Shoshonean Peoples and the Overland Trail

Smoak, Gregory, Saunders, Jr., Richard, Morgan, Dale L

Published by Utah State University Press

Smoak, Gregory, et al.
Shoshonean Peoples and the Overland Trail: Frontiers of the Utah Superintendency of Indian Affairs, 1849–1869.
Project MUSE. muse.jhu.edu/book/12454.

For additional information about this book
https://muse.jhu.edu/book/12454

For content related to this chapter
https://muse.jhu.edu/related_content?type=book&id=356957
Dale L. Morgan's “Washakie and the Shoshoni” series is almost the earliest non-ethnographic, historical treatment involving the Northern and Eastern Shoshoni and was certainly the first publication of documentary sources. In retrospect, while his earlier articles on Indian relations had been independent studies, “Washakie and the Shoshoni” was a remarkable document. Morgan skimmed the cream from the Utah Superintendency records to produce the series. As a result, it stands as a marvelous introduction to Indian affairs in perhaps the most critical place of the overland experience. Other qualified work would not begin appearing for years or decades after Morgan published these extracts. Robert H. Lowie's ethnographic description The Northern Shoshone had been published by the American Museum of Natural History in 1909 but was essentially anthropology. The only truly major piece of historical writing available before 1960 was Dr. Grace Raymond Hebard's Washakie: An Account of Indian Resistance of the Covered Wagon and Union Pacific Railroad Invasions of Their Territory (Cleveland, Ohio: Arthur H. Clark Co., 1930; Lincoln: Univ. of Nebraska Press, 1996), which is considered a classic work but which Morgan disparaged as careful history.

of Utah’s American Indians, ed. Forrest Cuch (Salt Lake City: Utah State Division of Indian Affairs, 2000).

In successive years three new works have come to hand that push well beyond the limits that circumscribe Dale Morgan’s work. John W. W. Mann, Sacajawea’s People: The Lemhi Shoshone and the Salmon River Country (Lincoln: Univ. of Nebraska Press, 2004) considered a more distantly related band; John Heaton’s The Shoshone-Bannocks: Culture and Commerce at Fort Hall, 1870–1940 (Lawrence: Univ. of Kansas Press, 2005) picks up temporarily where Morgan left off. Gregory E. Smoak’s Ghost Dances and Identity: Prophetic Religion and American Indian Ethnogenesis in the Nineteenth Century (Berkeley: Univ. of California Press, 2006) is undoubtedly the best recent work on the Shoshoni and addresses the theme of cultural self-genesis and identity that was touched in the opening of this essay.


Mormon relations with the Indian tribes of Utah and the surrounding areas have tended to focus chiefly on historic relations with the Utes, Paiutes, and Navajos. The northern area has been addressed but less well, with several exceptions. Perhaps the best summary work, and a really fine point of beginning, is a recent historiography by Sondra Jones, “Saints or Sinners?: The Evolving Perceptions of Mormon-Indian Relations in Utah’s Historiography,” Utah Historical Quarterly 72, no. 1 (Winter 2004): 19–46. Other studies include Leonard J. Arrington’s chapter 13, “Indians: Friendship and Caution,” in his Brigham Young: American Moses (New York: Knopf, 1985), 210–22, and a brief overview of relations with the Office of Indian Affairs, 241–44; Eugene E. Campbell, “The Mormons and the Indians: Ideals versus Realities” and “Indian Missions and Farms” in Establishing Zion: The Mormon Church in the American West, 1847–1869, chaps. 6 and 7 (Salt Lake City: Signature Books, 1988); Howard A. Christy, “Open Hand and Mailed Fist: Mormon Indian Relation in Utah, 1847–1852,” Utah


Dale Morgan devoted hundreds of hours to basic research, but his Nevada trail and Utah relations articles were meant to be exploratory narratives, not definitive scholarship. The selections in “Washakie and the Shoshoni,” made from tens of thousands of Agency documents, was not an attempt to recreate a historical record of the Eastern Shoshoni, but to provide the first publicly available collection of material on the bands from an administrative perspective. In his Indian affairs work, Morgan expected to be little more than a path breaker. Still, for all of the original work Morgan expended in the superintendency records (and later War and Interior department records as well), he left some holes in his research, most notably due to sources he lacked. The Brigham Young papers, for instance, including voluminous material from his years as territorial governor and superintendent of Indian affairs, were generally unavailable to researchers during the 1930s and 1940s. That material would have interested Morgan deeply.
Items that certainly would have been included in “Washakie and the Shoshoni” series are several early letters from Young to the Shoshoni leader arguing that the bands would be better served by settling into a life of farming than they would be as nomadic hunters. These were later published by Rhett S. James as “Brigham Young-Chief Washakie Indian Farm Negotiations, 1854–1857,” Annals of Wyoming 39, no. 2 (Oct. 1967):245–56.32 Secondly, being deaf and inextricably tied to written records, Morgan also made no attempt to pursue or employ the oral history of the Shoshoni themselves. Even now, half a century later than Morgan’s work, oral traditions and family stories are being used successfully by a new generation of scholars writing about the Western and Northwestern Shoshoni. Scott R. Christensen’s biography Sagwitch: Shoshone Chieftain, Mormon Elder, 1822–1887 (Logan: Utah State Univ. Press, 1999) is an example of this.

This brief note on literature is not intended either to circumscribe the present state of scholarship or to outline approaches to history in the region or its people; published primary material like personal accounts and diaries isn’t even acknowledged. It is merely historically suggestive, a beginning point or guidepost to complement Morgan’s work collected here. The notes and bibliographies and library catalog records of mentioned works will direct interested readers to other secondary material, which in turn can point still further afield. Many of those studies will cite the papers and articles collected here. The last words on Indian-white relations in the Great Basin will thus likely never be written, but fortunately, Dale L. Morgan left us a pretty good beginning.

