

Snakes and Diggers

The Origins of Newe Ethnic Identities

During these years, the few whites then in that region called the more miserable bands Diggers, or Shoshonees. . . . Their condition is much poorer, having no horses. . . . another division of the Snakes. . . . [The] Bonacks [are] better supplied with all the means of Indian independence; horses, lodges, guns, knives, and form bands annually to hunt in the buffalo country.

Nathaniel J. Wyeth, 1848

By the time the Ghost Dance movements of the late nineteenth century reached the Fort Hall Reservation in southeastern Idaho, government officials and the local white population agreed that the reservation was the home of two discrete peoples, whom they labeled Shoshones and Bannocks. These same observers ascribed particular attitudes and behaviors to these ethnic identities, perhaps best illustrated by the “progressive” Joe Wheeler and the “nonprogressive” Jim Ballard. But these ethnic identities were not age-old, fixed, or permanent. Rather, they were the result of a historic process of social and economic differentiation beginning at the opening of the eighteenth century and stretching into the reservation era and beyond. The first stages of this process took place at time when the Newe peoples, who became the Shoshones and Bannocks, enjoyed relative autonomy. In the 1600s, Newe peoples probably possessed a fairly uniform social structure and economy, tied together by an intricate web of kinship. Into this world came horses, guns, and lethal new diseases. Newe peoples incorporated or survived these Euro-American agents of change, all the while modifying their culture to exploit fresh opportunities and temper new restrictions.

Not all Newe groups responded in the same way. Horse ownership, for instance, divided the Newes into mounted and foot-going groups,

drew Paiute-speaking people east, and led to the formation of bilingual “mixed bands.” When the first white men set eyes on what is today Idaho, the process was already well under way. Early historic observers rarely recognized subtle cultural differences, but they did crudely note this most obvious feature of native life. In these early accounts the mounted groups were often called Snakes, whereas their foot-going counterparts were derisively known as Diggers.¹ It was the development of bands, which sprang from these socioeconomic distinctions, that by the reservation era provided the basis for Shoshone and Bannock ethnic identities.

Before there were Snakes, Diggers, Shoshones, or Bannocks, there were Newes. All of the Indian peoples who lived in southern Idaho at the time of white contact spoke a dialect of either or both Shoshone and Paiute, two closely related languages. Shoshone is a Central Numic tongue of the larger Uto-Aztecan linguistic stock. It is a widely dispersed language, its various dialects understood by Shoshonean peoples from Nevada to Wyoming and by the Comanches of the southern Plains. Paiute is a Western Numic language, and Bannock is a Northern Paiute dialect. It is intelligible by Paiute speakers from Fort Hall to the Mono Basin of California. Although mutually unintelligible, Paiute and Shoshone are very similar languages. A fluid social order and constant interaction between groups led to a great deal of lexical borrowing and bilingualism and prevented the emergence of deep dialectical differences. *Bannock* is an anglicization of *panákwate*, their name for themselves. *Shoshone* originates in the Shoshone word *sosoni*, a type of grass that was used to build conical dwellings. Some Plains groups referred to the Shoshones as “grass house people,” and in 1805 William Clark reported, “This nation Call themselves *Cho-shon-nê*.” More accurately, they identified themselves that way to outsiders. Among themselves, the various Paiute, Bannock, and Shoshone speakers called themselves Numu, Neme, or Newe, meaning simply “the people.”²

The starting point for any study of Newe social identities must be the protohistoric period, the era before direct Euro-American contact in which historical trends can be traced. There are, of course, models for understanding the earlier prehistory of the Great Basin, but all are subjects of intense debate. The most influential, and controversial, of these paradigms comes from linguistics. Proceeding from the theory that linguistic diversity is a function of time, the “Numic spread” theory posits that the area of the basin with the greatest dialectical diversity and the smallest language territories—the southwest corner of the Great Basin,

near Death Valley—was the site from which a late and fairly rapid expansion of Numic-speaking peoples across the Great Basin and onto the Plains began. The large, fan-shaped area that Numic languages cover, with few dialectical differences, is used as evidence for this great population movement.³ Before the Numic spread theory gained ascendancy, most archaeologists argued for a long period of cultural continuity, perhaps ten thousand years, in the Great Basin as a whole. More recent evidence from southern Idaho, however, has been interpreted to support the theory that Newe peoples did not occupy the area until the fifteenth century.⁴ Regardless of archaeological or linguistic evidence, a clear understanding of prehistoric Newe social organization is essentially unrecoverable. The important, and established, fact is that the ancestors of the modern Shoshone-Bannock people lived in what is today southern Idaho at the opening of the protohistoric period.

There is no indication that the tribal or ethnic identities visible by the second half of the nineteenth century existed during the protohistoric era. The weight of ethnographic evidence suggests rather that the essential building block of pre-horse Newe society was the small “family cluster” or “kin clique”—several nuclear families that maintained close and consistent contact.⁵ This view emerged most clearly from the work of Julian H. Steward and has often been overstated, misunderstood, and misused. Steward spent but six months doing his initial research among Basin peoples. Like many other ethnologists of his day, Steward viewed the Great Basin as a human laboratory in which to study the most “primitive” of peoples, hunter-gatherers. He asserted that the rigors of life in a harsh environment dictated a given people’s social organization, and that Paiute and Shoshone speakers traveled in these small kin-based groups in order to exploit scarce resources. Band organization was nonexistent. Groups held a consensus right to the land, but because of the unpredictability of food resources and the fluid nature of the social order, these territories were not exclusive. Leadership was likewise rudimentary. The closest thing to chiefs or headmen were “talkers,” men who kept track of the available foodstuffs and organized cooperative ventures. Families and individuals often switched groups in their never-ending search for sustenance. Steward characterized the hand-to-mouth life ways of basin peoples as a “gastric culture.”⁶

Steward’s analysis is fraught with problems and must be assessed with the utmost caution. Its most glaring flaw is his reliance on a crude environmental determinism that resulted in overstated generalizations and an underestimation of historical factors. For instance, Steward privileged the

seed-gathering complex found in the more arid regions of the basin at the time of his research over all other subsistence strategies. Consequently, his simple “gastric culture” best describes some of the Shoshones and Paiutes of northern Nevada at only one moment in their history; it fails to capture the great diversity of subsistence practices and social organization evident among Newe groups at other places and times. The salmon-fishing populations along the Snake and Lemhi rivers, and especially the mounted buffalo hunters of the protohistoric and historic periods, do not fit neatly into Steward’s model. Steward himself recognized this problem.⁷ Moreover, there are questions concerning just how aboriginal a social order based on these small family groups actually was. Archaeological evidence suggests the presence of large, concentrated populations along the Humboldt River before the nineteenth century. Yet this is the very area where Steward developed his model and where it fits best. It is quite likely that historical factors, specifically the development of a trading and raiding route along the Humboldt after 1800, made that life-giving oasis a very dangerous place to live. Local groups probably withdrew from the river and traveled in small groups not only to exploit scattered resources but also to avoid roving “predatory bands” and stay alive.⁸ Thus, if the family-cluster concept is to hold any analytical power, it is critically important to conceive of these groups not as ahistorical social isolates but rather as the building blocks of larger, nonpermanent social formations.

The key to understanding the development of Shoshone and Bannock ethnicity is kinship. Newe society was marked by intermarriage, bilingualism, and the easy transfer of families and individuals between groups. Descent was figured bilaterally: that is, just as in modern Euro-American culture, both sides of one’s family are considered kin. Bilateral kinship allows individuals to activate a broad range of kinship ties at various times in their lives. Residence was initially matrilocal (with the wife’s parents), but after the birth of the first child the couple felt free to live with other relatives. Fred Eggan has argued that marriage patterns elevated the “sibling group” to a central role in the social structure, a contention confirmed by Sven Liljeblad’s research on family political leadership among the Bannocks.⁹ Interaction between family clusters was extensive but informal, and there was no guarantee that the same people would travel, live together, or follow the same leader from year to year. The most stable units larger than the family cluster were winter camps. Established at attractive sites (sheltered, with wood, water, and forage), winter camps were used habitually, but it is impossible to determine from

the historic or archaeological record whether the same families camped together each winter. Modern informants claim that families and individuals often wintered in different camps. Between the family cluster and the larger linguistic community, then, there were no *permanent* social institutions, and ethnic identities did not yet hold the saliency that they would gain by the reservation era.¹⁰ Still, the groups with the strongest kinship ties gravitated toward each other as social and economic factors gave greater meaning to ethnic distinctions. Sibling bonds probably formed the basis for many family clusters and, by extension, the larger social groups that emerged later. In other words, the band and ethnic identities of the nineteenth century sprang from preexisting kin networks.

