

The Paiute & Shoshone of Fort McDermitt, Nevada:

A Short History

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The Fort McDermitt Paiute-Shoshone reservation is located on highway 95 five miles south of the small town of McDermitt Nevada, which straddles the Nevada-Oregon border and is an unincorporated community for both states (Humboldt and Malheur counties respectively). McDermitt is located within the Great Basin, which is comprised of a series of depressions once covered by Lake Lahontan, and encompasses parts of Nevada, California, Oregon, Idaho, Utah, and Wyoming. The Quinn River, which winds through the arid landscape of the reservation, empties into a low point of the basin which forms the valley where McDermitt is located. United States census data from 2000 shows 269 people living in this “census designated place” (down thirty percent over ten years) with over 97 percent being Indian residents. The median income for Humboldt County is nearly ten percent higher than the national average, but the average in the McDermitt area sits at an abysmal fifty percent of the national average.

Pre-Contact History

Archaeological evidence shows that native peoples lived on the shores of prehistoric Lake Lahontan, though it is unclear where these ancient people came from. It is more than likely, however, that their descendants became the Paiute, Ute, and Shoshone Indians, that ranged the Great Basin, and make up three branches of the Uto-Aztecan language tree. These terms denote a similar culture and language rather than a specific political, genetic, or geographic entity. Paiute bands in what is now Oregon, Nevada, Utah, California, and Arizona, as well as Shoshone in Nevada, California, Utah, Idaho, Colorado, Montana, and Wyoming lived in a variety of climates and often had very diverse lifestyles. In the days before contact with Europeans, Great Basin Indians ate roots, seeds, fish, rodents, birds, waterfowl, and some larger animals like antelope,

deer, and mountain sheep. The climate was mild, but dry, and the landscape did not provide surpluses of food like the buffalo ridden plains. The valley of the Quinn River (once known as the Queen's River) was the location of a winter campsite utilized by nomadic Northern Paiutes and a few Western Shoshone even before Anglos came to the area. The McDermitt area was the traditional territory of the Atsa-Kudok-Wa band of Paiute, while to the south, where Winnemucca now lies, were the Sawa-Waktodo.

The Arrival and Militarism of the Anglo-Americans

The first white people seen by the Indians of Nevada were explorers and trappers who began to permeate the area early in the nineteenth century. John C. Frémont and his guide Kit Carson were the most famous of these early explorers, (it was Frémont who named Pyramid Lake after The Great Pyramid at Giza). Westward expansionism boomed with the discovery of gold at Sutter's Mill (California) in 1848 and silver at Virginia City (Nevada) in 1859. A steady stream of settlers, complete with pack mules and wagon trains, had begun moving west in pursuit of natural riches and fertile lands (the Oregon Trail passed just north of the Quinn River Valley). Nevada was made a territory in 1861 and gained statehood three years later. For the once nomadic Indians of the Great Basin who had lived off the frugal land, resources were scarce amongst a population swollen by settlers and draft animals.

In the nineteenth century many Indians in the West turned to raiding white settlements and travelers as a way to make ends meet. This was made possible for Paiutes only after the introduction of the horse, which was brought to the new world by the Spanish, and reached the Great Basin as early as 1850. Attacks on white settlements compelled the U.S. to establish a

military detachment, called the Quinn (or Queen) River Station, in order to protect a stagecoach line that ran between Winnemucca (Nevada) and Silver City (Idaho). At the time Lieutenant-Colonel Charles McDermit was in command of the Sub-District of Nevada, a part of the Department of the Pacific, and spent most of his time trying to maintain a tenuous peace between Indian and whites. In 1865 McDermit was killed in an ambush near the Quinn River Station, an attack generally attributed to Indians even though it was not documented. The murder of McDermit, and the continuation of unrest in the area, precipitated the detachment's escalation to a fully fledged installation. The new fort was dubbed McDermit(t) in honor of the late Lieutenant-Colonel. New towns and settlements began popping up all over Nevada as soon as the transcontinental railroad was completed in 1869. Tracks bisecting northern Nevada near the Quinn River offered a fast convenient alternative to the arduous overland journey between Mississippi and the West Coast. The railroad was a particular joy for McDermitt Indians who often received free passes from the Indian agent, though within a few years access to the railroad would be restricted by increasing costs and prejudice toward Indian passengers.