32 James points out that settlement was intended to pull the Shoshoni away from the stretch of the overland trail east and north of Salt Lake City and west of the Continental Divide, stabilizing Indian-emigrant relations by discouraging or undercutting the trading business of former mountain men like Jim Bridger, who had agitated against the Mormons among the tribes.
Shoshone men on horseback, ca. 1870. Photographer unknown. Denver Public Library, Western History Collection, X-32287.
THE works of Dale Morgan collected in this volume not only document the history of the Utah Superintendency of Indian Affairs, but two decades of transition in Shoshone life. By 1849, the Shoshones, or Newe (pronounced *ney-wa*), had already undergone immense social, political, and economic change. Contact with European livestock, goods, diseases, and eventually, the colonizers themselves, revolutionized Newe life, but change did not erase older ways. Along with the large and more politically cohesive mounted buffalo-hunting bands, there coexisted smaller foot-going groups that seemingly had little interest in adopting the equestrian lifestyle. The Newe world in the mid-nineteenth century was a complex place. Even greater changes loomed by 1849, as permanent white settlement in the Newe homelands became a reality. Within twenty years, treaties and reservations would reshape the Newe world. Understanding the interaction between the Newe and officials of the Utah Superintendency about which Dale Morgan wrote requires a deeper understanding of the native people, their culture, and their history.

Nearly all of the native peoples of the northern reaches of the Utah Superintendency spoke one or more dialects of two closely related languages: Shoshone and Paiute. Both tongues are Numic languages and belong to the larger Uto-Aztecan language family (as does Ute). Dialects of Shoshone are particularly widespread and are spoken in a massive arc stretching from western Nevada across the Great Basin and the Snake River country onto the plains of Wyoming. The Comanches of the southern Plains are also Shoshone speakers who separated from their co-linguists in the seventeenth century to begin their migration to the southern Plains. Numerous Paiute speakers lived amongst the Shoshone speakers, especially west of the continental divide. Bannock is a dialect of the Northern Paiute language. The Bannock dialect spoken today at Fort Hall, Idaho, is intelligible to Paiute speakers in eastern Oregon, northern Nevada, and as far south as the Mono basin of California. Shoshone and Paiute are mutually unintelligible, but they are closely related languages. This fact, combined with

---

1 I have developed the interpretations of Newe culture and history presented here more fully in Gregory E. Smoak, *Ghost Dances and Identity: Prophetic Religion and American Indian Ethnogenesis in the Nineteenth Century* (Berkeley: Univ. of California Press, 2006).
the constant and close association of Shoshone and Bannock speakers led to a
great deal of bilingualism.

Depending on the language and the dialect, Shoshone, Bannock, and Paiute
speakers called themselves Newe, Neme, or Numu, meaning simply “the people.”
From these names, anthropologists derived the label Numic as a term to refer to all
of these linguistically related peoples. When he arrived in the Lemhi Valley in 1805,
William Clark recorded in his journal “This nation Call themselves Cho-shon-né.”
The root of the name Shoshone is found in the Shoshone word sosoni, a type of
grass used to build the traditional conical wickiup. “Bannock” is an Anglicization
of panákwate, the name that the Paiute speakers who resided among the Shoshones
applied to themselves. In this essay I have adopted the term Newe—“the people”
in most Shoshone dialects—to refer generally to the Shoshone and Shoshone-
Bannock peoples who dealt with the Utah Superintendency. Anthropologists gen-
erally use the term Shoshonean to refer to the same peoples. Using the word Newe
is important because it recognizes that the native peoples of the United States have
traditional names for themselves. Secondly, it acknowledges the cultural and his-
toric connections between Shoshone and Bannock speakers. Using Newe does not
mean that all of these peoples were in constant contact, that they always intermar-
rried, that they pursued identical lifeways, or indeed, that they identified themselves
as the same, but rather that they shared deep social, economic, and linguistic con-
nections. From these connections, through a process of historic differentiation,
emerged the Shoshone groups of today. Because modern Shoshone and Shoshone-
Bannock peoples are a product of a dynamic history, band names and modern
labels will be used when appropriate.

The modern names attached to Newe bands are historic and ethnographic
labels based upon the broad geographic ranges of bands and emergent tribes in
the nineteenth century. The Eastern Shoshones reside today on the Wind River
Reservation in central Wyoming. They were historically the most Plains-adapted
of all Shoshone groups (with the exception of the Comanches). To the south and
west ranged the so-called Northwestern Bands, who owned fewer horses, pursued

