AT A GLANCE: WASHAKIE AND HIS LEGACY

Chief Washakie was an important American Indian leader whose life spanned nearly one hundred years—from sometime around 1804 to 1900—and he witnessed many intense developments in Shoshone history. Washakie's story is particularly informative because he lived through three important phases of American Indian–United States relations. When he was born, Native American nations made agreements with the United States as equal parties. Starting around 1828, however, the balance of power between Indians and the federal government shifted, and the United States enacted policies to remove and relocate Indians, usually in order to free up Indian lands for non-Indian settlers. Finally, starting in 1887, the government developed policies of assimilation and allotment, seeking to destroy the sovereign status of tribal communities. Washakie's life stretched through these eras; thus, his experiences reflect the degrees of agency the Shoshone people exercised during these periods of change.

Washakie was born around 1801 in the Bitterroot Valley of what is now Montana. His father was a member of the Salish tribe and his mother was a member of the Shoshone tribe. When Washakie was about five years old, a group of Blackfeet Indians attacked the Salish village where he and his family lived. Washakie's father was killed, and Washakie's mother decided to take her children and try to return to her tribe. The family settled with the Lemhi Shoshones on the Salmon River in what is now Idaho.

Washakie lived with the Lemhi until, as a young man, he left to live with a group of Bannock Indians for a few years before settling with a group of Shoshones in what is now southwestern Wyoming. Washakie married during this time and began hunting, trapping, and trading with non-Indian trappers and traders. Through these activities he befriended a number of non-Indian trappers and traders, including Jim Bridger. In addition to his activities in the fur trade, Washakie successfully participated in a number of battles defending the Shoshones against their enemies in the Blackfeet and Crow tribes. By the early 1840s, Washakie became the leader of a number of bands of Shoshones who lived in the area.

Washakie's emergence as the leader of the Shoshone coincided with a dramatic increase in the white presence on Shoshone lands. In 1843 the first large group of settlers headed out across what came to be known as the Oregon Trail, and thousands of other whites followed, making their way to Oregon and California. In 1847, members of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, known as the Mormons, entered Shoshone territory and began to settle in Utah near the Great Salt Lake. Washakie was friendly to these various groups of early settlers, as were most other Shoshone leaders in the area. In 1851, the federal government, in an attempt to secure the safety of the overland trails, signed the Treaty of Fort Laramie with several Great Plains tribes. Though the Shoshones were not officially part of the treaty, Washakie and a contingent of Shoshones attended the negotiations. Washakie's military strength and diplomacy impressed white officials, building his reputation as a great leader of the Shoshones.

THE SHOSHONES

As white settlers pushed further into Shoshone lands and began to use, or interfere with, more and more of the vital resources of the area, tensions between settlers and some of the Shoshones rose. This was especially true of the area along the Snake River, in what is now southern Idaho and eastern Oregon, and in northern Utah. Beginning in the 1850s, in response to the destruction of water holes, game, and vital plant resources, Shoshone groups not directly affiliated with Chief Washakie began to conduct raids against emigrant groups.

In 1858 as a result of the "Utah War," control over Indian affairs passed from Mormon leaders to U.S. government and military leaders. While tensions existed between the Mormons and the Shoshones prior to 1858, this change in leadership further destabilized the region. In January 1863, several small incidents of violence and theft between the Shoshones and settlers occurred near the town of Franklin, Washington Territory (now Idaho). On January 29, 1863 Colonel Patrick Edward Connor and about two-hundred army volunteers from Camp Douglas in Salt Lake City attacked a group of 450 Shoshone men, women, and children in a winter camp along the Bear River, about twelve miles from Franklin. In the early hours of the morning, Connor and his men surrounded the Shoshones and began a four-hour assault on the virtually defenseless group. Some 350 Shoshones were slaughtered by the troops, including many women and children. This was one of the most violent events in Utah's history and the largest Indian massacre in U.S. history. Chief Sagwitch, who at the time had been trying to negotiate peace with the United States, survived. So did his young son Beshup Timimboo, although he had been shot many times. 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. Many of the survivors escaped to Washakie's camp in Wind River.

In the aftermath of the Bear River Massacre, the Shoshones felt the full impact of the federal government's removal and relocation policies. In 1863 Washakie, along with other Shoshone leaders, signed a treaty at Fort Bridger that was designed to help keep peace between the Shoshones and the white emigrants and settlers. It allowed for white roads, ferries, and settlements, while only loosely defining what constituted Shoshone land. In the years following this treaty, the Shoshones under Washakie faced increasing conflict with neighboring groups and pressure from increased settlement. In 1867 Washakie and a local Indian agent requested that the Wind River Valley be set aside as a reservation, and in 1868 a second treaty was signed at Fort Bridger granting those lands to the eastern Shoshones under Washakie. However, between 1896 and 1904 this reservation was slowly whittled down to one-fifth of its original size.

Throughout these difficult times for the Shoshones, Chief Washakie offered friendship to the American settlers. For instance, he was a friend of Brigham Young, the leader of Mormon Church, and he and about three hundred other Shoshones converted to the LDS faith in 1880. Although Washakie would later convert to Episcopalianism, many Shoshones, including many from the Northwestern band, remained members of the Mormon Church.

THE SHOSHONES

In 1876, after being displaced from farms in Corinne, Utah, many members of the Northwestern Band of the Shoshone applied for land under the Homestead Act, and they and several Mormon families created what was eventually known as the Malad Indian Farm. Though this farm was later abandoned, it was an important step in the formation of the Washakie settlement and also demonstrates the ingenuity of the Northwestern band in using the Homestead Act, a tool of white expansion, to gain advantages for their own people. The Washakie settlement, named for the great Shoshone leader, was founded on lands purchased by the Mormon Church in 1881. The Northwestern Shoshones later expanded the Washakie settlement by filing for land under the Homestead Act.

While some Shoshones were able to use the tools of western expansion, to maintain a small amount of control over their original lands, ideas of assimilation continued to dominate federal Indian policy. On February 8, 1887, thirteen years before Washakie's death in 1900, Congress passed the General Allotment or Dawes Act requiring that land be removed from tribal control, portioned to individuals, and the remainder opened to white settlement. As a result of this act over 18,000 acres were stripped from Washakie's Wind River Reservation by 1935.

In spite of these losses, as the name of the Washakie settlement attests, Washakie commanded respect among both Indians and non-Indians alike. Several locations and buildings throughout the West have been named for him, including the dining hall at the University of Wyoming in Laramie and a county in Wyoming. In World War II, the United States launched a both a battleship and a tugboat named after the statesman. A bronze statue of Washakie, donated by the state of Wyoming, is part of the National Statuary Hall collection in Washington, D.C.