

THE LIFE OF CHIEF WASHAKIE

PART ONE: WASHAKIE'S EARLY LIFE



Chief Washakie

Historians don't know when Washakie was born, but many believe it was between 1800 and 1804. Through his participation in many adventures and battles, Washakie became a leader for the Shoshone nation. He negotiated many agreements between the Shoshones and the United States. Washakie lived for nearly one hundred years and had an exciting life.

As a young man he traveled through the western part of North America and traded with trappers and mountain men. He met many different people and learned English, French, and many Native American languages. Being able to get along with non-Indians helped him be a good leader for the Shoshone people. He was known for being good at communicating with others and being brave during battle for the Shoshone nation.

When Washakie was a young man, the American Indian nations and the U.S. military were equally strong. But non-Indians continued to move beyond the Mississippi River, eventually traveling as far west as Shoshone territory. To protect Shoshone lands, many men, Washakie included, went into battle against the United States and other Native American groups. Washakie fought fearlessly and became known as a fierce opponent.

D. B. Huntington, an interpreter between the Shoshones and the United States, wrote about Washakie:

The First Buffalo [Washakie] ever killed he skinned the pate, took the hair off, puckered it up, and tied it around a stick with a hole in it, and when it became perfectly dry it would rattle, and when the Sioux came to war with them, he would ride in among them and scare their horses; so they called him Wash-a-Kii, "The Rattler."

His name reminded people how tough he was in battle. But he wasn't just a fighter; Washakie was also interested in getting to know people from other backgrounds. He became friends with many U.S. settlers.

THE LIFE OF CHIEF WASHAKIE

PART TWO: WASHAKIE BECOMES A LEADER

Washakie became a leader of the Shoshone around 1851. By this time, the United States had a stronger military than many American Indians nations. Non-Indians were expanding across the continent, and they wanted Indian lands. Many tribal nations, including the Shoshones, agreed to give up some of their land to the United States in order to keep some land and avoid war. Washakie was a charismatic leader, and he used his leadership abilities to help negotiate treaties that ensured peace for the Shoshone people.

In the 1850s and 1860s, whites traveled through Shoshone territory on their way to the West Coast. The new travelers destroyed grasslands and killed game the Shoshones needed to survive. Sometimes they also killed Shoshone Indians. With their way of life threatened, some Shoshones fought back by stealing food and cattle from the settlers' wagons.

The U.S. government was angry that some Shoshones were causing trouble, so in January 1863, United States troops from Salt Lake City attacked a group of Shoshones camped along the Bear River near what is now Franklin, Idaho. The troops killed over 350 defenseless Shoshone people, including many women and children. This was the worst Indian massacre in U.S. history, and it showed the Shoshone people how far the government would go to protect white settlers.

Later that year, Washakie helped negotiate a treaty with the United States to ensure the safety of his people. The treaty, known as the Fort Bridger Treaty of 1863, promised safe travel to American settlers and reduced the amount of Shoshone land. Knowing how many had died at Bear River, Washakie may have signed the treaty because he was afraid for his people. The Fort Bridger Treaty of 1863 encouraged peace with these words:

Friendly and amicable relations are hereby re-established between the bands of the Shoshonee nation, parties hereto, and the United States; and it is declared that a firm and perpetual peace shall be henceforth maintained between the Shoshone nation and the United States.

A second treaty in 1868 took away even more Shoshone land, and many Shoshones had to move to the Wind River Reservation in Wyoming. Washakie could not keep the government from taking Shoshone land, but he is an important figure in Shoshone history because he helped established peace with the United States government.



Chief Washakie

THE LIFE OF CHIEF WASHAKIE

PART THREE: THE LEGACY OF WASHAKIE



Chief Washakie

There are many different groups of Shoshone Indians. Washakie led many of these groups, with the help of several sub-chiefs. One band that Washakie led was called the Northwestern Shoshone, who lived in what is now southeastern Idaho and northwestern Utah. Many Northwestern Shoshone had been killed in the Bear River Massacre; those who lived did not want to move to the Wind River Reservation or the nearby Fort Hall Reservation in Idaho. Instead, they worked hard to remain in their traditional homeland. In the 1880s, many Northwestern Shoshone moved to land near Brigham City. With help from members of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, they established a farm. They called the new settlement Washakie, in honor of their beloved leader. In 1882, two years after the settlement, the Washakie Day School opened to teach the Shoshone youth.

After a long life of service and high achievements, Washakie passed away on February 20, 1900. His influence and importance to the Shoshones and to the United States is still felt in Indian country and many western states. He is the only American Indian leader to receive a military funeral from the United States government.

In 2004 the state of Wyoming legislature dedicated a statue to the memory of Washakie with an inscription attributed to him:

I fought to keep our land, our water and our hunting grounds—today, education is the weapon my people need to protect them.

Washakie led an adventurous life, one of great service to Shoshone people. His commitment to peace is respected and admired by both American Indian and non-Indian people alike, and his legacy will always be remembered by the Northwestern Shoshone of Utah.