106; Drusilla Gould and Christopher Loether, An Introduction to the Shoshoni
Language: Dammen Daigwape (Salt Lake City: Univ. of Utah Press, 2002); Beverley Crum and Jon Dayley, “Western Shoshone Grammar,” Occasional Papers
and Monographs in Cultural Anthropology and Linguistics, vol. 1 (Boise, Idaho: Boise State Univ., 1993); Sven S. Liljeblad, “Indian Peoples in Idaho” (unpub-
lished manuscript, Idaho Museum of Natural History, Pocatello, 1957), 20–22, 23.
3 Gould and Loether, Shoshoni Language, 4–5; Liljeblad, “Indian Peoples,” 20–22, 23; Robert
F. Murphy and Yolanda Murphy, “Northern Shoshone and Bannock” in Handbook of
of the Lewis & Clark Expedition: Volume 5, July 28–November 1, 1805, ed. Gary E. Mouton
(Lincoln: Univ. of Nebraska Press, 1988), 115.
lifeways more adapted to the arid Basin, and resided northwest of the core of Euroamerican settlement along the Wasatch Front. To their north on the Snake River Plain were the Northern Shoshones, or more accurately, the Shoshone-Bannocks of the modern Fort Hall Reservation. Often referred to as the “mixed bands” in historic documents, they practiced a complex seasonal subsistence cycle that combined elements of Plains, Basin, and Plateau economies. During the last three decades of the nineteenth century, many of the Shoshone bands living west along the Snake, Bruneau, Boise, and Weiser rivers were forced to move to Fort Hall. Others moved south to the Duck Valley Reservation, where, along with some Western Shoshones and Northern Paiutes, they are known today as the Shoshone-Paiute Tribe. The label Western Shoshone is applied to peoples ranging from the Gosiutes of western Utah to the Panamint Shoshones of Death Valley. What unifies groups across this vast geographic expanse is the historic Great Basin orientation of their lifeways. Western Shoshones today live on reservations and in colonies in Utah, Nevada, and California.4

A debate concerning the timing of Newe occupation of the Great Basin has occupied anthropologists and linguists for over half a century. In the 1950s—using new radiometric dating techniques and influenced by Julian Steward’s environmental interpretations of Newe social life—archaeologist Jesse Jennings presented a model of a Desert Archaic culture that existed nearly unchanged in the Great Basin for 10,000 years preceding the advent of the historic period.5 Earl Swanson’s work at Birch Creek in eastern Idaho in the early 1970s also suggested a very long residency for the Newe in the area, around 8,000 years.6


Later theories have offered a more dynamic history for Great Basin peoples in the pre-contact period, but have proven more controversial. The Numic Spread theory, first proposed by Sidney Lamb in 1958 and developed by numerous other scholars since, posits a very late and very rapid migration of Numic-speaking peoples from their original homelands in the southwest corner of the Great Basin. Based upon lexicostatistical dating methods, the Numic Spread theory proceeds from the observation that linguistic diversity increases over time. Numic languages exhibit the greatest dialectical diversity and cover the smallest geographic areas in the region near Death Valley. This then, would be the Numic homeland—the area where Numic languages have been spoken the longest. That Numic languages today are spoken across a huge fan-shaped area while exhibiting relatively few dialectical differences is evidence, it is argued, for a rapid migration. According to the Numic Spread theory, the ancestors of modern Shoshone people may not have reached the Snake River area until the thirteenth or fourteenth centuries.\(^7\) Basing his judgments on a reinterpretation of artifacts rather than linguistic theory, one archaeologist has argued for an even later sixteenth-century date for Shoshonean occupation of southern Idaho.\(^8\) More recent excavations led by Richard Holmer of Idaho State University have pushed back the date of Newe occupation once again. Working at sites above the Fort Hall bottoms on the Snake River and at Dagger Falls on the Middle Fork of the Salmon River, Holmer’s team uncovered an artifact set that they deemed distinctively Shoshonean. If so, then Newe residence in the Snake River region dates back some 3,500 to 4,000 years.\(^9\) Regardless of which theory seems most convincing, the indisputable fact is that by the time of the founding of the Utah Superintendency in 1850, the ancestors of modern Shoshone people had lived in the area for centuries, if not millennia.

In the Great Basin, perhaps more than in any other region, anthropological theory and practice have shaped historical understandings of native peoples. The


work of one man, Julian H. Steward, has cast a particularly long shadow. In *Basin-Plateau Aboriginal Sociopolitical Groups*, originally published in 1938, Steward posited that the harsh and arid environment of the Great Basin shaped a culture marked by kin-based social units, low population density, and an unrelenting quest for sustenance. “[T]he entire Shoshonean culture . . . was stamped with a remarkable practicality,” he wrote. “So far as its basic orientation was definable, it was ‘gastric.’” The perils of life in this unforgiving environment dictated a simple kin-based social structure. Family clusters or *kin cliques*—consisting of several nuclear families that consistently lived and traveled together—were, for Steward, the irreducible social units of Newe life. Band organization was non-existent before the acquisition of horses. Political leadership was limited to *talkers*, men who kept the people apprised of available foodstuffs and organized cooperative ventures such as pine nut harvests and rabbit drives. *Talkers* did not lead discrete and permanent sociopolitical groups. Rather, families and individuals were free to follow whomever they chose, and, in any case, operated as independent family clusters much of the time. The quest for survival also shaped Shoshonean understandings of territory. Steward found that the fluid social order combined with the precarious nature of food resources meant that groups held a consensus right to the land, but that their territories were not exclusive.  

Steward’s work provided valuable insights into Newe social structure and life but it also was largely responsible for the creation and perpetuation of a monolithic and ahistorical vision of Newe peoples across the Great Basin. His reliance on what is seemingly environmental determinism led to an underestimation, if not dismissal, of historical change. Steward called his approach *human ecology* and explicitly denied he was engaged in environmental determinism, which he defined as the premise of an “automatic and inevitable effect of environment upon culture.” The tenor of his work, however, moved toward these conclusions. In a later essay he even wrote, “the small family cluster based on bilateral principles was the inevitable response to areas of meager resources, low population density, and an annual cycle of nomadism [emphasis added].” Whether cultural adaptation or inevitability, Steward’s approach factored out historical circumstances and failed to capture the diversity of subsistence strategies employed by Newe peoples through the historic period. He emphasized the seed-gathering complex of Western Shoshone and Northern Paiute groups evident in the

1930s at the expense of all other Newe subsistence practices. Steward himself recognized this problem, remarking that the Snake River was “unique in having salmon,” and that the “Northern Shoshoni and many Ute stood in sharp contrast to the Western Shoshoni” due to horses and buffalo. While acknowledging these differences, Steward also cast them as anomalies on the fringes of Shoshonean life. Moreover, readers get no sense that the seed-gathering complex and family social structure were also products of historical trends. More recent archaeological work suggests that larger bands probably lived along the Humboldt River prior to 1800. The development of a trading route along the river and the presence of “predatory bands” were likely factors that drove people away from the river and to travel in smaller, more scattered groups.