The social identities beyond family groups that existed among Newe peoples during the protohistoric era reflected the fluid nature of the pre-contact Newe world. Family clusters that habitually lived and traveled in close proximity and gathered together at various times for subsistence and ceremonial or defensive purposes often identified themselves and other Newe groups by the most important food source taken in an area. These “food names,” however, did not represent discrete bands with a fixed membership or territorial range. Nor did they translate into fixed ethnic identities. For instance, *agai'-deka'*, or “salmon eaters,” could refer to either Newes in the Lemhi Valley or those over two hundred miles away on the middle and lower Snake River. Moreover, many of the Lemhi Valley *agai'-deka'* also went “to buffalo,” at which times they were *guchundeka'*, “buffalo eaters.” (*Guchundeka'* also referred to the Eastern Shoshones of the Wyoming Plains.) Some group names referred to environmental adaptations. *Duku-deka'*, literally translated as “meat eaters,” or more commonly “sheep eaters,” was the name applied to the small Newe groups who lived and hunted at high elevations from the Wind River Range and Yellowstone Plateau of Wyoming all the way west to the Blue Mountains of Oregon. Many of the Lemhi Valley *agai'-deka'* were known as *duku-deka'* when they left the fisheries and returned to the mountains. Group names could also be geographic: the Newes who wintered on the upper Snake River in the vicinity of Fort Hall were known as *bohogoi'*, “people of the sagebrush butte,” in reference to Ferry Butte, the prominent point visible in the northwest portion of the modern Fort Hall Reservation. A person's identity could remain fairly stable, but there was nothing to preclude the transfer of residence from one group to another.¹¹

Nor did these social formations claim territorial rights exclusive of

other Newe peoples. In the Western Shoshone dialect, the verb *nemi* means both “to live” and “to travel.” Quite literally, to live was to travel across a large territory utilizing a wide range of resources. Yet, although a given group could range hundreds of miles each year, it also occupied a traditional “native land” (*tebíwa* in Bannock, *debia’* in the Northern Shoshone dialect). Here the group usually wintered and had uncontested access to resources. Rights to the *tebíwa* were not exclusive, but, out of respect, visitors from other Newe peoples always asked permission to join a people in the use of their native land.¹² Territorially as well as socially, then, the Newe world was a fluid and intricate network of kinship ties and extensive intergroup migration, and it cannot be assumed that the food-name groups constituted true bands, let alone tribal or ethnic identities.

Into this world of foot-going groups came the most important agent of social and economic differentiation in the protohistoric period: horses. Adopting an equestrian lifestyle, or dealing with peoples who had, revolutionized the lives of most of the tribes of the North American West. The Spanish settlements of New Mexico were the earliest source of horses for the intermountain and Plains peoples. By the 1640s Navajo, Apache, and Ute raiders regularly plundered the Spanish herds. The flow of horses out of New Mexico soared after the Pueblo revolt of 1680, and horses reached the Newe peoples of the Snake River region sometime around 1700, possibly as early as 1690.¹³ There is a Newe tradition that their first horses came from their relatives, the Comanches, but it is just as likely that they obtained them from the Utes, who moved them north along the western slope of the Rockies. This western route was the most direct way to the Snake River Plain and the Columbia Plateau and avoided the hostile Apaches and Kiowas of the western plains.¹⁴ The acquisition of horses revolutionized the social and economic lives of Newe peoples, increasing distinctions among them, drawing more Paiute speakers east, and intensifying conflict with the Blackfeet. All these factors in turn contributed to greater social cohesion among some Newe groups.

The first great consequence of horse ownership was the growth of significant social and economic distinctions between the mounted and the mostly foot-going groups. For the Comanches, the equestrian lifestyle became the basis for a new tribal identity. The Comanches split off from the main body of mounted Newes sometime in the late seventeenth century, and by the 1750s they had completed their migration south and southwest to supplant the Apaches as masters of the southern plains.¹⁵

The mounted Newes who remained on the upper Snake and Green rivers never developed so distinct a tribal identity, but they did increasingly incorporate elements of Plains equestrian culture into their established and varied economic culture. Mounted family groups could travel together for much longer periods, carrying far more equipment, food, and supplies. They could access a greater range of subsistence and trading sites—scattered over thousands of square miles—than their foot-going kin. Buffalo hunting, originally carried out on foot, gained increasing importance among the mounted groups. Still, they did not abandon established economic pursuits such as fishing, root and seed gathering, and small-game hunting.¹⁶ The visible manifestation of this economic revolution was the influence of Plains material culture—parafleches, travois, Plains-style saddles and horse trappings, and skin-covered tipis—but just as their subsistence patterns retained important Basin orientations, so did their material culture. The mounted groups continued to use the ubiquitous conical baskets of Basin peoples as well as a complex fishing technology of the Plateau to exploit salmon runs on the Snake and Salmon rivers.¹⁷ The mounted groups simply did not fit into neat culture areas, such as the “Great Basin,” the “Plains,” or “Plateau,” and the economic distinctions that emerged between the mostly foot-going groups and the “wealthier” mounted groups was not a case of abandoning one way for another but of incorporating new opportunities.

The second great consequence of the acquisition of horses was the migration of Paiute speakers to the upper Snake River Plain, where they adopted the horse-bison economy then developing among the local Shoshone speakers and became an integrated minority within the larger group. It was this bilingual community that became the mixed bands of the treaty era and the Bannocks of the reservation period. The rich and varied economy that the equestrian life made possible attracted these migrants, but undoubtedly kinship ties were critical for determining exactly which families moved east. Mixed groups of Shoshone and Paiute speakers did not exist everywhere in the Great Basin. On the contrary, there was little intermixture of the two language groups. A possible explanation for this separation was that, in other places, both lived in similar landscapes and subsisted on essentially the same resources. In Nevada the line between the two language groups was fairly clear-cut. In Liljeblad’s estimation there simply was no great incentive for one people to move into or share the other’s territory. Only where more varied opportunities existed, to the north along the Snake and Salmon rivers, did substantial linguistic overlap occur. Yet even here bilingual alliance was

not always the case. Most of the foot-going bands in the Snake River country between American Falls and the Boise River were exclusively Shoshone-speaking. During the historic period, the largest permanent Paiute-speaking presence was found on the upper Snake River Plain and in the Lemhi Valley, two centers of the equestrian economy and culture.¹⁸

The other important exception to this linguistic separation was found along the lower courses of the Boise, Payette and Weiser rivers, and it was there that Liljeblad surmised that the first mixed bands emerged. Known in Shoshone as *Sehewooki'* (*Séwoki'i* in Bannock), “willows standing in rows like running water,” the area was a rich resource base.¹⁹ The rivers abounded in salmon, and the nearby mountains offered root and hunting grounds. *Sehewooki'* was also one of the principal centers of the intertribal horse trade west of the Rockies during the protohistoric period and continued to host intertribal trade fairs until the late nineteenth century. Because of these advantages, the people who lived in these river valleys—oral traditions at Fort Hall hold that there was a mixed Shoshone-Paiute population at *Sehewooki'*—were the most sedentary of all Newe groups. For the same reasons, the area was also the westernmost stop in the regular rounds of the mounted Newe populations of the upper Snake River Plain. The kinship ties between the Boise-area people and those who wintered on the Fort Hall bottoms suggest that *Sehewooki'* was both the cradle of the mixed bands and the springboard for the Bannock migration to the east.²⁰

How closely were Paiute speakers integrated into Shoshone society? Linguistic evidence can help answer this question as well as questions concerning the timing of the Bannock migration. According to Liljeblad, Paiute speakers within the mixed bands called their Shoshone companions *wihínakwate*, which is variously translated as “on the knife side” or “on the iron side.” The Paiute speakers called themselves *panákwate*. (The equivalent Shoshone words are *wihíN-naite* and *bannaite'*.) Informants told Liljeblad, who studied Numic languages for over four decades, that *panákwate* meant “on the water side” or “on the west side.” *Wihínakwate* and *panákwate* are essentially geographic referents to the original locations of the partners in the mixed bands. Primary evidence for this argument can be found in the account of the fur trader Alexander Ross, who reported that “Sho-sho-ne” meant “inland.”²¹ Liljeblad also emphasized that neither *wihínakwate* nor *panákwate* referred to a distinct “tribe” or people but rather to two “sides” of a bilingual “speech community.” In accordance with bilateral kinship customs, people of mixed parentage could identify themselves either by the “side” whose

language they preferred to speak or by the language spoken by the headman they were then following. "In fact," wrote Liljeblad, "one cannot properly speak of a Bannock and Shoshoni tribal division."²²

The third of the interrelated consequences of equestrian life for the Newes was an intensification of the conflict with their perennial foes, the Blackfeet. The same decades that saw the beginning of the Bannock migration also witnessed the ebbing of Newe residence on the northern Great Plains. As early as the 1720s, foot-going Newes ranged as far north as the Saskatchewan River, where they battled the Blackfeet. It is in regard to this struggle that the first references to the Newes appear in the historic record. In 1742 the de la Vérendrye brothers reported that the tribes of the northern plains were at war with the feared "Gens du Serpent" who lived to the west. Although it is not at all certain, it has long been assumed that these were the Snakes, or Newes.²³ There is more certainty that the Blackfoot war, coupled with a devastating smallpox epidemic, led to the Newe retreat from the plains of present-day Alberta and Montana in the mid- to late eighteenth century (the easternmost Newes continued to range east of the divide in central Wyoming).²⁴ War against the Blackfeet remained a constant in Newe life well into the historic period, and the consequent demands for defense influenced both the recruitment of Paiute-speaking allies and the emergence of band organization, a crucial first step towards ethnic identity, among the upper Snake River Newes.

