

The Paiute of Walker River, Nevada:

A Short History

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Walker Lake lies at the edge of the Great Basin, a series of depressions which is the decomposing skeleton of prehistoric Lake Lahontan, and nearly forty fossils of the sixty foot Ichthyosaur have been found in the exposed lake bed. Lakes like Walker and Pyramid are the last trapped remnants of water from this enormous lake which encompassed parts of Nevada, California, Oregon, Idaho, Utah, and Wyoming. Paiutes from the Walker River area retain a legend collected from the “Older People” of sea serpents living in Walker Lake and some people believe the lake is home to a Nessie-type creature that has been dubbed Cecil. The Lahontan Cutthroat Trout, the state fish of Nevada, and the Cui-ui, an endangered sucker fish from Pyramid Lake, are descended from the enormous fish that once inhabited Lake Lahontan. Most of the Great Basin was submerged during the last ice age but changing evaporation patterns, rather than precipitation changes, have caused the waters to recede, and the lake ceased to be recognizable around nine thousand years ago.

Pre-Contact History

Archaeological evidence proves that native peoples lived on the shores of Lake Lahontan, though it is unclear where these ancient people came from. Their descendants most likely did, however, become the Paiute, Ute, and Shoshone Indians of the Great Basin area. These terms do not refer to a specific political, genetic, or geographic entity, but rather a common grouping in the Uto-Aztecan linguistic group, signifying comparable culture and language. Similarly Paiute bands lived in a variety of climates and often had very diverse lifestyles in their range across what is now Oregon, Nevada, Utah, California, and Arizona. Paiutes inhabiting the hills around Walker River subsisted primarily on fish from the two great fisheries at Pyramid Lake (Cuy-yui Pah as it was

once known) and Walker Lake (Agai Pah or Trout Lake), supplemented by abundant antelope, deer, mountain sheep, rabbit, and water fowl. The area offers a varied landscape of slopes, valleys, meadows, lakes, rivers, swamps, and deserts each providing its own food products, including pine nuts, rice grass, seeds, and berries. Paiute hunters used a simple bow and arrow with a cane tip, and reserved valuable flint tips for larger game. The waterways and lakes of the Sierra Nevadas were essential to many Paiute bands, not simply for sustenance, but also for economy, transportation, and identity. Paiute bands can often be identified by their major food source. For instance the Koop Ticutta (meaning "ground-squirrel eaters") or the Toi Ticutta (meaning "tule eaters."). The importance of Walker Lake is evident by the names of the people who resided there: Agai Diccutta (Trout Eaters), and Pugwi Diccutta (Fish Eaters). The receding waters of old Lake Lahontan trapped a bounty of fish in Walker Lake that is today jeopardized by environmental deterioration and continually decreasing water levels.

The Arrival of Anglo-Americans and the Reservation System

The first white explorers to encounter native peoples in Western America were the Spanish who established missions, colonies, and settlements in the American Southwest and in California. It is doubtful, however, that the Spanish visited present day Nevada in the eighteenth century even though the area was claimed by the Spanish crown. Trappers and traders began infiltrating the Great Basin in the nineteenth century, primarily in pursuit of beaver. Jedediah Smith is presumed to be the first white man to set eyes on Walker Lake, though he was followed shortly by Peter Ogden and Joseph Walker. Walker first traversed the area in 1833 by following the Humboldt River, his party of forty men often had hostile encounters with local Indians and

recorded killing several Paiutes in retaliation for the theft of beaver traps. Subsequent expeditions brought wagon trains past Walker Lake, over Walker Pass, and into what was now called Nevada. Captain John Charles Fremont led a government exploration in 1844 and named Walker Lake, Pass, and River, as well as Pyramid Lake, which reminded him of the Great Pyramid at Giza. One of the earliest American female writers published was a Paiute woman named Sarah Winnemucca, who documented some of these early encounters in her autobiography Life Among the Piutes,

By the mid nineteenth century white settlers had thoroughly permeated much of the American West and were beginning to formalize their control over the land. In 1859 the discovery of the Comstock Silver Lode (named for miner Henry Comstock) in what was then Utah Territory, and is now Virginia City (Nevada), brought a deluge of interlopers into contact with the Paiute and Washo populations of the Great Basin. The Walker River Reservation, along with Pyramid Lake, was first proposed in this same year to be a refuge for the natives. The population of Nevada, which became a territory in 1861 and a state in 1864, increased drastically due to the influx of miners, farmers, and ranchers, and forced native inhabitants to compete for natural resources. Somewhere between 500 and 600 Indians lived on the Walker River reservation in 1865, though during fishing season this number could quickly swell to 2000. The Paiutes continued to live in their traditional manner, utilizing the resources of the reservation to support their lifestyle of hunting, fishing, and gathering.

