The Shoshone Indians, also known as the Snake Nation, occupied areas both east and west of the Rocky Mountains. Unlike the bands west of the Rockies, which lived in roofless grass huts and hunted fish, birds and rabbits, the Shoshones in the east and north lived in tepees and hunted buffalo.

Among the buffalo hunters were the Lemhi Shoshones, who had once lived on the plains of what is now Montana. The Lemhi band had superb horsemen and brave warriors but had grown poor and hungry of late. Their musket-bearing enemies - the Blackfeet, Atsinas and Hidatsas - had driven the band from the rich buffalo plains into the mountains.

The band’s attempts to return to the plains and hunt buffalo put them at risk for attacks like the one in the spring of 1805, when the Atsinas killed or captured many Shoshone men, stole their horses and destroyed most of their tepees.

Their enemies had acquired muskets from Canadian fur traders, but the Shoshones traded with the Spanish, who had refused to give them firearms. The Lemhi Shoshones sought such weapons to protect themselves and to hunt.

Because of the great losses they had suffered, the Shoshone men and women had cut their hair at the neck in a show of mourning. But Meriwether Lewis later noted, “Notwithstanding their extreem poverty they are not only cheerful but even gay, fond of gaudy dress and amusements...”

TAKEN FROM THE JOURNALS OF LEWIS AND CLARK

In August 1805, the Lemhi Shoshones were living in the mountains, sustained only by roots, berries and, infrequently, fish and small game. They were preparing for another buffalo-hunting venture to the plains.

On August 13, some Shoshone women gathering food a few miles from their village saw four strangers drawing near. It was Lewis and three of his men.

Fearful at first, the women saw that the men were friendly after Lewis laid down his gun, gave them trinkets and painted their faces with vermilion, a symbol of peace. The women convinced an arriving war party of 60 Shoshones that the strangers were friendly, and Lewis confirmed this with more gifts for the warriors, including an American flag. The principle chief, named Cameahwait (One Who Never Walks) welcomed Lewis and his men, and from that point the Shoshones treated them as guests, sharing what food the Indians had and providing the men with a tepee for their stay.

Lewis and his men were the first white people the Shoshones had ever seen.

At camp, Cameahwait described to Lewis the impassable rivers and shores ahead, confirming that no all-water route could take the Corps through to the Pacific Ocean. They would have to traverse the daunting Bitterroot Mountains to continue the expedition.

Horses would be crucial for such a mountainous trek, and the Corps hoped to acquire some from the Shoshones’ impressive herd of about 700. In the days before Lewis had met the Indians, he had written, “If we do not find [the Shoshones], I fear the successful issue of our voyage will be very doubtful.”

Cameahwait and a group of warriors traveled with Lewis to join Clark’s camp and negotiate for horses.

Communicating via a translation chain, the Shoshones and the captains had begun negotiating when a great coincidence occurred: Sacagawea, who was raised as a Shoshone but had been kidnapped years earlier by Hidatsas, recognized Cameahwait as her brother. After an emotional reunion, the negotiations proceeded and Cameahwait agreed to sell the Corps the horses they needed.

The Shoshones were most concerned about securing guns in return. Lewis wrote that Cameahwait told him, “If we had guns, we could live in the country of the buffaloe and eat as our enimies do, and not be compelled to hide ourselves in these mountains and live on roots and berries as the bear do.”

Lewis pledged that upon the Corps’ return to the East, “whitemen would come to them with a number of guns and every other article necessary to their defence and comfort.”

TAKEN FROM THE JOURNALS OF LEWIS AND CLARK

Shoshone Tribe

How do you pronounce the word "Shoshone"? What does it mean? Should it be spelled 'Shoshone' or 'Shoshoni'?

Shoshone is pronounced show-SHOW-nee. Nobody knows where this word came from or what it meant. Probably it was an English corruption of a name for their tribe in a different Indian language. In their own language, the Shoshones call themselves Newe (pronounced nuh-wuh) which means "people." Some bands prefer the spelling 'Shoshoni,' and others prefer 'Shoshone.' Either spelling is fine to use.

Where do the Shoshones live?

The Shoshone Indians were far-ranging people. Different bands of Shoshoni Indians lived in what is now Idaho, Nevada, Wyoming, Montana, Utah, and even parts of California. Most Shoshone people still live in these areas today.

How is the Shoshone Indian nation organized?

There are nine different Shoshone tribes today. Each Shoshone tribe lives on its own reservation, which is land that belongs to them and is under their control. Each Shoshone tribe has its own government, laws, police, and services, just like a small country. However, the Shoshones are also US citizens and must obey American law. In the past, each Shoshone band was ruled by a chief, who was usually were chosen by a tribal council. Today, most Shoshone tribes are led by a chairman and council members elected by all the people.