The best account of the Newe-Blackfoot conflict comes from the Northwest Company trader David Thompson, who spent the winter of 1787–88 in the lodge of Saukamappee, an elderly Piegan man who recounted his people's battles with the Snakes and the impact of horses, guns, and disease on the struggle. He was between seventy-five and eighty years of age at the time of Thompson's visit. His earliest recollections dated to the 1720s, when Newe expansion onto the northern Plains had reached its zenith and the Piegans suffered the brunt of their attacks. Unlike the foot-going Piegans, the mounted Newes rode their horses swiftly among their enemies and "with their stone puk-a-mog-gan [and] knocked them on the head." The strange new animal alarmed the Blackfeet, "who had no idea of horses and could not make out what they were." The first horse Saukamappee ever saw was dead, having been shot out from under its Newe rider. He and many others flocked to the site to get a better look. The animal reminded them of a stag that had lost its horns, but as it was a "slave to man, like the dog" they named it the "Big Dog."²⁵

The few horses the Newes possessed did not prove an overwhelming advantage in warfare. It was another European import, firearms, which the Blackfeet obtained from the French through intertribal trade, that turned the tide in the conflict. Until that time, large-scale battles were essentially shows of force, with each side taking refuge behind rows of shields and firing arrows with limited effect. The normally outnumbered Blackfeet appealed to Saukamappee's natal people, the Crees, for assistance. Sometime in the 1730s, the last "general battle" between the Newes and Blackfeet took place. Though again greatly outnumbered, the Blackfeet possessed a secret weapon: Saukamappee and nine other men carried guns. Lying beneath their shields, they crept to within sixty yards of the Newes, and when one of their enemy rose to shoot an arrow, the gunmen fired, with murderous effect. The disoriented and frightened Newes began to slip away, and when the Blackfeet charged, most fled the battlefield. The "terror" of the guns prevented future pitched battles. Ambushes and surprise attacks came to characterize the war. Here, the Blackfeet continued to enjoy the advantage of guns and iron weapons as a result of their proximity to French, and later British, traders. The Newes, who had no traders among them, obtained only a few such items, either in battle or from their allies.²⁶ Moreover, by the mid-eighteenth century the Blackfeet had obtained horses. Facing a well-armed and now mounted foe, the Newes began their retreat from the northern Plains.

One final, devastating factor led to the Newe withdrawal to the southwest: disease. Saukamappee told Thompson how the Blackfeet came on an apparently abandoned Newe village along the Red Deer River in southern Alberta. Fearing a trap, the warriors cautiously watched the camp, but no one appeared. Horses, and even a herd of buffalo, grazed nearby. The Blackfeet attacked at dawn, cutting through the tents with their knives. What they found inside stopped them in their tracks: "There was no one to fight with but the dead and dying, each a mass of corruption." The Piegan warriors believed the "bad spirit had made himself master of the camp and destroyed them." They did not touch the victims but took the horses, the best tents, and any plunder that was "clean and good." But microbes are invisible, and diseases take no sides. Soon the pestilence struck the Blackfoot camp, killing more than half the population. For two or three years neither people felt much like fighting. When the conflict resumed, however, the Blackfeet advanced into present-day Montana, driving the Newes farther and farther south. As badly as the Blackfeet had suffered, the Newes suffered more: the catastrophic small-pox epidemic of 1781 made continued their residence on the northern

Plains untenable, except for a few small groups that took refuge among the Crows.²⁷

By the time Lewis and Clark's Corps of Discovery made the first documented, direct contact with Newes in 1805, the process of social and economic differentiation was well under way. The expedition specifically sought out the Newes for assistance because they maintained large horse herds and because they were the natal people of the expedition's famed guide Sacajawea.²⁸ As chance would have it, Sacajawea's brother, Cameahwait, was a headman of the Newe group that the Corps of Discovery encountered in what is today Idaho's Lemhi Valley. Although the explorers' sojourn lasted less than three weeks among but a small portion of the larger "Snake Nation," and although the journals of Meriwether Lewis, William Clark, and others contain the ethnocentric judgments of their age, their detailed, vivid descriptions of subsistence strategies and social customs constitute the first Newe ethnography and provide a basic picture of Newe social identities at the beginning of the historic period.²⁹

The journals reveal the effects of protohistoric trends such as the advent of the equestrian culture and the integrative effect of the Blackfoot war. "They have a great many fine horses, and nothing more," wrote expedition member Patrick Gass, "and on account of these they are much harassed by other nations."³⁰ Lewis reported that Newe warriors counted coup like their Plains enemies and added: "Each warrior keep[s] one or more horses tyed by a cord to a stake near his lodge both day and night and are always prepared for action at [a] moment[']s warning."³¹ The source of such anxiety was the Blackfeet and their Gros Ventre confederates, who had forced the Newes from the Missouri headwaters and killed or captured twenty of Cameahwait's people in a recent attack. The explorers had expected to find the Newes around the forks of the Missouri and grew concerned as many miles, and precious summer days, passed without sight of their prospective allies. With fall fast approaching and the roughest segment of the journey at hand, it was imperative to make contact with the Newes and secure horses and information about routes through the mountains.

When Lewis finally crossed the divide and descended into the Lemhi Valley, he found a people who had suffered greatly at the hands of their enemies. They erected their only remaining tipi for the visitors' use; everyone else lived in conical brush lodges. The hostilities had forced the Newes into a defensive posture in which security was the first priority

and food shortages were a constant threat. Out of custom and necessity, the Lemhi Valley Newes practiced a far more diverse subsistence cycle than their completely Plains-adapted enemies. This way of life was due in part to the presence of hostile tribes on the plains and in part to the varied opportunities available west of the divide. Fishing remained particularly important to all Newe peoples. The fisheries along the Lemhi River were some of the finest in the Newe country, and the people there exhibited a well-developed fishing culture and technology.³² Hunting and gathering were also important aspects of their subsistence cycle. Serviceberry and chokecherry cakes were a staple in the lean times between the end of the salmon run and the Fall buffalo hunt. Antelope, taken after an arduous chase, and deer provided a more limited meat supply.³³ Many of the Newes, suspecting the strangers were in league with their enemies, were less than welcoming, and only through a long, pleading harangue was Cameahwait able to convince some of the people to help him assist the party.³⁴

The Blackfoot war and the restrictions it imposed on Newe subsistence created a major impetus for the development of larger social formations among the buffalo hunters. Cameahwait's people remained in the Lemhi Valley for approximately half of each year, from May to September. Only in the fall, when the salmon runs had ended, did they venture back to the buffalo country of the Missouri drainage. That is why they were not where Lewis and Clark expected to find them. Lewis summed up their defensive subsistence tactics this way: "They never leave the interior of the mountains while they can obtain a scanty subsistence, and always return as soon as they have acquired a good stock of dried meat in the plains; thus alternately obtaining their food at the risk of their lives and retiring to the mountains, while they consume it."³⁵ When they did venture onto the plains for buffalo, the fear of their enemies was great, and consequently they banded together in the largest groups possible, usually joining forces with their allies, the Salish.

The Lemhi Valley Newes were preparing for the hunt just as Lewis and Clark arrived, and this timing partly explains their initial reluctance to help the explorers. To miss their meeting with the Salish would jeopardize the hunt and make starvation a looming possibility.³⁶ The anxious Newes nearly abandoned the explorers at one point, but, fearing the loss of valuable new trading partners, they continued to assist the expedition. After seeing Lewis and Clark safely into the Bitterroot Valley, the Newes hurried off to the forks of the Missouri.³⁷ Horses may have allowed larger groups of people to travel together for longer periods, but it was

the demands of defense and hunting in hostile territory that were the real motivations for larger social amalgamations. By the turn of the nineteenth century, the elements were in place for the development of band organization among the buffalo-hunting groups, which in turn proved to be the first step toward more distinct ethnic identities.