Fort McDermitt's intractable mission was to protect a growing white population from Indian raids and to curtail attacks of retaliation against the natives. The military settlement benefitted nearby Indian groups who had begun settling more permanently in the vicinity, by reportedly offering food, clothing, medical aid, and work, to the Indians, as well as facilities such as a trading post and stage line. The Indian population at Fort McDermitt at this time (1860s and 70s) has been estimated at between 100 and 350, but was in constant fluctuation as natives were forcibly moved between settlements and reservations, including Pyramid Lake (which was not recognized by the executive branch until 1874 but was utilized as a detainment center as early as

1866 by the Bureau of Indian Affairs). The mixed Paiute and Shoshone population at Fort McDermitt spiked in 1878 as natives sought protection during the Bannock War. In this brief struggle, Bannock (a Paiute band “the buffalo eaters”), northern Shoshone, and other northern Paiute, insubordinately left reservations in Idaho and Oregon to escape the famine caused by overcrowding and mismanagement by the Bureau of Indian Affairs (BIA). The Bannock War was one of the last displays of tribal militancy in protest of the reservation system, though recalcitrance in the face of the U.S. Army must have seemed futile even to the Indian insurgents. The “war” lasted only a few months yet embroiled a variety of reservation Indians. The conflict ended after much blood shed when 131 hostiles surrendered in Wyoming. With Northern Nevada finally pacified, Fort McDermitt was closed in 1886 and the military detachment reassigned. A caretaker was left in charge of the fort and the military reserve land, which was signed over to the Secretary of the Interior for Indian use, in the hope that a school would be built there to educate the local Indians.

The Federal Government and the Reservation System

Beginning in the 1870s a policy of assimilation shaped the BIA’s relationship with its Indian “wards.” The bureau hoped to undermine tribalism in favor of American agrarianism, a move that would threaten numerous native communities and lead to the impoverishment of a great many individuals. The infamous Dawes General Allotment Act (1887) was a key piece of legislation in this policy. It distributed tribal lands, which were previously held in trust by the federal government, to individual tribal members. Military reserve land at the old Fort McDermitt had previously been allocated for Indian purposes, with the hopes that a tribal school would be

established, but these lands were allotted under the Dawes Act in 1892. Some 4000 acres were divided into 89 allotments ranging from sixty to eighty acres each. These allotments were subsequently subdivided and resized in 1906 into 147 plots ranging from five to eighty acres. That same year a day school was finally opened that would remain active until the Humboldt County school in McDermitt was integrated in 1957. During this period Indian residents at Fort McDermitt were not members of a federally recognized tribe, had no sanctioned government, and held no communal land. The community received a modicum of supervision from the BIA, which included a teacher and agent in residence as well as assistance with food, housing, cattle, seeds, and medical aid.

In the 1930s federal Indian policy took a dramatic swing epitomized by the 1934 Wheeler-Howard Act, known as the Indian Reorganization Act. Under this legislation tribes had the ability to “reorganize” their tribal government along the lines of the American political system. This new era has been called Indian self-rule by political historian David Wilkins, though it would soon give way to the more enlightened era of self-determination. The mixed Indian community at Quinn River voted to incorporate the provisions of the IRA and formed the Fort McDermitt Paiute and Shoshone Tribe with the ratification of the tribal constitution and charter by the Secretary of the Interior in 1936. This new twist endowed the tribe with the corporate powers enjoyed by other government bodies and brought economic opportunities to the newly formed reservation; 32,000 new acres were purchased over four years and a cooperative tribal cattle association was also formed in 1940. Despite these economic progresses, the Great Depression of the 1930s reduced employment opportunities on the reservation, and some McDermitt Indians took positions with the Civilian Conservation Corps, or moved away, in order to make ends meet.