What language do the Shoshones speak?

Most Shoshone people speak English today. More than a thousand Shoshones also speak their native Shoshone language. If you'd like to know a few easy Shoshone words, "behne" (pronounced similar to buh-nuh) is a friendly greeting, and "aishen" (pronounced similar to eh-shun) means "thank you." You can also read a Shoshone picture glossary here. These words come from a dialect of Shoshone spoken in Idaho. Some Shoshone words are different among Nevada Shoshones, just like English sounds different when spoken by British and American people.

What was Shoshone culture like in the past? What is it like now?

There are some cultural differences between the Eastern Shoshone people, the Western Shoshone people, and the Northern Shoshone people. In particular, the Eastern Shoshones adopted more elements of Plains Indian culture. Here are links to the homepage of the Eastern Shoshone tribe, the Te-Moak Tribe of Western Shoshone, and the Shoshone-Bannock tribe (Northern Shoshones.) On their sites you can find information about the Shoshone people in the past and today.

TAKEN FROM BIGORRIN.COM

Shoshone, also spelled Shoshoni; also called Snake, North American Indian group that occupied the territory from what is now southeastern California across central and eastern Nevada and northwestern Utah into southern Idaho and western Wyoming. The Shoshone of historic times were organized into four groups: Western, or unmounted, Shoshone, centred in Nevada; Northern, or horse, Shoshone of northern Utah and Idaho; Wind River Shoshone in western Wyoming; and Comanche in western Texas, a comparatively recent offshoot of the Wind River group. The Shoshone language is a Central Numic language of the Uto-Aztecan family. Shoshone dialects were so similar that speakers from the extreme ends of Shoshone territory were mutually intelligible.

The Western Shoshone were organized into loosely affiliated family bands that subsisted on wild plants, small mammals, fish, and insects. Each family was independently nomadic during most of the year and joined other families only briefly for activities such as rabbit drives, antelope hunts, or dancing; like other Great Basin Indians, they were sometimes referred to by the derogatory name Diggers, taken from their practice of digging tubers and roots for food. A few Western Shoshone obtained horses after the colonial settlement of Nevada and Utah.

The Wind River Shoshone and Northern Shoshone probably acquired horses as early as 1680, before Spanish occupation of their lands. They formed loosely organized bands of mounted buffalo hunters and warriors and adopted many Plains Indian cultural traits such as the use of tepees and the importance of counting coup (striking or touching an enemy in warfare in a prescribed way) as a war honour. Sacagawea, the Shoshone woman who acted as interpreter and guide for the Lewis and Clark expedition of 1804–06, is thought to have been a member of either the Wind River or the Northern group.

After acquiring horses, the Comanche split off from the Wind River Shoshone and moved south into Texas. Comanche bands were feared by the Spaniards of the Southwest because they subsisted as much by plunder as by buffalo hunting.

Early 21st-century population estimates indicated some 41,000 descendants of the four Shoshone groups.

TAKEN FROM ENCYCLOPEDIA BRITTAINICA

The same tragic story.

The Bear River Massacre, like the Walker War and so many other tragic conflicts, resulted from tensions between new settlers and the original occupants of the land they settled on.

The Mormons had begun moving into Cache Valley in 1860. But the Northwestern Shoshone had used that valley for generations, gathering and hunting food there. In a very short time, the settlers’ farming and livestock crowded out the traditional Shoshone food sources.

Desperate and nearly starving, some individuals begged for food. Others raided the new farms and stole cattle. Some attacked emigrants on the Oregon Trail. In return, white settlers killed some Shoshone.

Troops are called. Innocents die.

After several incidents of violence, Colonel Patrick Edward Connor was called in to resolve the situation, along with 200 California Volunteers. They chose to attack the Shoshone winter quarters, located at the junction of Bear River and Beaver.

The Shoshone were ready for them, and had posted men around the camp to defend it. After an initial attempt to charge the camp straight on resulted in casualties for Connor’s men, they surrounded the village and began shooting.

Two hours after the fight started, the Shoshone had run out of ammunition for their guns. Connor and his men continued shooting until they had killed most of the men. Afterwards, soldiers went through the camp, raping and killing the women that survived as well as the children. They burned the homes, took wheat and horses, and left.

The number of Shoshone killed is uncertain. It was probably at least 250—more than any other of the Indian massacres in the American West.

TAKEN FROM ILOVEHISTORY.GOV