

Western Shoshoni Indians in Nevada

by Danny L. Noss

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Local Indians in Ely, NV
attending Ely's Railroad Day
celebration 1906.
WPHAS photo



George Reville and family.
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It is the belief of historians that the first humans entered what would become Nevada around 11,000 to 13,000 years ago. Historians however, have not determined when the first Western Shoshoni Indians entered this area.

The language of the Shoshoni Indians can not be historically defined. It has been written that the language is a mixture of Shoshoni and Comanche while being influenced by their movement through the Great Basin, Plateau and Plains areas of what would become the United States of America. The Shoshoni Indians called themselves "NEWE" which means "The People". After the arrival of the white man (Taibo), the word "NEWE" was expanding to mean all Native Americans, not just the Shoshoni Indians.

There is no actual recorded history of the Western Shoshoni Indians. Everything was passed down from the elders for generations. The first recorded history of the Shoshoni Indian's contact with the white man was in 1827 when Jedediah Smith made contact and relayed this information to Meriwether Clark of Lewis and Clark fame.

The Western Shoshoni's were a nomadic people whose area of travel encompasses a major portion of the western United States. This area covered parts of modern day Montana, Idaho, Utah, Arizona and Nevada. The Shoshoni Indians expanded their area of travel from the Great Basin to the Plains into what is current day Wyoming and Colorado as early as the 1500's. In Nevada, this area covered the eastern half of the state from approximately present day Winnemucca.

The Great Basin was a very harsh area to live in. Food, water and materials for shelter were always in demand and not easy to find. Because of this environment, the Western Shoshoni Indians were known by many different names. Some of these names and the Indian tribes associated with them are Snakes (Mandan, Omaha, Poncas and Teton Dakota), Rattlesnakes (Atsina and Yankton Dakota), Grass Lodges (Crow and Hidatsa), Grass House People (Kiowa) and People Who Use Grass or Bark for Their Lodges (E-wu-ha-wu-si) (Arapaho).

The Shoshoni Indians did not acquire the use of horses until sometime in the 1700's. Horses probably were the single most important change for the Shoshoni Indians that affected their lifestyle. It gave them greater mobility and allowed them to hunt larger game. Horses also created a social difference between different factions of the Shoshoni Indians. Shoshoni Indians that had horses were called Shoshoni. Shoshoni Indians that did not have horses were called Shoshoko and were said to have eaten grasshoppers. To Shoshoni Indians, fighting with other Indian tribes was a way of life, but after horses came into their environment, most fighting was centered on stealing as many horses as you could from the other tribes.

The Shoshoni Indians were not afraid to fight, but they tended to stay clear of the Pocatello and Crow Indians who were their fierce enemies. Because of their wandering nature, they did not acquire very many permanent belongings. They lived day to day and used what nature provided to meet their needs. As with most Indians, the Western Shoshoni's took from the environment only what they needed for existence. Early on their main diet consisted of plant roots, pine nuts and berries. This diet was supplemented with rabbit meat when the opportunity presented itself. Later their diet included antelope, deer, elk and even buffalo depending on what area they were traveling through at the time.

Their clothing was dictated by the environment through which they traveled. In summer, the normal clothing for males was just a breechcloth and the females wore a double apron. In the wintertime their clothing first consisted of garments made of rabbit skin, but when they started killing larger game for food, these hides were also used for protection from the elements.

Religion within the Western Shoshoni Indians, like with most Indians, was dependent upon the spirit (mugua), ghost (tsnap)

and the Sun (ago) which was called the Great Spirit. They also believed in transmigration and practiced sutteeism. The Medicine Man was the spiritual leader who was said to be the prophet and possess special powers.

Elijah N. (Nick) Wilson was a young Mormon man who ran away from his family for two years and lived with the Shoshoni Indians. He lived with a band of the Shoshoni Indians whose chief was Washakie. Nick gave the white man great insight into the day-to-day life of the Shoshoni Indians after he returned to his family. Nick learned to speak Goshute (Gosh-Ute) from an Indian friend on his family's farm which made learning the Shoshoni language an easier task.

