Dakota. With the great menace of Blackfoot raiding ended, large composite bands no longer were essential. Smaller bands which used to have to collect together to defend their horses from the Blackfeet no longer had to assemble into the large composites. Even after 1850, when the composite bands no longer assembled, Shoshoni organization in smaller bands, while better organized than before still was highly flexible. Then treaties and government pressure, and still more, gold miners' pressure, made for more organization and stronger leadership among the Shoshoni. There still was much changing in individual membership back and forth from one band to another.

[Prepared from information provided by Sven Lijebblad.]

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