The Lemhi Valley Newes were also embedded in a far-reaching trade network that illustrated both the mediate effects of European colonization and the importance of wide-ranging kin networks. Lewis saw horses with Spanish brands in their herds as well as “bridlebits and stirrips they obtained from the Spaniards, tho’ these were but few.”³⁸ It is unlikely that Cameahwait’s people traded directly with the Spanish (which would have necessitated a long journey to California or New Mexico); rather, they most likely obtained these goods through a highly developed intertribal trade. By the early nineteenth century, an Indian trade route transporting horses stolen from the Spanish settlements of California had developed along the Humboldt River. At the same time, *Sehewooki*’ emerged as a center of intertribal horse trading west of the Rockies.³⁹ Undoubtedly writing about the same area, Lewis wrote that the Lemhi Valley Newes obtained “perl oister they value very highly” from their “friends and relations who live beyond the barren plain” to the southwest. These people reportedly lived in a game-rich country and possessed more horses than the Lemhis, characteristics that suggest *Sehewooki*’. They also served as a conduit for Spanish and Indian goods, including horses, mules, metal, cloth, and beads.⁴⁰

Regardless of these intricate trade relations, imperial decisions made on the other side of the globe limited Newe access to the most crucial trade items—guns. The French and English freely traded guns to the Blackfeet and other Plains people, whereas the Spanish prohibited trading guns to Indian nations. Consequently, the Newes possessed only the few firearms that they had taken in battle or could obtain from allied Indian groups. Lewis counted only three guns in a group of sixty Newe warriors and remarked that they were “reserved for war almost exclusively and the bow and arrows are used in hunting.” Meanwhile, their well-armed enemies “hunt them up and murder them without respect to sex or age and plunder them of their horses.” Cameahwait attributed his people’s precarious situation directly to their inferior position in the gun trade. He desperately wanted an adequate supply of guns so that his people “could then live in the country of the buffaloe and eat as our enemies do and not be compelled to hide ourselves in these mountains and live on roots and berries as the bear do.”⁴¹ Recognizing an advantage, Lewis

threatened that no white traders would ever come among the Newes if they refused to aid his expedition. Hoping to open an unlimited trade, Cameahwait cajoled and pleaded with his people to continue to help the explorers.

Trade was important for survival, but it was also indicative of the intricate network of social and economic ties, based on kinship, that connected Newe peoples. Within this network there was a decided lack of ethnic consciousness. Social groupings larger than the family cluster were fluid, and individuals often spent time with different, widely scattered groups. Lewis unknowingly recorded evidence of this flexible social order when he sought information concerning routes through the mountains. Cameahwait suggested that an “old man of his nation,” who lived a day’s march away, could provide the necessary details concerning the country to the northwest. Presumably the man had spent time there, among the “pierced-nose Indians.” He also introduced the explorer to another elder who knew the lands to the southwest. The “band of this nation” from which the man hailed lived some twenty days of difficult travel to the southwest across mountains, deserts, and a great plain divided by a large river. His people lived beyond this plain, in a fertile and partially wooded country, “not far from the white people with whom they traded for horses” and other goods. The old man was describing a trip across the Snake River Plain to the river valleys of southwestern Idaho and eastern Oregon, perhaps *Sehewooki*. His home valley is impossible to determine, but his residence at Lemhi bears witness to the close and continuing associations that Newe peoples maintained across enormous distances, the fluid nature of residence and group membership, and corresponding lack of specific ethnic or tribal identities within the larger Newe world.⁴² The distinctions among Newe peoples stemmed less from a well-defined concept of ethnicity than from the diversity of economic pursuits and the fact that certain groups, formulated through kinship ties, maintained closer relations than others. The old man who described the journey to the southwest also spoke of the “broken mockersons,” a fierce, reclusive people who lived in the high country and “fed on roots or the flesh of such horses as they could take or steel [*sic*] from those who passed through their country.” Judging by location and description, the “broken mockersons” were probably the *duku-deka*, or Sheep-Eaters. Their separation from other Newe peoples was more a function of their location in the remote Salmon River country than of any nascent concept of ethnicity. Indeed, during the late nineteenth century, many *duku-deka* came to live at the Lemhi Reservation

and were never viewed as a distinct tribe. Ethnic, tribal, and band identities simply did not hold saliency among Newe peoples at the turn of the nineteenth century.

In the nearly six decades between the visit of Lewis and Clark and the advent of permanent white settlement, an ever-increasing stream of European Americans traversed the Newe homeland. These fur trappers, explorers, and overland emigrants traversed nearly every mile of the Newe country south of the Salmon River, and their journals and reports offer a more complete picture of the changes taking place during the first half of the nineteenth century. They witnessed not just the rounds of the buffalo hunters but also the lives of the foot-going hunting, gathering, and fishing groups. The first phase of white contact, the fur trade, was the least intrusive for the Newe peoples. Relations between the Newes and the trappers were generally good, buttressed by occasional intermarriage and, especially, a common enemy in the Blackfeet. Newe people never became specialized, full-time trappers and so offered little direct competition to Euro-American fur hunters. Nor were the trappers a threat to the Newes. They did not seek land cessions nor make permanent settlements outside a few small trading forts. Newe peoples looked on the trappers as allies in their war with the Blackfeet as well a much-needed conduit for manufactured goods.

Although they contain obvious cultural and gender biases, fur traders' accounts also contain the first evidence of emergent social, economic, and band divisions among the Newes. Some trappers and traders described fairly subtle differences. They recorded food names as well as free renderings of Newe words. Peter Skene Ogden even recognized that the "Upper Snakes" and the "Lower Snakes" spoke closely related yet distinct languages.⁴³ Most, however, were less observant and usually remarked only on the most obvious aspects of economic and social organization or, more likely, indiscriminately lumped all of their Newe allies together as Snakes. Typical was Alexander Ross, who described the Newe divisions as they appeared to Donald McKenzie during the latter's 1819 Snake River expedition: "The great Snake nation may be divided into three divisions, namely the Sherry-dikas, or Dog-eaters, the War-are-ree-kas, or fish-eaters, and the Ban-at-tees or Robbers. But as a nation they all go by the general appellation of Sho-sho-nes, or Snakes."⁴⁴ With their telltale suffixes, *Sherry-dika* and *War-are-ree-ka* are clearly versions of food names. Judging by their location and horse wealth, the *Sherry-dikas* were probably the mixed buffalo-hunting bands, while *War-are-*

ree-ka was a catchall term for the Newe groups living and fishing along the Snake and its tributaries. (It is impossible to determine with complete accuracy to which groups these labels actually referred.) Ross himself admitted that the trappers had but a “very confused idea of the Snakes,” writing, “One would call them Bannacks, and another Warracks, while a third would have named them dogs.” Even after personally traveling among the Newes, Ross cautioned that his observations could not “be fully relied upon as correct.”⁴⁵ No matter how confused, however, Ross’s account is still useful, for it identifies the essential divisions between mounted and pedestrian Newe populations as well as the variations found in the latter.

More troublesome is Ross’s characterization of the Ban-at-tees, or “robbers,” which underscores the frequent confusion of Newe group names in the historic record. Phonetically, *Ban-at-tee* is a close approximation of *bannaite’*, the Shoshone word for Bannock, yet Ross’s description of these people bears little resemblance to the buffalo-hunting Bannocks. They led, Ross reported, a “predatory and wandering life in the recesses of the mountains, and are to be found in small bands, or single wigwams among the caverns and rocks.” This description could conceivably encompass the *duku-deka’*, or any number of small foot-going bands found north or south of the Snake, all the way west into present-day Oregon. Whoever they were, Ross’s Ban-at-tees were clearly not the mounted, Paiute-speaking migrants to the buffalo-hunting groups, who were already becoming known as Bannocks in the literature. For instance, the American trapper Warren Angus Ferris reported in 1832 that the people whom the trappers labeled “Ponacks” called themselves “Po-nah-ke,” a close approximation of the Bannocks’ name for themselves, *panákwate*. Moreover, Ferris’s Ponacks were mounted buffalo hunters who often traveled in large mixed bands with the Snakes, indicating their continual presence among Shoshone speakers. The confusing, sometimes contradictory uses of *Bannock*, or variations thereof (such as Pannack, Pawnack, and Bonack) are the most problematic aspects of the early historical record concerning Newe social relations.⁴⁶

Ross’s crude ethnology also clearly illustrates the social, economic, and gender biases of the fur hunters. Ross called the Sherry-dikas the “real Sho-sho-nes, . . . [who] live in the plain hunting buffalo,” but his assessment of the War-are-ree-kas was far less charitable. He derided the latter as “corpulent” and “slovenly” and claimed they were, although numerous, “neither united nor formidable.”⁴⁷ Taken with the Sherry-dikas’ wealth and prowess as warriors, Ross and countless other white

observers associated the equestrian lifestyle with a power and nobility they found lacking in the pedestrian groups. But, as Elizabeth Vibert has demonstrated, there were also gendered cultural assumptions at work among Ross and his fellow traders. The buffalo hunters, in European eyes, were more masculine, as was their principal food source. Red meat stood at the pinnacle of a European food hierarchy that saw fish and vegetable foods as feminized and far lower in status. So not only were the mounted bands critical as defensive allies against the Blackfeet and as suppliers of food, but their entire way of life appealed to the traders' gendered perceptions of worth.⁴⁸

During his first trading expedition Nathaniel Wyeth, the founder of Fort Hall, drew conclusions similar to Ross's, suggesting three general life ways among the Newes. The "Pawnacks" often wintered near American Falls because of the abundance of buffalo. Farther downstream, Wyeth generally distinguished between peoples he called "Snakes" and those he called "Diggers" (although from time to time he encountered "Pawnacks" as well). Wyeth's Snakes owned horses, but they were not specialized buffalo hunters. Rather, they were a fishing people who kept Wyeth's party well-stocked with salmon during their march down the Snake River in August and September 1832. The Diggers, on the other hand, were "very poor and timid," living in smaller groups and fleeing at the approach of unknown parties.⁴⁹ It is unclear exactly what criteria Wyeth used to draw these distinctions, but he did not record subtle linguistic variations, as Ogden did, or any possible food names, as Ross did. Rather, it seems that his divisions depended as much on social integration as on economic orientation, and both were clearly more important than geographic location.