While it is ultimately impossible to recover all of the details of the pre-contact social structure, the weight of the ethnographic evidence does point to the family cluster as the essential building block of pre-horse Newe society. Kinship was figured bilaterally, allowing individuals to employ a broad range of kin relations at any given time. Family clusters interacted extensively, but this was no guarantee that they would remain together from one year to the next. Winter camps represented the most stable social groupings in the pre-horse era. Sites like the Fort Hall bottoms and the Bear River valley offered sheltered campsites and plenty of wood and water, as well as access to fish, game, and waterfowl. Newe peoples returned to these places winter after winter, but there is no way to determine if the same families always camped together. In fact, modern informants reported that families often chose different winter camps from year to year. People with the strongest kinship ties gravitated toward one another. Sibling bonds were particularly important. Marriage patterns made what one anthropologist labeled the “sibling group” the basis for many family clusters and later, for larger social groups. The linguist Sven Liljeblad, for instance, argued that the importance of the sibling group helped explain the long-standing political leadership of one Bannock family among the Shoshone-Bannocks in the mid-nineteenth century. Kin networks, then, were the ultimate origin of the band and tribal identities that emerged later.

Large, semi-permanent social groups did not exist among the Newe before the acquisition of horses. The “food name groups” evident in the historical

record were not truly bands, but rather groups of family clusters that habitually traveled, camped, and worked together during cooperative subsistence ventures. Food names have sometimes been mistaken for permanent socio-political units. West of the continental divide, they certainly were not. For instance, the same food name could apply to peoples separated by hundreds of miles, while one group could be known by different names when it shifted its subsistence practices. *Agai-deka’*, or “salmon eaters” in the Shoshone dialect of Fort Hall, was a name applied to the Newe in the Lemhi Valley as well as the people at the great fisheries of the middle and lower Snake River. Moreover, many of the Lemhi Valley *agai-deka’* also went “to buffalo” at which time they were *guchundeka’*, “buffalo eaters.” *Guchundeka’* could also refer to Washakie’s Eastern Shoshones. Some group names referred to environmental adaptations and were particularly widespread. *Duku-deka’*, commonly translated as “sheep eaters,” could refer to any of the small kin-based groups that customarily lived at higher elevations ranging from the Wind River Range and Yellowstone Plateau of Wyoming all the way west to the Blue Mountains of Oregon.18

The variety of food names illustrates the complexity of pre-horse Newe economy. Vegetable foods included pine nuts, seeds, and various roots. Pine nut harvests were critical for the Newe of the basin extending north into what is today southern Idaho. Farther north, camas brought people from great distances late each spring to dig up the nutritious roots. Game, small and large, made up a large portion of the Newe diet depending on location and season. Buffalo, deer, elk, antelope, and mountain sheep were staples. The *duku-deka’* were renowned both for the craftsmanship of their bows as well as their hunting acumen. Small game included rabbits and even insects. Mid-nineteenth-century officials held a unique fascination with the Newe consumption of “black crickets.” They were less thorough in reporting Newe dependence upon riparian resources. Rivers were literally the lifeblood of the country. Newe people fished and hunted for all types of game, including waterfowl, along the rivers. Until recently, scholars have underestimated the importance of fishing to Newe life. The Newe possessed a highly developed fishing culture that included weirs, fish traps, and spears with detachable barbed points.19

The acquisition and use of spiritual power or supernatural strength—*bo’ha* or *puha* in various Numic dialects—was at the center of Newe spiritual life. *Bo’ha* pervades the universe. It is an essential life force. Animals, plants, and even rocks

---

18 Liljeblad, “Indian Peoples,” 54–57. In this section, I have adopted the spelling provided by Drusilla Gould, a native Shoshone speaker from the Fort Hall Reservation. Drusilla Gould to Gregory E. Smoak, 2005 Jan. 11.

possess their own distinct bo'ha, but are also part of a larger spiritual force. All persons, regardless of age or sex, could seek bo'ha in matters of war, love, hunting, or gambling. Strong bo'ha in war, for instance, was often a prerequisite for sustained political leadership. In these cases, bo'ha served individual purposes. But there were also highly skilled practitioners—bo'hagande in Shoshone, puhagem in Paiute, and puhá ga'yu in Bannock—who had access to bo'ha for social purposes, most notably, healing. Anthropologists call these powerful people sha-mans. Bo'ha was always the gift of a spirit tutor and came to a person through dreams. These dreams could be sought directly through vision quests, or come as unsolicited visits. Vision quests were less common among Newe peoples than among neighboring groups on the Plains and Columbia Plateau. Among some groups, bo'ha acquired in vision quests was viewed as inferior to that obtained through unsolicited dreams. The spirit tutor instructed the dreamer in the gathering of a medicine bundle and imposed personal taboos. Instruction for shamans was far more intricate than for lay persons and involved an ongoing, usually life-long series of dreams in which the tutor revealed the knowledge and songs necessary for successful healing.  