Horses were not plentiful during this time, which must have accounted for Nick's version of the Shoshoni Indian's hunting techniques. When hunting antelope they would circle the herd and then they would take turns running at the antelope which made them run until they were tired and had to stop. Then they would be killed with arrows. Their way of killing buffalo was to run behind them and cut their tendons so they couldn't run away. Then they would kill them by shooting them in the neck with arrows.

While living with the Shoshoni Indians, Nick killed many buffalo, antelope, elk and deer, but they were afraid to try and kill bears. During the timeframe (1850's) that Nick lived with the Shoshoni Indians, they traveled to Salt Lake City to trade their furs for items that would help them make it through the tough winters in the Great Basin.

Elijah N. (Nick) Wilson was also a very important part of the Pony Express because of his vast knowledge of the Indians that populated the areas that the Pony Express riders had to cross. He died in 1915 in Wilson, Wyoming (Named for him) at the age of 73.

Sacajawea, a Shoshoni Indian became a very important part of the history of the Western United States. She was the wife of French-Canadian Toussaint Charbonneau who was the guide for Lewis and Clark's Expedition. She was instrumental to the success of this expedition for besides acting as their interpreter, she also knew what vegetation was eatable along their route. Sacajawea was a compassionate person who also served as a nurse for the members of the expedition.

It is written that Sacajawea was probably kidnapped at an early age by the Hidatsas Indians and bought from them by Charbonneau. During the Lewis and Clark Expedition, they encountered some Shoshoni Indians of which one, Camenhwait, happened to be Sacajawea's brother. Sacajawea was very happy to see her family again, enough though for a short period of time. There are conflicting accounts of whether Sacajawea died in South Dakota in 1812 or if she died in 1884 and was buried in a Shoshoni cemetery. Historians lost track of Sacajawea after the Lewis and Clark Expedition which accounts for this discrepancy.

With the coming of the first white man, the Shoshoni Indians had no idea that their freedom to roam the countryside and the way of life as they knew it would soon disappear. The Shoshoni Indians signed a treaty on August 7, 1855 in good faith, but the US Government refused to ratify the treaty because it was felt that Garland Hunt, who was the Indian Agent overstepped his authority in offering the Shoshoni Indians the treaty. It did not take the Shoshoni Indians long to realize that words on a treaty document did not have any meaning to the white man.

They also realized that they might win a battle, but they would never win the war because there were too many white men and they could not defeat them all. The next treaty was signed in 1863. The main content of this treaty encompassed the right of the white man to cross over Shoshoni Indian land without being attacked or losing any of their property to theft. The Shoshoni Indians, as almost all Indians tribes, signed these treaties with all intentions of abiding by them. The white man on the other hand, broke most treaties before the ink had dried.

It did not take long after the Treaty of 1863 was signed for the white man to start settling on the Shoshoni Indian's land. The authorities refused to enforce the treaty which only made things worse for the Indians. When Nevada became a state, things only got worse for the Shoshoni Indians. Compared to the area of land that the Shoshoni Indians used to roam across, the amount of land that they were allowed after Nevada became a state was a travesty.

The Goshute Indian Reservation in north central Nevada was created in 1914. In 1928 this reservation consisted of 111,000 acres. There were also two areas established in the Ely area in 1931. One area consisted of 10.1 acres and the second consisted of 90 acres. These two areas established what is called today the Ely Colony. Since at least 1951, the Shoshoni Indians have been in litigation with the United States Government to retrieve some of their land taken from them after the Treaty of 1863.

Author's Personal Reflection: Growing up in North Dakota and seeing how

the Indians in that area were treated after the 1870s, the Western Shoshoni Indians in Nevada were treated the same. Through greed, United States Government committed the same travesties against all Indian tribes without disregard to their customs and faiths.

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