Twentieth century industry in the McDermitt area has been a blend of mining (gold, silver, and mercury), ranching, and farming yet has provided only sporadic employment to tribal members. The current town is comprised of a gas station/grocery store, a convenience store, two motels, a burger stand, one bar, and a casino. The public school and the Say When Casino are by far the two biggest buildings in McDermitt, which remains nestled amongst large tracts of farming and grazing land ringed on all sides by gentle mountains. The area's population has been in steady decline due to economic stagnation, though the discovery of high levels of gallium, a rare mineral used in high tech applications, may prove advantageous in the future. The tribe has struggled to offer economic opportunities to individual members, but has consistently provided basic services such as medical, housing, and utilities. The future of the tribe remains hopeful because of strong community support, though it remains to be seen what corporate possibilities will be available to tribal administrators.

Chief Winnemucca

Chief Winnemucca was a tribal leader at the time whites began infiltrating the Great Basin in larger numbers. Not much is written about the chief and it remains unclear how wide his authority held or what type of leader he was. An unconfirmed legend suggests that "Winnemucca" means "One Shoe," a name given to the chief when he began wearing a single army boot he had acquired. Despite the veracity of this story, the name Winnemucca was given to the Nevada town near Fort McDermitt, once a seasonal Paiute camp, and also passed to the chief's daughter.

Sarah Winnemucca

Sarah Winnemucca lived to see a large number of whites encroaching on the Paiute territory she had always known as home. These new interlopers were not merely passing through on their way to California, the Pacific Coast, or the Oregon Territory. They sought to establish new ranching and mining operations in Nevada itself. Sarah Winnemucca's book Life Among the Piutes documents circumstances before the white man appeared from across the plains, early interactions with white settlers (including massacres), and the rise of the prophet Wovoka. It has been heralded as a unique personal account of native life and provides a rare view of the history of white contact from an Indian perspective. Sarah Winnemucca was educated by a white soldier living in Carson City, and was one of the first Paiutes to learn how to read and write English. She was also among the first American women writers to be published and her book is still readily available today. A bronze statue of Sarah Winnemucca, located in the Hall of Columns, is one of Nevada's two contributions to the National Statuary Hall Collection in Washington D.C.. She was a spokesperson for reservation Indians in the late 1880s, and a great orator who gave numerous speeches in support of American Indians. Sarah was stricken down by tuberculosis in 1891 after a long life as activist, educator, and ambassador.

Here are some informative websites.

An article on the Project Paiute bilingual education program.

<<http://jaie.asu.edu/v17/V17S1pro.html>>

This site has pictures and history from McDermitt as well as other small towns in the area.

<<http://www.cowboycountry.org/mcdermitt.shtml>>

Wikipedia has articles on the town of McDermitt, Pyramid Lake, and Sarah Winnemucca,

<<http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/McDermitt>>

Here is a good map of Nevada Indian communities.

<<http://www.nevadadot.com/traveler/maps/StateMaps/pdfs/ReservationColonies.pdf>>

Here are some good books that expand on the information presented.

The only historical work, a graduate thesis, that deals directly with McDermitt.

Houghton, Ruth Edna Meserve. The Fort McDermitt Indian Reservation: Social Structure and the Distribution of Political and Economic Power.

An extensive and well written history of the nearby Pyramid Lake Reservation.

Knack, Martha C., and Omer C. Stewart. As Long as the River Shall Run: An Ethnohistory of Pyramid Lake Indian Reservation.

A biography of a Nevada Paiute.

Mack, Corbett. The Life of a Northern Paiute: As told by Michael Hittman.

Sarah Winnemucca's autobiographic book.

Winnemucca, Sarah. Life Among the Piutes: their wrongs and claims.

My "sourcebook" for Indian politics

Wilkins, David. American Indian Politics and the American Political System.