Newe concepts of political leadership were equally dynamic and individualistic. Euroamericans expected, and indeed desired, leaders who represented fixed sociopolitical entities and exclusive property rights. Among Newe peoples, however, this was not the case. The bands evident in the mid-nineteenth century coalesced around able leaders of cooperative endeavors—the talkers or dai'gwhanee in the Shoshone dialect of Fort Hall—be it salmon fishing, pine nut harvests, or buffalo hunts. In all of these cases the ability to act as an effective intermediary was at a premium. Successful leaders balanced their people's needs against the demands of others. They negotiated with other leaders their people's access to the land and its resources. As the United States became more powerful in the mid-nineteenth century and imposed its authority in the Newe homeland, the dai'gwhanee emerged as the chiefs who dealt with the Euroamericans. But they were not the “head chiefs” that nineteenth-century government officials perceived. They lacked the coercive power that whites expected in their leaders and governments. They spoke only for the people who followed them at any given time. The most adept leaders, such as Washakie, were able to maintain

their influence even after the arrival of Euroamericans by building upon their traditional role as a provider and intermediary for their people.\textsuperscript{21}

Newe conceptions of territory were perhaps even more baffling for Euroamericans. On the broadest scale, the profound differences between the ways in which American Indians and whites conceived of territory and property shaped much of the history of Indian-white relations. While most Newe bands ranged hundreds of miles each year to exploit a variety of resources, they always returned to their “native land”—\textit{debía} in Shoshone, \textit{tebíwa} in Bannock. A group’s attachment to its \textit{debía} was profound. “An Indian will never ask to what nation or tribe or body of people another Indian belongs,” wrote John Wesley Powell of the Newe peoples in the 1870s, “but to ‘what land do you belong and how are you land named? Thus the very name of the Indian is the very title deed to his home.”\textsuperscript{22} The group customarily wintered in its \textit{debía} and enjoyed uncontested access to its resources. These rights, however, were not exclusive of other Newe. The \textit{dai'gwhani'} of a visiting group would always negotiate permission to join a people in the use of their native land. The role of the \textit{dai'gwhanee}, then, was to maintain access to diverse areas and resources, rather than control an exclusive territory. It was from this perspective that the \textit{dai'gwhanee} approached the demands of the United States.\textsuperscript{23} Some officials, such as Utah’s James Duane Doty, clearly recognized that Newe concepts of land tenure were very different than those of Euroamericans, yet ultimately he, like every other white negotiator, failed to fully grasp the implications of these differences.

The mediate, or indirect, effects of European colonization set off a process of social differentiation that led to the emergence of the Shoshone groups that Doty and other officials encountered in the mid-nineteenth century. The acquisition of horses had the greatest consequences for Newe people. The Spanish settlements of New Mexico and, later, Texas, were the origin points of horses for all of the Native peoples of the West. As early as the 1640s, Athabaskan (Navajos and Apaches) and Ute peoples carried off substantial numbers of horses from the Spanish herds. The Pueblo Revolt of 1680 turned this stream into a flood. Horses were traded through pre-existing native trade networks north along both slopes of the Rocky Mountains. The Newe on the Snake River plain acquired horses perhaps as early as the 1690s.\textsuperscript{24} The Comanches came to dominate the

\textsuperscript{22} Ibid.; John Wesley Powell, “Indian Life,” extract from “They Call themselves Nu-mes,” manuscript 798, Smithsonian Institution National Anthropological Archives, 8–9.
eastern horse trade out of New Mexico and there is a Newe tradition that their first horses came from them. Newe groups farther west more likely got their first horses from the Utes. Horses revolutionized Newe life. Economic distinctions increased between Newe groups. Mounted groups became larger and exhibited greater political cohesiveness and stronger political leadership. (Although these factors should not be overstated.) Some allied peoples merged to form new groups, while others split and took on new identities. The possession of horses also enmeshed many Newe groups in the chronic intertribal warfare that marked the Plains for the next century and a half.

The social and economic distinctions that emerged between the mounted and mostly foot-going Newes were the most visible consequence of horse ownership. Mounted groups traveled together for longer periods and used a greater range of resources than their foot-going kin. Buffalo, which were hunted on foot before the acquisition of horses, became a much larger part of the Newe diet. The material culture of Plains Indians groups set the mounted groups apart. Tipis replaced older brush shelters while parafleches, travois, Plains-style saddles and horse trappings all became commonplace. Still, even the most Plains-adapted of the Newe, the Eastern Shoshones, did not abandon the diverse economic pursuits of the kinsfolk to the west. They continued to fish, gather seeds and roots, and hunt small game. The Shoshone-Bannocks present perhaps the most complex case of all. Mounted buffalo hunting became a focus of their seasonal rounds, yet they also continued their reliance on the great salmon runs of the Snake and Salmon rivers, as well as the annual harvest of camas roots. The mounted Newe of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries simply did not fit into neat culture areas such as Great Basin, Plains, or Plateau. They blurred the lines between all of these areas. The economic distinctions which emerged between the mostly foot-going groups and the more “wealthy” mounted groups were, then, not a case of abandoning one way of life for another, but of incorporating the new opportunities presented by the equestrian lifestyle.

Social differentiation reached its peak with the emergence of new peoples. Before the arrival of the Spanish in New Mexico, proto-Shoshone-Comanche bands already had taken up residence on the Plains. Sometime after the arrival of horses, the Comanches and Shoshones went their separate ways. According to a Comanche tradition recorded in the early twentieth century, in the distant past, the Shoshones and Comanches were two bands that camped together. The

death of a young boy at play nearly led to war between these kinsfolk. At the last moment, an aging chief stepped in and averted bloodshed. But when the camp broke up, one band moved off to the north to become the Shoshones. The other, the Comanches, went south. Die Spanish sources first mention the Comanches in 1706 who, by the 1750s, had completed their migration south and southwest to supplant the Apaches as masters of the southern Plains.