In Wyeth's scheme, Snakes, Diggers, and Pawnacks could at times be found in the same vicinity, often, indeed, visiting and traveling together. Moreover, both Snakes and Diggers were fishing people. The Diggers, however, were found in small, scattered encampments rather than at the major fisheries. Taken together, early accounts, such as Ross's and Wyeth's, and modern ethnographic resources suggest the general social and economic divisions apparent in the Newe world by the fur-trade era. To borrow Wyeth's nomenclature, the Snakes were the large Shoshonean populations along the middle and lower Snake. They owned horses and periodically joined in the buffalo hunt, but mostly they were fishing people who lived in relatively sedentary villages among the greatest fisheries in all the Newe country, *Sehewooki'* and Salmon Falls. The Diggers were the multitude of small, foot-going Newe groups and family clusters that

continued to pursue a mixed subsistence strategy in more marginal environments north and south of the Snake River. Finally, the Pawnacks were most likely the mixed buffalo-hunting bands of the upper Snake River Plain, who in their annual cycle regularly visited and fished with their downstream friends and kin.

Despite such visible distinctions, these peoples were not separate tribes. They maintained close ties with one another, and indeed all were part of the greater "Snake Nation." That interrelationship was evident during McKenzie's winter encampment with the Newes near Bear Lake in 1819. People from all three Newe divisions were in a camp that reputedly stretched for seven miles. Taking advantage of the opportunity, McKenzie sought to negotiate peace between the Newes and the Nez Percés, his two principal trading partners, who were so often in conflict. The Sherry-dikas dominated both the camp and the council. Along with the War-are-ree-kas, they spoke in favor of peace and blamed the Ban-at-tees for attacks on both the Nez Percés and the whites. The latter people were eventually brought over to the council and told they must be good, and the "poor, trembling . . . Ban-at-tees" agreed.⁵⁰ None of these groups represented a separate tribe, but it is also evident that there was an unequal power relationship at work. This might have been due to the location of the Bear Lake encampment within the Sherry-dikas' *tebíwa*, or homeland. It is also possible that because the Sherry-dikas had developed a greater band organization and their leaders spoke for more people. Finally, because they often traveled with the mounted groups and relied upon them for protection, the trappers generally looked upon the equestrian people as dominant and ascribed greater power to them.⁵¹

The principal reason for the greater organization found among the mounted groups, and for their seemingly dominant status in the Newe world, was the continuing Blackfoot War. The demands of traveling and hunting in dangerous territory placed a premium on greater social integration among the mounted buffalo hunters of the upper Snake River Plain, who lived closest to the threat. By the 1820s, Blackfoot war parties regularly ventured deep into the heart of the Snake River country, as far west as the Great Camas Prairie; and the equestrian Newes, with long experience in warfare, most often battled the intruders. The men who led the fur brigades knew the danger well. In 1824, Ross feared the "Blackfeet and Piegan war roads [that] were everywhere in our way." But he was lucky and encountered only two sizable Blackfeet camps, both of which professed peaceful intentions.⁵² Ross's successor, John Work, cautiously tried to keep the Newes between his party and the

Blackfeet. In September 1830, when he learned that the “great Snake camp” had already left for the buffalo hunt, Work wrote, “This is of advantage to us as they will be before us and amuse the Blackfeet.” Work spent the harsh winter that followed near the future site of Fort Hall, constantly fretting over the Blackfeet and noting the passage of Newe bands downstream, which left his brigade exposed to attack.⁵³

The Blackfeet may have been the terrors of the upper Snake River Plain, but they were not always successful in the brutal fighting. John Kirk Townsend, a naturalist who accompanied Wyeth’s second expedition, recounted an intense battle on the upper reaches of the Big Lost River in August 1834. Caught on foot on the open plain, “the Blackfeet were run down with horses, and, without being able to load their guns, were trampled to death, or killed with salmon spears and axes.” These unfortunate Blackfeet were probably a horse-raiding party intercepted short of their goal.⁵⁴ Still, the Blackfoot risk had grown so great that formerly safe havens, such as the Lemhi and Salmon valleys, had become dangerous “war roads.”⁵⁵

One of the consequences of the Blackfoot presence, then, was ever-larger social amalgamations. These were evident as early as 1805, when the Lemhi Valley Newe joined forces with the Salish to hunt in the Three Forks country. By the summer of 1819, when McKenzie’s Northwest Company brigade fell in with a “friendly band of Snakes” as they traveled east along the Snake River, large defensive groups were necessary even in the heart of Newe country. The fur brigades that worked the northern Rockies commonly traveled with Nez Percé and Salish allies, but they also sometimes joined forces with the Newes. The group camping with McKenzie engaged the Blackfeet in a “severe battle” somewhere on the middle Snake Plain, and when the victorious Newes returned, Snakes appeared from every direction to join in a raucous celebration. Ross wrote: “They came in crowds from their hiding places and joining the victorious party in their scalp dancing and scalp singing, formed a host of at least five or six thousand. Their huts, their tents altogether resembled a city in an uproar, and their scattered fires exhibited rather an awful spectacle.”⁵⁶ Although the Newe numbers were probably exaggerated, the reference to both huts and tents suggests the presence of both foot-going and mounted Newe, as does the suggestion of more timid Newes emerging from hiding places. It was late summer, and McKenzie’s party was undoubtedly in the company of mounted Newes returning to the upper Snake River Plain after their annual trip to the fisheries of the middle and lower Snake. The foot-going people were at a decided disad-

vantage in warfare, and the mounted groups exhibited an increasing Plains influence, including the warrior complex. Indeed, Ross reported that the more sedentary fishing groups suffered most at the hands of the Blackfeet, while the mounted buffalo hunters held their own in combat.⁵⁷ Notwithstanding their differences, all of these groups were of the same “nation,” and they came together in large groups first and foremost for defense.⁵⁸

With larger social groups came important shifts in the power of Newe headmen. Bands formed around successful leaders of important cooperative endeavors. Liljeblad referred to these leaders as “bosses,” although “talkers” is probably more accurate. For instance, the *baingwi-dai’-gwahni*’ directed cooperative labor at the fisheries. The *dai’gwahni*’ was literally “someone who coordinates or conducts a service for the people.” He was an orator and mediator who smoothed over difficulties among his own people and with other bands. The *dai’gwahnee*’ increased in importance as the mounted bands traveled ever farther to access the buffalo. The “band chiefs” whom European Americans encountered sprang from this political tradition. First and foremost, they had to be successful leaders of subsistence endeavors. Second, as the Blackfeet onslaught continued, larger groups coalesced around proven war leaders. Often these men possessed supernatural sanction for their abilities. Finally, by the mid-nineteenth century, the ability to act as effective intermediaries with European Americans became preeminent. Thus, the *dai’gwahnee*’, men already skilled as intermediaries, most often emerged as the “chiefs.” Among the buffalo-hunting bands, the *dai’-gwahnee*’ who spoke for the largest groups often fulfilled this role. The most successful band leaders balanced the needs and desires of their people against the demands of white society and, most important, negotiated their people’s access to the land and its resources.⁵⁹

Still, the power of these leaders should not be overstated. In such a fluid social world, political leadership developed on grounds that European Americans could hardly fathom. Newe headmen lacked the coercive power that white observers were accustomed to in leaders. Individual choice rather than stable allegiance marked Newe politics, and only the most capable leaders retained a following. In 1805 Meriwether Lewis wrote: “Each individual is his own sovereign master . . . the authority of the Cheif [*sic*] being nothing more than mere admonition supported by the influence which the propriety of his own exemplary conduct may have acquired him in the minds of the individuals who compose the band. . . . In fact every man is a chief, but all have not an equal influence

on the minds of the other members of the community, and he who happens to enjoy the greatest share of confidence is the principal Chief.”⁶⁰

During McKenzie’s peace council in the winter of 1819, the combined Snakes were led by two brothers, Pee-eye-em and Ama-qui-em, who, according to Alexander Ross, exercised remarkable control over their people. Perhaps their size had something to do with their power. Both men were of great stature, with Pee-eye-em reported to be much larger than the 312-pound McKenzie!⁶¹ But, clearly, their authority stemmed from their roles as successful *dai’gwahnee’*. Ross wrote: “Trade was no sooner over than Ama-qui-em mounted one of his horses, rode around and round the camp, and that itself was almost the work of a day, now and then making a halt to harangue the Indians, remind them of the peace, their behavior towards the whites, and to prepare them for raising the camp.”⁶²