Assimilation and Modernization

Beginning in the 1870s the Federal Government, in the form of the Bureau of Indian Affairs (BIA), began to take a more active role on the reservations of western Nevada. The Indian population at Walker River, reduced by disease, persecution, and loss of resources, still maintained a distinct culture that was not seen as beneficial to the nation. The BIA pursued a national policy of cultural assimilation by recasting Indians, like those at Walker River, as agrarian farmers rather than hunter-gatherers. Education was a key component to this plan and schools were built at Walker River and Pyramid Lake in the 1880s to serve nearby reservation Indians. Many Indian children were kidnaped and sent to boarding schools, often far from home, where they were taught the white man's way and simultaneously stripped of their Indian heritage. Paiutes from Walker River were sent primarily to two boarding schools, the one at Pyramid Lake, which they often ran away from, and the larger Stewart Indian School in Carson City.

Assimilation policies continued to dominate Indian affairs, but took a new twist, with the introduction of the Dawes General Allotment Act (1887), which allowed reservation lands to be distributed amongst individual tribal members. Through this act the U.S. hoped to destroy tribalism and further integrate Indians into the general population. At Walker River allotment came in 1902 when the reservation was broken into twenty acre parcels for each member. The remaining lands were opened for public settlement and mining operations four years later. Allotment consolidated the Walker River Paiutes to the current reservation where an Indian Agency was created in 1909. Nearly 268,000 acres were removed from tribal control and the reservation shrank to 50,000 acres. Throughout the early twentieth century Walker River Paiutes struggled to become the farmers America wanted them to be. Irrigating the reservation land was

difficult work and BIA support was intermittent. Some tribal members went to work for the railroad while others left for California or Nevada cities. A few individuals from Walker River even volunteered for the Army and participated in World War I. Land was gradually added to the reservation, both by act of congress and executive order, and the current boundaries are nearly concurrent with the original 300,000 acre reservation created by President Grant in 1874.

The Walker River Paiute Tribe remains committed to protecting cultural heritage and maintaining tribal sovereignty. The modern tribal government operates both tribal and civil courts, a tribal health clinic, an environmental department, and a unique Tribal Employment Rights office that works to ensure “that Indian Preference in contracting and subcontracting is practiced” on and near the reservation. Future plans include an improved cultural department, infrastructural improvements (Weber Dam tops the BIA’s list of High Hazard Dams), and the continued removal of unexploded Navy ordinance. Walker River has been home to Paiute Indians since time immemorial and the tribal office seems poised to face any challenges that will threaten the people again.

Wodziwob

Wodziwob, also known as Fish Lake Joe, was a Paiute raised near Walker Lake. Though not a native doctor or Shaman, he became a spiritual leader in the late 1860s after demonstrating ascendancy over the weather, prophesying the arrival of the transcontinental railroad at Promontory Point, and predicting the return of the dead. This last feat he accomplished by entering a trance like state and visiting the Land of the Dead located to the South. Wodziwob preached that men, women, and children, should dance as a form of spiritual activity, worship, and celebration, but also as a gateway to heightened enlightenment. The Ghost Dance movement, as it became known, sought to bring about a radical change in the natural and cultural world of Native Americans. A transformation that would give Indian people the power to combat the problems facing them, primarily the reservation system. This new world would be free from Whites and the havoc they had wrecked on the land. Wodziwob and his followers believed that through dancing they could return the dead to the land of the living, a manipulation of the traditional Paiute cosmology, and redeem the material world within their lifetime.

