



THE SHOSHONES

AT A GLANCE: THE BEAR RIVER THEN AND NOW

Before white encroachment onto their lands, the Shoshone people lived, hunted, and gathered plants throughout parts of what are now Utah, Idaho, Nevada, and Wyoming. The Northwestern Shoshones predominantly lived in the area that is now southern Idaho and northern Utah. Among the most ecologically efficient and well-adapted Indians of the American West, they moved with the seasons to harvest a variety of foods from the land, and their subsistence practices were cleverly adapted to the region and time of year. (For more information, see “Shoshone Seasonal Land Use and Culture.”) The Bear River site was an important winter campsite for the Northwestern Shoshones, as the deep embankments served as a barrier against the winter weather. The immediate area also served as an important fishing and gathering place.

At the beginning of the 1860s, life became increasingly difficult for the Northwestern Shoshones, as they faced multiple interruptions to and stresses on their way of life. Other powerful tribes to the north and to the south limited the Shoshones’ range, while non-Indian overland emigrants destroyed the Shoshones’ water resources with their livestock and chopped down precious timber for their campfires. At the same time, other, more permanent settlers who were members of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, began moving farther north and deeper into Northwestern Shoshone territory. In addition to the problems created by other tribes and non-Indian settlers, the United States Army, freed from a duty to fight the Civil War in the Southwest by the Confederate surrender of New

Mexico in 1862, began to have an increasing presence throughout the area.

The Shoshones became angry and frustrated by these threats to their traditional way of life, and tensions started to escalate into violent conflict. In January of 1863, while the Northwestern Shoshones were at their winter campsite on the Bear River, several altercations between whites and Indians erupted. Most of the Shoshones involved were not members of the Northwestern band, but non-Indians from nearby settlements had been putting pressure on the army to remove the Shoshones from the desirable land near the Bear River and to put an end to the conflict through force. On January 29, 1863, troops from the United States Army, under the command of Colonel Patrick Edward Connor, attacked the winter camp. Though the Northwestern Shoshones had been warned of the army’s impending arrival, they believed they would be able to negotiate. Instead, the troops attacked the encampment of over seven hundred Shoshone men, women, and children, killing approximately half of those in the encampment. In addition to murdering so many of their people, the army also destroyed all of the Northwestern Shoshones’ food and shelter, leaving survivors of the massacre destitute.

In the aftermath of the Bear River Massacre, white settlers moved unopposed into traditional Northwestern Shoshone lands. As American settlements grew around them, the few remaining Northwestern Shoshones lost their land base and could no longer sustain their traditional nomadic lifestyle. Some Northwestern Shoshones moved to



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the Fort Hall Reservation in Idaho, but those who wanted to remain in their traditional homeland were left without a reservation and had to search for alternative means to secure a land base. Many adopted the LDS faith and white methods of agriculture, but they were repeatedly displaced from their farming communities (for a detailed look at these settlement attempts, see “A Brief History of Utah’s Northwestern Shoshones”).

Repeatedly denied a viable land base and scattered throughout the states of Utah and Idaho, the Northwestern Shoshones became active members of their various communities, working as business owners, schoolteachers, and local leaders. In 1987, this diverse community gained official recognition as the Northwestern Band of Shoshone Nation, a group separate from the various other bands of Shoshones. Federal recognition of the nation restored the basis for sovereignty, and today the Northwestern Shoshones have begun to develop their small tribal holdings in Idaho and Utah.

Perhaps most significantly, the Northwestern Shoshones are using one of the most difficult moments of their history in a positive manner through their development of the Bear River. In 1990 the Bear River Massacre Site was declared a National Historic Landmark, and in March 2003, twenty six acres that included the Bear River Massacre site were donated to the Northwestern Band of the Shoshone Nation. In the last two years the Northwestern Shoshones have come up with a plan to develop five plants on their tribal lands and sell the geothermal energy. The plan offers a means of economic development and reflects the Shoshones’ commitment to a clean environment. One of the proposed plants is to be built near the site of the Bear River Massacre. Though this plan has created some controversy, it takes a place that was economically important to the Northwestern Shoshones’ ancestors and allows it to become part of the tribe’s economic future.