In 1848 Nathaniel Wyeth remarked on the Newes’ “almost entire absence of social organization,” except at “salmon time” and during the buffalo hunt, when “some person called a chief usually opens a trade or talk, and occasionally gives directions.”⁶³ Wyeth’s original journal entries presented an image of greater respect and influence but still suggested that ability could only draw followers, not compel them. Writing of the great fishery at Salmon Falls and the Newe leader in charge, he recorded: “This chief is a good sized man and very intelligent and the President would do well if he could preserve the respect of his subjects as well or maintain as much dignity.”⁶⁴

The most famous Newe headman of the fur trade era, the Horn Chief, embodied all of the talents and characteristics necessary for effective leadership. The Horn Chief’s role as *dai’gwahni’* was intertwined with his ability as a war leader. Living close to the buffalo herds on the upper Snake River Plain meant living in constant conflict with the Blackfeet. The Horn Chief, whom white fur hunters considered the “principal chief of the Snakes,” was one of the most influential leaders because of his bold and successful tactics. Once, the story was told, while traveling alone across the open plain and armed only with a spear, he happened on a Blackfoot war party. Rather than flee, he charged into the enemy and killed six in hand-to-hand combat. “He always rushed headlong upon his enemies without fear of death,” wrote the trapper Warren Angus Ferris, “and rendered himself so terrible . . . that his presence alone was often sufficient to put them to flight.”⁶⁵ In addition to his prowess as a warrior, the Horn Chief also possessed a supernatural sanction for his leadership. He had survived countless battles, and it was well known among the

Newes that his tutelary spirit had rendered him invulnerable. Whites, of course, were usually incredulous, branding him superstitious, and lucky.⁶⁶ According to Ferris, the Horn Chief believed that “the moon was his guardian deity, this extraordinary Indian imagined that she instructed him in dreams during his sleep; and he taught his followers to believe that he never acted but in obedience to her directions, and that he could not be killed by metal.”⁶⁷ Such beliefs were deeply rooted in the spiritualism of the Basin and Plateau. Newe peoples believed that tutelary spirits transmitted sacred knowledge and power, *bo’ha*, through dreams. These same spirits imposed dietary and behavioral taboos on their charges and protected them as long as they followed these proscriptions.⁶⁸ Although it may not have been necessary for leadership, the Horn Chief’s formidable war *bo’ha* certainly buttressed his position among his people.

Just as important, the Horn Chief was a skilled intermediary. Captain Benjamin Bonneville remarked on the “great magnanimity” the chief had shown the whites. When some trappers had reportedly killed one of his relatives, the Horn Chief used his influence to halt his people’s plans for revenge and declared himself a “friend of the white men.”⁶⁹ In February 1831, Ferris experienced a similar situation firsthand. The Horn Chief forced some of his own people to return goods stolen from American caches. Then, when a few hatched a plan to kill the trappers and take all their goods, the Horn Chief again interceded. In full war regalia, he sat on his horse between his people and the Americans and “commenced a loud and threatening harangue.” He bullied them and dared them to fire on him, until one by one they slipped off to their lodges. Considering his war record and his reputation for invulnerability, it is not hard to understand how his presence saved the trappers.⁷⁰ His motives for doing so might demand more explanation.

Although there were many important ramifications of white contact by the 1830s, the native world on the Snake River Plain was still one that operated essentially on Newe terms. Buffalo were still plentiful in eastern Idaho; white emigrants and their destructive livestock, miners, settlers, land claims, and reservation life still lay in the future. To protect and provide for his people, the Horn Chief dealt first with other Indian peoples and only secondarily with whites. His greatest adversaries were the Blackfeet; the trappers had become valuable allies and suppliers. Befriending the trappers offered more in the long term than did murdering them for their limited goods. Thus, the Horn Chief was a direct predecessor of Washakie, Taghee, Tyee, and Tendoy, the most influential

Newe leaders of the late nineteenth century. As a successful cultural intermediary, he remained on friendly terms with the whites while maintaining great influence over his people. In preserving this balance, he protected his people's interests and independence and brought access to the white man's goods.

The Horn Chief's leadership during the fur-trade era illustrates the growing importance of "bands" rather than "tribes." The latter was a Euro-American concept that only gained importance with the treaty-making and reservation eras later in the century. The Horn Chief was not a dictator, nor was he ever the "principal chief of the Snakes." The periodic violence against trappers was mostly the work of opportunistic young men seeking wealth and prestige through raiding. It was simply impossible for the Horn Chief, or any other leader, to control all of the Newes, especially when many did not even recognize his leadership. In the winter of 1831, Work recognized the diversity of the Newe groups camping together and the lack of a dominant chief: "The Indians assembled here are of different tribes of the Snakes and from different quarters and many of them belong to no chief and are such wanderers that when they commit a crime by stealing a horse there is no knowing where to find them."⁷¹ The Horn Chief may have been the most influential leader the trapper knew, but he was not the "principal" chief because there was no such position. The Horn was a *dai'gwahmi'* who spoke first and foremost for his own people, a large, mounted mixed band of Shoshone and Paiute speakers.

Nor could the Horn Chief's influence be easily transferred to other leaders. He died in battle with the Blackfeet on the Big Lost River in the fall of 1832. His village was large, two hundred lodges of "Snakes and Ponnacks." It was attacked by 150 Blackfeet who disastrously underestimated the Newe numbers. At battle's end some forty-five Blackfeet were dead, as were nine Newe, the Horn among them. The story quickly circulated that a Blackfoot warrior, aware of the chief's immunity to metal, had loaded a piece of antler in his musket and thus killed the greatest Newe leader of the day.⁷² Not only the Newes mourned the Horn Chief's passing. The trappers, too, had lost an important friend and protector who held "sufficient influence over the tribe to restrain the wild and predatory propensities of the young men."⁷³ During a visit to a large mixed village of Bonnacks and Snakes in the summer of 1835, Osborne Russell concluded that fears of increased Newe raiding were warranted. The Horn Chief's brother, Aiken-lo-ruckkup, or "Tongue Cut with a Flint," was the group's nominal leader, but he lacked his sibling's domi-

nant influence. He told Russell that young men from the village had recently murdered two white trappers. The chief was angry that the whites had been killed simply for their possessions, which had already been gambled away. He guaranteed Russell's safety while in the village, but the trapper put little faith in the chief's ability to keep this promise.⁷⁴

By the late 1830s, major changes in the Newe country were reinforcing the emergent band divisions. In 1837 another smallpox epidemic effectively ended the Blackfoot invasion of the upper Snake River Plain. Some bands were nearly wiped out; many of the survivors were elderly people who had weathered the 1781 epidemic.⁷⁵ In June 1838, Osborne Russell was working the Madison River with an outfit led by Jim Bridger. The trappers were following a Blackfoot band that was "to all appearances occasionally dying of the Small Pox." In an account reminiscent of Saukamappee's macabre tale of the 1781 epidemic, Russell wrote: "Today we passed an Indian lodge standing in the prairie near the river which contained 9 dead bodies." The trappers showed no mercy to their afflicted enemies, attacking and harrying them for several days before heading south for Henry's Lake. There they found more of their enemies and had "concluded . . . to smite [them] without leaving one to tell their fate." The approach of six suffering Blackfeet softened the trappers' hearts. "For we were ashamed to think of fighting a few poor Indians," Russell wrote, "nearly dwindled to skeletons by the small Pox and approaching us without arms."⁷⁶

Such mercy was as rare for the trappers as it was for the Blackfeet; the enmity that had grown over the decades was hard for some outsiders to comprehend. Bridger's party traveled from Henry's Lake to the 1838 rendezvous on Green River. There they encountered a party of missionaries bound for Oregon. Among them was Sarah White Smith, one of the first white women to cross the continent, who condemned the fur hunters' actions: "It is dreadful to hear how the whites treat the Indians. Bridger's party have just been among the Black Foot tribe. This tribe have long been a terror to neighboring tribes & whites, but now their number is much reduced by the smallpox & it is still raging. The Indians made no attack on B's party but this party attacked them & shot 15 of them dead without excuse but to please their wicked passion."⁷⁷ Smith's sympathy was undoubtedly genuine, yet she also represented the first wave in a massive emigration that brought greater changes to the Newes, their allies, and their enemies than the trappers could ever imagine.