The advent of equestrianism also led to the creation of mixed Shoshone and Bannock bands on the upper Snake River. Paiute-speaking Bannocks, drawn by the wealth of the horse-buffalo economy, began moving east to join with the mounted Shoshone speakers at the beginning of the eighteenth century. Eventually, substantial Bannock populations lived among the Shoshones who wintered around Fort Hall and in the Lemhi Valley. The close relationship between Shoshones and Bannocks in the mixed bands is evidenced by the name each group applied to the other. Sven Liljeblad reported that the Bannocks called the Shoshones wihinakwate, “on the knife side” or “on the iron side.” The Bannocks referred to themselves as panákwate (from which is derived “Bannock”) meaning “on the water side” or “on the west side.” Liljeblad argued that these references to the original locations of the partners in the mixed bands revealed two “sides” of a bilingual “speech community” rather than two distinct tribes. Individuals of mixed parentage identified themselves by the side whose language they preferred to speak, or by the language of the headman they followed.

With the acquisition of horses the Newe also became embroiled in a long standing series of wars with Plains groups, most notably the Blackfeet. Newe groups had expanded as far north as the Saskatchewan River by the 1720s, where they came in direct conflict with the Blackfeet; possibly the oldest reference to Newe people in the historic record dates from this struggle. In 1742, the de la Vérendrye brothers reported that the feared “Gens du Serpent” lived to the west. Scholars have long assumed that the Gens du Serpent were the “Snakes,” or Newe.


29 Liljeblad, “Indian Peoples,” 81–82.

30 Liljeblad, “Indian Peoples,” 57–58, 87–88; Murphy and Murphy, “Northern Shoshone and Bannock,” 284. Liljeblad renders the equivalent Shoshone words as *wihin-naite* and *bannaite’*.

31 *Journals and Letters of Pierre Gaultier de Varennes de la Vérendrye and His Sons*, ed.
Horses were an early, but not overwhelming asset for the Newe in their war for the northern Plains. In 1787–88 the Northwest Company trader David Thompson wintered among the Piegan Blackfeet. His host, Saukamappee, was an elderly man of Cree birth who had spent his entire adult life among his adopted people. Saukamappee’s riveting account of the Newe-Blackfeet war has been retold in countless histories of the Plains and Native peoples. He recalled that in the early years of the conflict, the Newe’s horses gave them an advantage. They could ride in amongst their enemies and wield heavy clubs with brutal effect. The Blackfeet “had no idea of horses and could not make out what they were.” When one horse was killed from beneath its Newe rider, the Blackfeet rushed to the scene and gawked at the strange animal that reminded them of a stag without horns. But, Saukamappee remembered, as a horse was a “slave to man, like the dog” the Blackfeet named it the “Big Dog.”

Guns represented yet another frontier, one shaped by imperial policies that distinctly disadvantaged the Newe. While the horse frontier moved from southwest to northeast, the gun frontier followed an opposite path. Spanish policies prohibited the trade of firearms with Native peoples. The French and British traders to the northeast were under no such restrictions. Thus, while Newe people had horses before their Blackfeet enemies on the Plains, it was the latter people’s earlier possession of firearms that turned the tide in the ongoing struggle. Up until the 1730s, the general battles between Newes and Blackfeet were shows of force. Warriors wearing leather armor and protected by rows of shields launched arrows at the opposition with limited effect. The Blackfeet, who were normally outnumbered, appealed to Crees and their ties to French traders, for assistance. Saukamappee and nine other Crees who owned guns joined the again outnumbered Blackfeet. The guns proved to be the difference, and the Blackfeet were able to drive the Newe from the battlefield. Subsequently, ambushes and surprise attacks came to characterize the Newe-Blackfeet war, while the latter continued to enjoy a near monopoly on firearms and iron weapons due to their proximity to French, and later, British traders. The situation had worsened for the Newe by the time of Lewis and Clark. Meriwether Lewis reported that the Newe band led by Cameahwait (who was also Sacajawea’s brother) possessed “bridlebits and stirrups they obtained from the Spaniards,” but he saw only three guns among sixty warriors. Firearms were “reserved for war almost exclusively and the bow and arrows are used in hunting.” The Blackfeet, meanwhile, “hunt them up and

33 Thompson, *Travels*, 193–95, 197.
murder them without respect [*sic*] to sex or age and plunder them of their horses.” Cameahwait desperately wanted to open a trade for guns with the Americans, and the astute Lewis used their dire situation to the expedition’s advantage. Help us, he told the Newe, or no American traders would trade among them.  

Imperial policies, however, had far less impact upon the most devastating of all European imports: epidemic disease. “Virgin-soil epidemics,” so named because they struck populations that had never experienced them before and so held no inherited immunity, killed 80 to 90 percent of many native groups. The epidemics changed forever the history of the American continents as well as their human and physical landscapes. They were an essential part of the process that environmental historian Alfred Crosby has labeled “ecological imperialism.” Moreover, the diseases moved rapidly in advance of direct European contact, creating a new world for native peoples and shaping perceptions among the newcomers of an “empty continent.” Before they ever laid eyes upon a European, Newe peoples were victims of the catastrophic smallpox epidemic of 1781, which was part of a larger continent-wide epidemic that carried away soldiers in George Washington’s Continental Army as well as thousands upon thousands of native peoples. In a chilling and oft-repeated tale, Saukamappee told David Thompson of how the Blackfeet came upon an apparently abandoned Newe village along the Red Deer River in southern Alberta. Sensing a trap, the Blackfeet waited and watched. After a day, when they were satisfied that they would not become victims themselves, the warriors attacked. As they cut through the tents they witnessed a horrific scene; “there was no one to fight with but the dead and dying, each a mass of corruption.” The Blackfeet took care not to touch the dying Newes. They did, however, make off with the horses, the best tents, and the property they thought was “clean and good.” Within weeks the vicious and impartial killer was at work among the Blackfeet. As devastating as the smallpox epidemic of 1781 was for the Blackfeet, the Newe suffered so badly that they began a protracted retreat from the northern Plains toward the Rocky Mountains.


