



Shoshone Indians and tepees, taken sometime between 1880 and 1910. Some Western Shoshone groups, especially in northeastern Nevada, had developed cultural features similar to the Plains, including the horse and the teepee, before the Euro-Americans arrived in Nevada.

Chapter 6: Indians and their wars in Nevada.

The first intercourse between the white and red race in Nevada, of which there is any record, dates from 1832. In August of that year Milton Sublette reached the head-waters of the Humboldt River, with a company of trappers. Within a few days after their arrival at that place, [Joe] Meek shot and killed a Shoshone Indian. The famous mountaineer, N. J. Wythe, who was also of the party, asked the trapper why he had done this, and was told that it was only a hint “to keep the Indians from stealing their traps.”

“Had he stolen any?” queried his questioner.

“No,” replied Meek; “but he looked as if he was going to.”

Cady was
riding along
a trail not far
from where Dayton now
is, and overtook an Indian,
and like a brave man, deliber-
ately shot him.





Winnenap will not any more. He died, as do most medicine-men of the Paiutes. Where the lot falls when the campodie chooses a medicine-man there it rests. It is an honor a man seldom seeks but must wear, an honor with a condition. When three patients die under his ministrations, the medicine-man must yield his life and his office. Wounds do not count; broken bones and bullet holes the Indian can understand, but measles, pneumonia, and smallpox are witchcraft.

It is possible the tale of Winnenap's patients had not been strictly kept. There had not been a medicine-man killed in the valley for twelve years, and for that the perpetrators had been severely punished by the whites. The winter of the Big Snow an epidemic of pneumonia carried off the Indians with scarcely a warning; from the lake northward to the lava flats they died in the sweat-houses, and under the hands of the medicine-men. Even the drugs of the white physician had no power.

Mary Hunter Austin, 1903

Heebe-tee-tse, Shoshone Indian, date unknown



Courtesy of the Library of Congress

This was a suggestive introduction of the whites to the natives of Nevada; one that gives the chief actor a distinction over which it requires, upon our part, a great effort to become enthusiastic.

The following year Captain B. L. E. Bonneville started an expedition of forty men under Joseph Walker, from the Green River Valley, to explore and trap the country west from Salt Lake to the Pacific Ocean. The company made its way slowly down the Humboldt, trapping as it went, until the curiosity of the natives had gradually overcome their fears of the whites. From day to day their numbers increased in the vicinity of, but at what they considered, a safe distance from, the camp and line of the strangers' advance. At night the more daring would occasionally steal into camp and carry off some trifling article that seemed to them a treasure of priceless value.

Their petty larceny proclivities, combined with their constantly increasing numbers, eventually aroused the suspicion of Walker, who claimed, as justification of what followed, to have feared a meditated attack.

Washington Irving, in his account of this expedition, says:

“At length, one day, they came to the banks of a stream emptying into Ogden's River (Humboldt), which they were obliged to ford. Here a great number of

Shoshones were posted on the opposite bank. Persuaded that they were there with hostile intent, they advanced upon them, leveled their rifles, and killed twenty-five of them upon the spot. The rest fled to a short distance, then halted and turned about, howling and whining like wolves and uttering the most piteous wailings. The trappers chased them in every direction; the poor wretches made no defense, but fled with terror; neither does it appear from the account of the boasted victors, that a weapon had been wielded or a weapon launched by the Indians throughout the affair. We feel perfectly convinced that the poor savages had no hostile intention, but had merely gathered together through motives of curiosity.”

After the departure of Walker’s party, there was no more slaughter of Indians for the ensuing seventeen years, although numerous expeditions passed through Nevada, culminating in 1849-50 in a tidal wave of whites from over the plains that passed down the western slope, a deluge upon the golden plains of California.

The passage of emigrants through the country, among whom were many that were reckless, and some who thought that the reputation of having killed an Indian would transform

One of the party related the circumstances as follows: “I was standing near some sage bushes when I heard a rustling among them, and going in the direction of the noise, saw an Indian creeping along, who, seeing that he was discovered, let fly an arrow that just grazed my ear. He then gave a whoop and ran, but tumbled down before he could draw another arrow from his quiver. One of the boys coming to my aid and having a hatchet in his hand, rushed forward and buried it in his skull, killing him instantly. The whoop of the now dead Indian brought the whole force, and a shower of arrows fell among us. I was the first to answer with a rifle shot which brought one of the foremost savages off his horse to the ground. In the meantime my companions were using their rifles to good effect. We were able to get behind a row of willows that afforded us some protection from the arrows of our assailants. After firing the second volley of rifle shots the smoke cleared away and I could see we had made more than one savage bite the dust. I had my eye on an old man who leaped from his pony and took in his arms one of his wounded companions who had been shot through the leg. Placing him on a horse, he mounted his own led the other and rode away. I could easily have shot him, but when I saw that, I could not find it in my heart to do so, but let the old chief carry off his wounded comrade in safety. As we emerged from our shelter, all that could be seen of them were five dead ones, weltering in their blood, bows and arrows and a few feathers and tomahawks lying on the ground.”

David Augustus Shaw, 1850



*Sego, Shoshone Indian,
date unknown*