The Blackfoot withdrawal did not reverse the trend toward greater Newe band organization because the very same years saw the extinction

of the buffalo herds in the Snake River country. The decline was evident by the late 1830s, and after 1840 buffalo could not be found in sufficient numbers to support the mounted bands. There were a number of reasons for the extinction. First, the Snake River Plain was a marginal environment for buffalo. The herds there, as elsewhere west of the Continental Divide, were never as large as the great biomass found on the Plains. As some Newe adopted Plains-style hunting on horseback, both their reliance on the herds and their hunting efficiency increased. Furthermore, large horse herds competed directly with the buffalo for grass and water. The Blackfeet, fur trappers, and early overland emigrants all increased the pressure on the buffalo herds. Ultimately the Snake River Plain could not sustain the number of animals necessary to support the mounted Newe bands.⁷⁸ In 1843 the famed explorer John C. Frémont called the recently extinct herds “pioneers” whose “experiment in colonizing the valley of the Columbia . . . had failed.”⁷⁹ The extinction of the Snake River herds meant that although the Blackfoot threat had dissipated west of the mountains, the Newes still had to form into larger groups and travel long distances through hostile territory to find buffalo.⁸⁰

Consequently, both band structure and individual political leadership became stronger among the mounted Newe. Julian Steward argued that the extinction of the Snake River herds was the catalyst for the emergence of “band chiefs” among the Idaho Newes and that before that point such leaders were relatively unimportant, with no real political power. While his theory minimized defensive needs and ignored earlier political developments due to the Blackfoot war, the major point was sound. Newe band organization came into its own after 1840, and it was the *dai'gwahnee*, or hunt bosses, who most often emerged as leaders among the mounted bands. The intrusion of larger numbers of whites only increased political power. By the 1840s band councils existed, and, along with the chiefs, these bodies dealt with whites. Still, the power of the leaders and the Plains influence on the social order should not be overemphasized. *Dai'gwahnee* could speak only for a specific group at specific times, and they could easily lose their following if they failed to maintain “unanimity by persuasion.” The fluidity of Bannock and Shoshone society remained, and band chiefs and police societies never developed to the extent they did among Plains groups.⁸¹

During this period the ethnically mixed buffalo-hunting bands of the upper Snake River, most often identified as Bannocks, developed an even wider-ranging subsistence cycle that made them the “wealthiest” of the Newe groups. These bands already traversed great distances to access the

best resources. Russell remarked in the summer of 1835 that the mixed band he visited had “just returned from salmon fishing to feast on fat buffaloe.”⁸² With the addition of the journey to Montana, the Bannocks’ subsistence cycle reached its greatest extent. They usually wintered along the Snake River bottoms in the vicinity of Fort Hall. Early each spring they dispersed into smaller kin-based groups to hunt throughout eastern Idaho before journeying west, to the fisheries at Salmon Falls and Glenn’s Ferry, to partake in the spring salmon run. Some groups continued farther west to *Sehewooki’* and beyond, where they fished and traded with local Newes and with the Umatilla, Nez Percé, and other Columbia Plateau peoples. During the summer, most drifted east and congregated on the Great Camas Prairie near modern Fairfield, Idaho. Here they dug roots, prepared for the fall buffalo hunt, and held a great trade fair attended by many Indian peoples. In late summer and early fall the Bannocks departed for the buffalo hunt. At first they hunted around the forks of the Missouri, but as the herds diminished they were forced to travel farther east. Beginning in the 1840s the mounted Newes utilized the Bannock Trail, which crossed modern Targhee Pass, traversed the northern reaches of the Yellowstone Plateau, and descended to hunting grounds near *Guchu’nambi’hi*, or “cow heart,” northwest of modern Billings, Montana. The hunt lasted into the fall, and the people had to hurry back over the divide before the deep snows fell or else spend the winter east of the divide.⁸³

With the completion of the Fort Hall subsistence cycle, the economic distinctions between Newe peoples reached their peak. These differences were critical to the emergence of band identity and, later, ethnic identity. Newes who possessed fewer horses sometimes spent a season or a year with their mounted kin, but generally they covered a much smaller area from year to year. Because they accessed fewer resources and trade, the pedestrian Newes were “poor.” The division between wealthy mounted bands and poor foot-going groups was not simply a white imposition. The buffalo hunters of the Fort Hall region often referred to all downstream Newes, even the relatively well-off Boise River groups, as *dete-haandee’* (*tedébiwa’a* in Bannock), literally “pitiful people.” The term was not derogatory; it was used even by the “poor people” themselves. Rather, it was a recognition of the downstream Newes’ relative lack of horse wealth and their consequent inability to completely access the bison economy.⁸⁴

The band organization that emerged from economic developments ultimately became the source of ethnic identity for the equestrian Newes,

but that is not the whole story. By the 1840s the mounted bands were increasingly known as Bannocks, even though Shoshone speakers were always the majority. It would be easy to attribute this usage to the ignorance of white observers, but the continued existence of the name and the language indicate something more. The continuing influx of Paiute speakers throughout the historic period is one explanation for the survival of the Bannock language and identity within the numerically superior Shoshone populations.⁸⁵ Just as important, Bannock speakers dominated leadership of both the buffalo hunts and most war parties. Sven Liljeblad believed that disproportionate Bannock leadership was due to an earlier unification of the Paiute speakers, who became Bannocks for defense and collective warfare. Even before they migrated east, he argued, they faced continual harassment and raids by the Nez Percé and other Plateau peoples around *Sehewooki*, forcing a more organized response. Once integrated into the mounted Shoshone bands and facing the Blackfeet, the Bannock speakers continued this tradition. Kinship was another factor. Liljeblad also found that Bannock leadership was dominated by one family that had “risen to authority in the course of thirty years or less [and] discharged the duty of representing several mixed Bannock and Shoshone bands.” Because so many Shoshones followed Bannock leaders, the misconception entered the historic record that the mounted mixed bands were actually Bannocks.⁸⁶

By the late 1830s the fur trade was in decline, and both equestrian Bannocks and their pedestrian kin faced an invasion of unprecedented scale. Between 1840 and 1860, more than 250,000 emigrants crossed the continent to the Pacific coast, virtually all of them passing through Newe country. The emigration peaked in the years after the California gold rush, with some 60,000 making the trek in 1852.⁸⁷ Five years later B. F. Ficklin, an employee of the Pacific Wagon Road Office, kept an exact count of the wagons carried on the various Green River ferries. By August 15, some 850 wagons had crossed the Green, and the season was not over yet. Moreover, because most emigrants saved money by swimming their animals across the river, there were no comparable statistics for livestock. But by Ficklin’s estimate, California-bound emigrants had driven some seventy thousand head of stock through the heart of Newe country. Frederick W. Lander, the superintendent of the wagon road, put these numbers in perspective when he wrote: “The above was a very small emigration, less than one-third of what it was in 1854.”⁸⁸

Aside from its scale, the concentrated impact of the emigration was

unlike anything Newe peoples had seen before. The overland emigrants stuck to well-traveled riparian routes, which maximized their opportunities for living off the land but also intensified their environmental impact. They cut wood, hunted, fished, and grazed their stock within a very narrow corridor. As early as 1843, Charles Preuss, Frémont's cartographer, remarked, "The white people have ruined the country of the Snake Indians and should therefore treat them well."⁸⁹ Eight years later Richard Grant, the Hudson's Bay Company trader at Fort Hall, reported that the Newes around Fort Boise had been so terrorized by the Nez Percés and the emigrants that they would not remain at their fisheries and supply the fort's needs.⁹⁰ As Preuss's and Grant's comments suggest, the pedestrian Newes along the trails felt the greatest impact of the emigration. The emigrants consumed their resources first and most intensively, and, because they were less mobile than the mounted bands, these Newes had fewer options. They faced the choice of abandoning their most critical subsistence sites or possibly dying in the attempt to use them.

The equestrian groups also felt the effects of the emigration. Overgrazing was perhaps the most visible consequence. Grass was the fuel of the wagon trains, and the effect of tens of thousands of animals grazing within a narrow, semiarid corridor was profound. One historian has attempted to put a monetary value on the damage, but such numbers can never speak to the real impact of the emigration.⁹¹ The mounted bands were usually far from the Snake River when the bulk of each year's emigration passed in late summer, yet when they returned to their choice winter camps along the Snake River bottoms, they found denuded pastures and little firewood. Overgrazing also hurt the emigrants. Indeed, horse theft increased west of Fort Laramie because the trail had been so stripped of grass that each night the animals had to be taken miles from camp to find sufficient forage.⁹² Whether mounted or foot-going, Newe groups could not escape the effects of the emigration.