37 Thompson, Travels, 198–201.
When Lewis and Clark entered the Lemhi Valley in 1805, it marked the beginning of the “historic” era for the Newe. The Newe, of course, had already seen great changes set off by the indirect effects of the European colonization. Lewis and Clark did not encounter a “pristine” people, but rather people who were the product of a long and complex history. The expedition, and the fur trappers that followed shortly after, commented extensively on Newe life, but did not have the transformative effect of later white emigrants.

Relations between the Newe and the fur trappers and traders were generally good. The Indians did not compete with the trappers for furs, and the latter were not interested in taking land. There was some intermarriage. The fur men built only a few small trading forts and the Newe became valued trading partners. More importantly, the Newe and the trappers shared a common enemy in the Blackfeet. The most famous Newe leader of the fur trade era, the “Horn Chief,” was celebrated by the fur men as a capable leader and fearsome ally against the Blackfeet.¹⁸ Both British and American fur trappers regularly traveled and camped with Newe groups who provided them with added security in dangerous country. In 1830, when John Work, who led the Hudson’s Bay Company’s Snake River Brigade, learned that a large Newe village was traveling upstream ahead of his trappers he wrote, “This is of advantage to us as they will be before us and amuse the Blackfeet.”³⁹

The group names applied to Newe peoples is perhaps the most confusing aspect of the fur trade literature. Some trappers saw only the most obvious of social distinctions—the ownership of horses—and lumped together the mounted bands as “Snakes” while the foot-going bands were derisively called “diggers.” Both these labels survived throughout the nineteenth century and appear regularly in official documents. Other fur men offered more complex assessments of Newe divisions, but ones that were still bound to obvious social and economic divisions. For example, Alexander Ross wrote, “The great Snake nation may be divided into three divisions, namely the Sherry-dikas, or Dog-eaters, the War-are-ree-kas, or fish-eaters, and the Ban-at-tees or Robbers. But as a nation they all go by the general appellation of Sho-shones, or Snakes.”⁴⁰


Sherry-dika and War-are-ree-ka, with their telltale suffixes, are clearly food names. Ross exhibited a prejudice common among the trappers when he celebrated the mounted buffalo-hunting Sherry-dikas as the “real Shoshonees,” and derided the more “slovenly” groups that survived on fish, roots, and smaller game. It is impossible to determine exactly who these people were, and Ross himself admitted that the trapper held only a “very confused idea of the Snakes.” The official documents that followed the fur trade era also included numerous terms for various Newe peoples. And like earlier accounts, socioeconomic distinctions were always at their root. In August of 1849, John Wilson, recently assigned to the short-lived Salt Lake Indian agency wrote, “Among the Sho-sho-nies there are only two bands, properly speaking. The principal or better portion are called Sho sho nies, (or Snakes) who are rich enough to own horses. The others, the Sho-sho-coes, (or Walkers) are those who cannot or do not own horses.”

Except that Wilson’s “walkers” were more often labeled diggers, the agent’s nomenclature was characteristic of white observers. Their emphasis on visible economic distinctions, combined with the survival of “food name groups” and the creative spelling of the era created a confusing myriad of names for Newe groups.

The impact of the fur trade on the Newe was minuscule compared to the effects of the mass migration of emigrants to the Pacific coast each summer that began around 1840. By the best estimates, over 250,000 European-American emigrants traversed the Oregon and California trails between 1840 and 1860. The peak year came in 1852 when 60,000 made the trek in a single season. With them marched at least 1.5 million head of livestock. These emigrants were not adventurers. They did not seek new routes or welcome surprises. They did not randomly take up lands along the route, but rather remained focused on their goal of reaching Oregon or California in time to make provisions for the coming winter. Consequently, the emigrants sought the safety of routine. Nearly everyone carried commercially available guidebooks, many (at least early in the migration) hired guides, and, most consequential for Newe peoples, they stuck to the well-worn roads that followed the watercourses. From the Sweetwater River in central Wyoming, the main emigrant road crossed the upper Green River and continued onto the Snake where it split. The Oregon Trail continued northwest down the Snake before crossing over to the Powder River country of Oregon. The California Trail turned south

42 Document 1, this collection.
Utah territorial boundaries and the overland trails.
across the desert northwest of the Great Salt Lake and into Nevada where it struck the Humboldt and followed that stream to its sink and then into the Sierra Nevada. Thus, for over a thousand miles, the great overland roads cut through the very heart of Newe country.

The emigrants’ impact on the Newe country was profound and concentrated. Riverine routes allowed the emigrants to live off the land but also magnified their environmental impact. They cut wood, hunted, fished, and grazed their stock all within a very narrow corridor. While no Newe group could escape its effects, the impact of the migration varied. Hardest hit were the smaller, mostly foot-going bands that lived to the west along the Snake and Humboldt. They saw critical resource sites monopolized by the emigrants and later, by stage and freight companies. They were also the most likely victims of emigrant violence. The larger mounted bands to the east had more limited direct contact with the emigrants. The Fort Hall Shoshone-Bannocks, for instance, were usually hunting buffalo far from the emigrant roads at the height of the summer migration. But this did not spare them. When they returned to their traditional winter camps along the Fort Hall bottoms, they found little firewood and even less grass for their stock. The environmental impact of the migration was quickly obvious to white observers. In 1843, Frémont’s cartographer, Charles Preuss, remarked, “The white people have ruined the country of the Snake Indians and should therefore treat them well.”

