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LEMHI SHOSHONI CULTURAL ANTECEDENTS

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When Indian people moved into the Snake River Plains some 14,000 years or more ago, they found the climate quite different from that today. In the valley of the Lemhi--an important Shoshoni base when Lewis and Clark explored the region at the beginning of the nineteenth century--timber covered lands that now have become largely desert. Farther east and north, the most recent of the continental ice sheets gradually was receding as the climate slowly warmed up. To the south, large inland lakes (especially Lake Bonneville, which still covered much of Utah) filled vast tracts on the Great Basin. Then, as the climate changed, some of the Indians kept on moving about, so that they could continue to occupy a country suited to their way of life. Others got by without leaving the region. Substantial differences in elevation gave them a considerable choice of climate without having to move very far. And through gradual adaptation as the climate changed, some Indians managed to adjust so that they could survive under new conditions that confronted them. Around 10,000 years ago, the great ice sheet had melted a long distance back from their land. Then a much warmer era set in about 8,000 years ago. People who stayed in the Lemhi country faced a hotter and drier climate than exists there today. Around 4,500 years ago, another cold, wet sequence began to emerge. Finally a more recent warming trend eventually produced the climate that has characterized the land for little more than the past century. By that time, the Indians still were leading a nomadic life. But--as had been the case for well over a hundred centuries--they remained pretty well adapted to their environment.

Even in the colder age more than 10,000 years ago, the Lemhi people had interesting cultural traits to their credit. They had two breeds of domesticated dogs--and the presence of more than one kind suggests that the Lemhi had been in the dog raising business for a long time. (In fact, bones of these early varieties of Lemhi domestic dogs--found in Jaquar Cave high on the Idaho side of the Continental Divide--have substantial archaeological interest as the oldest dated evidence for domestic dogs yet identified. Evidence of domestic dogs found in England and in Turkey, dating back fairly close to the time of the Jaquar Cave dogs, indicate a wide canine distribution by 8,000 to 9,000

years ago.) In an era prior to horse transportation, dogs eventually were used to help pack equipment and supplies during the annual migratory cycle. The Lemhi certainly had an opportunity to profit from their early association with domestic dogs, although the origins of this significant cultural phase remain obscure.

Cultural periods associated with changes in climate, and consequent changes in hunting patterns, have been identified archaeologically in the land that eventually produced the Lemhi band. Following a really big game hunting era when people of the adjacent Upper Snake River Plain dined on local elephants and other interesting animals now long extinct, a long period of more diversified subsistence emerged around 8,000 years ago. These inhabitants retained a hunting economy (identified in archaeological literature as the Bitterroot culture), but spent more of their time in pursuit of buffalo at lower elevations and mountain sheep in higher country. In contrast with the earlier era, the Lemhi region had a greater concentration of population and activity. This development was associated with a gradual increase in buffalo herds in the area. Persisting over a long period of time, Bitterroot culture--the beginning of four cultural sequences following the earliest Birch Creek phase in that part of the country--continued from about 5200 to 1450 B.C.

The remaining phases spanned much shorter periods. Beaverhead culture lasted from about 1450 to 950 B.C. Blue Dome culture endured substantially longer, from around 950 B.C. to 1250 A.D. Finally Lemhi culture--identified more closely with the Lemhi Shoshoni--appeared around 1250 (only about two-and-a-half centuries prior to Columbus) and continued for 600 years until about 1850. The same kinds of stone implements and hunting equipment characterized all four phases, but proportions of the different kinds of artifacts found in each phase vary during the past eight thousand years. All of these phases represent part of a cultural continuity in which archaeological antecedents of the Lemhi Shoshoni may be traced back over a long period of time.