

THE SHEEPEATER CAMPAIGN OF 1879

By Sheila D. Reddy

Frank Church-River of No Return Wilderness
U. S. Department of Agriculture, Forest Service
Regions 1 and 4
Heritage Program
August 1996

In 1877, the Nez Perce were defeated a few miles from freedom near the Canadian border. In 1878, Indian hostilities broke out again in southern Idaho during the Bannock War. As military troops closed in on tribes an unknown number of Indians took refuge with the Northern Shoshone Tukudika band in the rugged mountains of Central Idaho.

This last holdout band of Indians provided an opportunity for whites to blame the Tukudika, or Sheepeater Indians for every incident, murder, and every cow or horse missing or stolen. It was an idea pursued by the fearful and the unscrupulous, particularly those who recognized profits can be made in war.

When ranches were raided in Indian Valley in the summer of 1878, renegade Indians were blamed. Newspaper editor Aaron Parker wrote in August, 1878, "Dan Crooks and Boone Helm were killed in Round Valley, ... Presumably by Sheepeaters."

In the Spring of 1879 five Chinese miners were found dead on Loon Creek, a tributary of the Middle Fork of the Salmon River. The Northern Shoshone were again suspected although quiet rumors indicated white men dressed as Indians had committed the murders and stolen the Chinamen's gold.

As a result, military troops under Captain Bernard were dispatched from Boise Barracks on May 31, 1879, effectively beginning the Sheepeater Campaign, Idaho's last Indian war. As troops marched north to Challis an incident on the South Fork of the Salmon River changed Capt. Bernard's orders. Two ranchers had been found dead on the river.

Warren resident, Norman B. Willey sent the following report to the Idaho Statesman:

WARRENS, I.T., May 25, 1879

"EDITOR STATESMAN: ...On the South Fork of Salmon river, twelve miles south of Warrens, there lived an old resident of the county, named Hugh Johnson. He had a small ranch, raised vegetables, kept horses & etc. There are a few others living thereabouts, miners and farmers, but communication was not very frequent since high water commenced, his place being on the east side of the river. He was not seen for some time and the few who passed his house supposed he was away at work on an irrigation ditch. Finally, during the last week a few neighbors visited his house and found it in confusion, with no signs of having been occupied for a long time. A further search resulted in finding his dead body, and that of another man named Peter Dorsey, who was temporarily stopping with him, in the ravine near the river. They had been shot apparently while at work in the field by the house and carried or dragged away to avoid observation. They were not scalped or otherwise mutilated. It was evidently

the work of Indians, as their mocasin [sic] tracts were everywhere visible in and around the house and the ploughed [sic] field, and also on the trail by which they came and went. They took away three horses, also blankets, flour and provisions, and two good guns and several hundred cartridges. It was a small party--three or perhaps four. The ranch is situated at the mouth of a creek called Elk Creek. At its head, some twelve miles from the river, is a pass and an ancient trail leads across on to another large stream called Big Creek, which flows eastward, and is supposed to empty into the Middle Fork of the Salmon below Loon Creek. It is by this route that the marauders came and returned. The snow was, and is yet deep on the mountains, but this year it is unusually solid, and at that time men and even horses could pass over it without difficulty. Those who live on the South Fork in that vicinity have all moved into town, and night before last, and yesterday morning signal fires and smokes were reported to have been seen on the mountain on that side...No pack trains have yet arrived here and grub is scarce, and there is no feed for stock away from the immediate vicinity of the Salmon river, so that nothing by the way of pursuit can be attempted yet, but the knowledge that they have been and probably are still near us is rather disquieting. The deed was done between the 19th and 23rd. of April..."[signed] N.B. Willey (June 7, 1879 issue).

Henry Smith, son of Sylvester "Three-Fingered" Smith, has added the following regarding the killing:

"Concerning the Johnson Massacre, which brought on the Sheepeater War, Henry related that the two men, Johnson and Dorsey, had hired Indians to work for them, mistreated them and refused to pay them, with the result that the Indians became so enraged that they shot them..."(Elsensohn 1965).

In July, Lieut. Henry Catley with a detachment of 60 men and a pack train carrying supplies left Fort Howard (near Grangeville, Idaho) for a campaign against the Northern Shoshone Indians in the mountains of Central Idaho. He was later joined by Lieut. Farrow and his Umatilla scouts. Farrow's troops remained in the mountains late into the fall pursuing the Indians. Deep in the Salmon River country Farrow's men destroyed village sites and caches, leaving the Sheepeaters without winter supplies or shelter. As snow fell through the trees, the small band surrendered their homeland.

YOUR ROLE IN PROTECTING ARCHAEOLOGICAL SITES

Wilderness Archaeologists are currently working to preserve, protect and understand the prehistory of the ancient peoples who lived in the Frank Church-River of No Return Wilderness. As this prehistory is discovered and understood, they will share it with the public through educational monographs and other publications. You can help in this effort by leaving artifacts where they lie, and informing Forest Service Wilderness managers of your discovery. Take pride in our American heritage. Take nothing but photographs.