The Ghost Dance movement was the result of harsh conditions forced on Indian tribes. The end of the Civil War in 1865 allowed the U.S. Army to focus on the ever problematic reservation Indians. The reservation system that confined most tribes offered few natural resources, destroyed tribal kinships, and set boundaries on what were often migratory people. Federal efforts to ease the strain of reservation life (an obligation generally secured during the treaty process) were largely inefficient, and starvation, loss of political self rule, and cultural eradication (a form of genocide) resulted in the rise of new spiritual traditions like the Ghost Dance and the Indian Shaker Church, both of which are still practiced today, though on a limited

scale. The hopeful message of the Ghost Dance spread to other tribal groups of the Great Basin in the late 1860s, including Shoshone and Bannocks as far as southern Idaho. By the 1870s, however, the movement was beginning to lose steam, the Ghost Dance was now over ten years old and no great change had been forthcoming. Despite the energetic dancing of people from many tribes, reservation conditions had continued to deteriorate, Whites were still in power, and a U.S. monopoly over Indian policy was virtually complete. Wodziwob's transformative Ghost Dance movement fizzled out as its followers became disillusioned by the realities of reservation life and lost faith in the Ghost Dance's ability to consummate a radical improvement.

Wovoka

The second coming of the Ghost Dance was heralded by another Paiute prophet from the vicinity of Walker Lake, this one by the name of Wovoka. Wovoka's father Tavivo was an ardent follower of the first Ghost Dance as well as a local shaman, and it is generally assumed that Wovoka participated in Wodziwob's Ghost Dance when he was young. Wovoka was raised by a Christian family, and also went by the name Jack Wilson, his teachings encouraged living in congruence with Whites and contained elements of the Wilsons' Christianity. Wovoka began preaching in the late 1880s, less than twenty years after Wodziwob's movement lost momentum, though the context and conclusion of this second Ghost Dance would be remarkably different. Wovoka's Ghost Dance contained a significantly altered message from that of Wodziwob, though the two movements were generally interpreted by the people as the same. Wovoka was overwhelmingly pacifistic and taught tenements such as self help through hard work, improvement of the community through personal ethics, and utilization of a positive attitude for the benefit of

everyone. A long term goal of reuniting with deceased loved ones continued to be a point of emphasis, but unlike Wodziwob, Wovoka believed this was not eminent and that it would happen in another world.

Wovoka traveled throughout Nevada, California, and Oregon, often aboard the railroad, preaching his pacifist message and encouraging reservation Indians to begin a life of spiritual harmony and ritual dance. Tribal messengers and spiritual leaders came from as far as the plains to hear Wovoka preach and return with the message for their own people. The Lakota Sioux of South Dakota embraced the tradition, and incorporated the use of Ghost Dance shirts, which were supposed to offer invulnerability from the white man's bullets. The U.S. Army had previously outlawed the Lakota Sun Dance and was easily convinced that the Ghost Dance was a dangerous new movement spurring the tribe towards military action. On December 29, 1890 tempers flared while the Seventh Cavalry was attempting to disarm Big Foot's band of Miniconjou and Hunkpapa Lakota from the Cheyenne River reservation. A brief melee ensued which promptly turned into a massacre as the Army fired their Hotchkiss guns (lightweight artillery) into the fleeing natives. Nearly three hundred Indians were slaughtered and left to freeze in the subarctic temperatures in a tragedy remembered as the Wounded Knee Massacre. It's tragically ironic that such a hopeful message of peace resulted in the murder of so many people.

Here are some informative websites.

The official website of the Walker River Paiute Tribe.

<<http://www.wrpt.us/index.htm>>

The National Park Service website for the Stewart Indian School Historic Place.

<<http://www.nps.gov/nr/travel/nevada/ste.htm>>

Here is a good map of Nevada Indian communities.

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

Wikipedia has articles on Walker Lake, Pyramid Lake, and Wovoka.

<http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Walker_Lake_%28Nevada%29>

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

A scholarly history of the Walker River Paiutes from pre-contact to the current age.

Johnson, Edward C. Walker River Paiutes: A Tribal History.

Sarah Winnemucca's autobiographic book.

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

An explorative history of Indian boarding schools.

Churchill, Ward. Kill the Indian, Save the Man.

A chronicle of the destruction of plains tribes, culminating with the massacre at Wounded Knee.

Brown, Dee. Bury My Heart at Wounded Knee.

The autobiography of a famous Oglala who survived the Little Big Horn and Wounded Knee.

Neihardt, John G.. Black Elk Speaks.

My "sourcebook" for Indian politics.

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