The emigrants also spoiled the country for themselves. Horse theft increased west of Fort Laramie because the grass along the trail had been so overgrazed that each night the animals had to be taken miles from camp to find sufficient forage, making them easier targets. In 1857, an employee of the Overland Road estimated that emigrants had driven at least 70,000 head of stock past the Green River that season. The following year, in response to the overgrazing, Frederick W. Lander, the superintendent of the Overland Road, surveyed a new route that diverged from the Oregon Trail at South Pass and proceeded north and west to the Salt River, and then to Fort Hall via the Blackfoot River and Ross Fork Creek. He bragged that the road offered “better grass and [a] more permanent supply of water.” And while Lander’s Cutoff added some miles to the journey, it also bypassed the alkaline deserts farther south and crossed the Green River so high that ferries or toll bridges were unnecessary. It was so popular that Lander estimated that 90 percent of the 13,000 overland emigrants of 1859 used his new

---


In other words, nearly 12,000 white emigrants and their livestock passed directly through the homeland of the Shoshone-Bannocks that summer.

The emigrant invasion sparked violence between Newes and Euroamericans, but the dimensions of the conflict must be kept in perspective. About 10,000 emigrants died on the overland trek between 1840 and 1860. Of that number, native peoples killed fewer than 400, or about 4 percent. Disease, with cholera being perhaps the single greatest killer, was responsible for 90 percent of the deaths along the trail. Accidents also killed more emigrants than Indians. In fact, emigrants usually killed more Indians each year than vice versa. In 1851, for instance, sixty emigrants died at the hands of Indians—the greatest total of any single year—while that same year emigrants killed some seventy Indians. In only five years during the two decades of heaviest travel did white deaths exceed Indian deaths. During the bloody year of 1851 more than half of the killings took place in the heart of Newe territory along the Snake River. Most often, emigrants themselves, sparked the violence. For instance, wanting a prime campsite for themselves that summer, members of the Patterson train charged a Newe camp on Rock Creek, firing shotguns in the air and chasing the Indians away on horseback. Retaliation followed, not only against the Patterson train but against other emigrants later in the season. Such rash acts combined with the monopolization and destruction of resources also led some Newe groups along the Snake and the Humboldt to turn to raiding.

Peaceful cooperation and trade rather than violence more often marked Newe encounters with emigrants. Washakie, uniformly celebrated by officials of the Utah Superintendency, came to epitomize Newe friendship. In 1859, Washakie told Frederick Lander, “that it was never the intention of the Shoshonee tribe, at least his portion of it, to fight the whites; that he had himself been fired upon by emigrants but had always taught his young men that a war with the ‘Great Father’ would be disastrous to them.”

46 Report of the Secretary of the Interior on Pacific Wagon Roads, 1859; 35th Cong., 2nd sess., House Executive Document 108 (Serial 1008), 7, 55–56; Frederick W. Lander to Commissioner of Indian Affairs (hereafter CIA), 1860 Feb. 18, Letters Received 1824–1881, Microcopy 234 (hereafter M234), Utah Superintendency, RG 75, Records of the Bureau of Indian Affairs, National Archives and Records Administration (NARA).


50 Pacific Wagon Roads, 68.
Friendship could be beneficial at both the individual and group levels, and Washakie proved adept at employing his reputation as a friend of the whites to buttress his status among them as well as his own people. Trade was another part of peaceful Newe-emigrant relations, especially along the Snake River. The great fisheries of the Salmon Falls on the middle Snake were a welcome sight for travelers weary of their monotonous diet. In 1838, Sarah White Smith wrote, “We have purchased salmon of these Indians, find it beautiful & are feasting on it.” Theodore Talbot, who accompanied Frémont’s 1843 expedition, wrote of the large Newe camp at the Falls, “Round every hut are high platforms covered with drying salmon. They present quite a gay appearance for the meat of the salmon is a deep scarlet color.” From Salmon Falls to the Boise, the party encountered Newe “strung out along the river at every little rapid where fish are to be caught, and the cry ‘Haggai, haggai’ (fish) was constantly heard.” Agai actually means salmon. By the time the emigration peaked in the early 1850s, the Newe salmon trade was thriving. “All sorts of trades were made for fish,” Bagley remembered. “The Indians had no use for money but were glad to exchange for clothing and particularly for ammunition.”

While the scope of conflict has been exaggerated, the friction between emigrants and Newe was an issue that demanded the attention of federal officials. With violent encounters seemingly on the rise, Frederick Lander reported that, “the Snakes or Shoshones have probably suffered more than any tribe from the passage of the emigration along the narrow valleys [sic] of their rivers.” When he visited with Newe bands he heard firsthand the difficulties Newe leaders faced controlling young men bent on prestige and plunder, and stinging from the insults and abuses of the emigrants. In 1858, Washakie told Lander, “before the emigrants passed through his country, buffallo, elk, and antelope could be seen on all the hills; now, when he looked for game, he saw only wagons with white tops and men riding upon their horses; that his people were very poor, and had fallen back into the valleys of the mountains to dig roots and get meat for their little ones.”

Washakie was still able to control his young men. It was farther west among the Northwestern Bands that raiding was common. Ignoring the over-


52 Pacific Wagon Roads, 68.