Violence was one of these effects, but it must be kept in perspective. The first overland emigrants had many fears about Indians on the trail—some warranted, some not. The Blackfeet caused the most trepidation during the earliest years of the emigration, but that threat faded with the smallpox epidemic.⁹³ Statistically, Indians of any kind posed relatively little danger compared with the other hazards of travel, and in fact emigrants killed many more Indians than vice versa. For example, the greatest number of emigrant deaths at the hands of Indians—sixty—came in 1851, a year when emigrants killed some seventy Indians. In only five years during the two decades of heaviest travel did white deaths exceed

Indian deaths. Overall, Indians killed fewer than four hundred emigrants between 1840 and 1860, accounting for only 4 percent of the estimated ten thousand emigrants who died along the trails. Disease was the greatest killer, causing nearly 90 percent of the casualties, and accidents too claimed more lives than violence.⁹⁴

Indeed, it is striking how little contact many emigrants had with Indians. Clarence Bagley, who traveled to Oregon with his parents as a boy in 1852, remembered a rather gruesome game he played with a young girl from another emigrant family; they counted the fresh graves lining the Snake River portion of the trail. They saw 120 in a single day, and Bagley was sure there were many more that they had missed. But Indians were not to blame. "Most of these deaths were caused by cholera," he later recalled, "which by this time was making frightful inroads among the emigrants." He added, "On all our part of the trip we had no fear of the Indians except to protect ourselves from the pilfering of articles about camp and from stealing our horses at night." Horse theft was the emigrants' most common complaint, but only rarely did it involve a face-to-face encounter. The "one considerable excitement on account of Indians" that Bagley remembered came when an unidentified intruder attempted to steal a valuable mare while the train was camped on the Boise River.⁹⁵

Newe people were more likely to trade with the white travelers than fight with them. Emigrants most commonly encountered Newes in the vicinity of Fort Hall, the great fisheries around Salmon Falls, and along the Boise River. Trade and peaceful relations usually prevailed, even in years of mounting violence. The sight of Salmon Falls, with hundreds of Newes engaged in fishing, particularly struck the emigrants. The Whitmans arrived there in August 1836, just a few days after a run had begun. Like the trappers who preceded them and the emigrants to follow, they traded with Newes for salmon. Two years later, at the same spot, Sarah White Smith wrote, "We have purchased salmon of these Indians, find it beautiful & are feasting on it." Salmon Falls was the source of extensive comment by members of Frémont's 1843 government expedition. Theodore Talbot described the colorful appearance of the large camp. "Round every hut are high platforms covered with drying salmon," he wrote. "They present quite a gay appearance for the meat of the salmon is a deep scarlet color." From Salmon Falls to the Boise, Frémont's party encountered Newes "strung out along the river at every little rapid where fish are to be caught, and the cry '*Haggai, haggai*' (fish) was constantly heard." (*Agai*' is more accurately translated as

“salmon.”) By the time the emigration peaked in the early 1850s, the Newes along the Snake River were still supplying the emigrants with fish. “All sorts of trades were made for fish,” Bagley remembered, “The Indians had no use for money but were glad to exchange for clothing and particularly for ammunition.” This last article of trade concerned Bagley, for by the 1850s tensions and violence between emigrants and Newes were on the rise.⁹⁶

The social divisions between equestrian and pedestrian Newes became obvious by the time the emigrants reached Salmon Falls. Whereas the horse Indians, the Bannocks, often made them nervous, the travelers perceived little threat from the foot-going people; in fact, they usually looked down on them. Both Narcissa Whitman and Sarah Smith called the people there “diggers,” even though they were well stocked with fish and roots. Smith was shocked by their poverty and lack of clothing and lamented, “It is out of my power to help them.”⁹⁷ At Fort Hall, Grant drew similar distinctions between the “brave and numerous . . . Bonacks” and the “set called diggers or chochoukos [who] are miserable objects nearly altogether naked and starving the greater part of the year.”⁹⁸ Talbot was one of the few white observers who spoke directly to the economic divisions in Newe life. Describing a visitor to Frémont’s camp, he wrote: “There was one of these Indians who had belonged to the better class of Snakes, or to the rich Shoshonees, but he had been reduced by a succession of mishaps and was now abiding with his more abject brethren.”⁹⁹ In essence, the effects of the large-scale emigration magnified the economic divisions in Newe life and soured relations between the travelers and the Newes.

Most often the immediate or remembered actions of the emigrants sparked the conflict. During the 1851 season one emigrant took revenge for the loss of a horse by shooting an unsuspecting Newe fisherman at Salmon Falls. It mattered not that the man was innocent; he was an Indian. That same summer, the Patterson train came across a Newe group camped at Rock Creek on the Snake River. Wanting the choice site for themselves, Patterson and several other men in the group fired shotguns over the Indians’ heads and then chased them away on horseback. The Newes retaliated the next day, killing one emigrant and wounding two others. Later in the season, Newe warriors attacked a train near Fort Hall, killing eight and escaping with a good deal of property. Both government officials and members of the train blamed Patterson’s arrogant and imprudent actions for the violence along the Snake River that summer (1851 was the bloodiest single year for the emigrants, and more than

half of the killings took place along the Snake).¹⁰⁰ By the late 1850s the impact of the emigration was acutely apparent, and the pace of Newe raiding increased, although the emigrant death toll never again reached that of 1851.¹⁰¹ Frederick Lander reported that “the Snakes or Shoshones have probably suffered more than any tribe from the passage of the emigration along the narrow vallies of their rivers.” His sympathy rings hollow, however, for he had just surveyed a new road that offered “better grass and [a] more permanent supply of water” to the travelers. The route diverged from the Oregon Trail at South Pass and proceeded north and west to the Salt River and then to Fort Hall by way of the Blackfoot River and Ross Fork Creek. From there, it descended the Snake River to intersect the existing trails. Though more circuitous, “Lander’s Cutoff” made up for the added miles by avoiding the alkaline deserts farther south and crossing the Green River so high that ferries or toll bridges were unnecessary; moreover, it provided “abundant” pasturage and water. It also directed the emigrants through the homeland of the mounted Newe bands. Lander estimated that 90 percent of the 13,000 overland emigrants of 1859 used his new road.¹⁰²

Lander and other government officials recognized that resource damage seriously threatened peace along the trails. Emigrant deaths exceeded the Indian death toll in 1856, 1859, and 1860. Most of the killings came west of South Pass, in the Newe homeland. Lander knew his new road would cause problems as it encroached upon the “herding and camas grounds of the Shoshonee and Pannack tribes.” One of his assistants, C. H. Miller, also singled out the new road for its impact on Newe life: “The animals of the emigrants will destroy the grass in the valleys where the Indians have kept the pine timber and willows burnt out for years as halting places in going and coming from their great annual buffalo hunts.”¹⁰³ Miller felt that the mixed Newe bands of the upper Snake River Plain were the “most dangerous of all the Indians I have visited” and that the increased traffic would just make matters worse. Still, he blamed the emigrants for the tensions and denied that the Newe were “treacherous” simply because they killed intruders. On the contrary, he reported that they had “in the most manly and direct manner . . . said that if emigrants, as has usually been the case, shoot members of their tribes, they will kill them when they can.” And yet another official of the Pacific Wagon Road office complained that the violence was a result of the “wanton annoyance of a class of emigrants, who never avoid an opportunity of attacking small bands of Indians whenever they are met with.”¹⁰⁴

In an effort to avert further violence, Lander toured the Newe country in the summer of 1859, and his report, filed in February of the following year, illustrates the effect of economic changes in Newe society and the emergence of band organization. Lander first visited his closest ally, the Eastern Shoshone headman Washakie, whose friendship had been sorely tested. The previous summer Washakie had told Lander that where he once saw a land filled with game, he now saw only “wagons with white tops, and men riding upon their horses.” When Lander returned in 1859, he brought with him presents as a “reward for their behavior in the past, and [as] payment for the destruction of their root and herding grounds.”¹⁰⁵ From the Green River, Lander moved west to the valley of the Salt River and met with the Mopeah’s band of three hundred “Pannacks” who frequented the Blackfoot River. Midway through the council, Tash-e-pah, or “French Louis,” another Bannock leader and “noted horse thief,” arrived. It was mid-July, and Tash-e-pah had left most of the “disaffected Pannacks at salmon falls.” Lander thought they were not “irreclaimably hostile” but feared that their “horse stealing proclivities [would] prevent amicable arrangements with them.” He also questioned the two leaders’ ability to control young warriors who were drawn to raiding by the promise of easy wealth and the abusive actions of the emigrants. Also of concern were the “Western Snakes” and the “Salt Lake Diggers,” in particular Pocatello’s band, which had developed a reputation for raiding in the Raft River Valley and Goose Creek Mountains.

Not dissuaded by wild rumors of hostility, Lander met with Pocatello, who told the superintendent, “his tribe had received . . . ‘assaults of ignominy’ from white emigrants on their way to California; that one of his principal men had had his squaw and children killed by the emigrants quite recently; that the hearts of his people were very bad against the whites; that there were some things he could not manage, and among them were the bad thoughts of his young men towards the whites.”¹⁰⁶ Pocatello’s people had adapted to violence and dislocation by becoming raiders. In all Lander described seven major “bands” that lived along the emigrant roads west of South Pass. All were Newe peoples, and Lander wrote: “All the above Indians travel together and intermarry. They hold the entire country.” Yet he found enough social, economic, and political difference to categorize them.¹⁰⁷ What separated the various Newe bands and groups were economic conditions and the effects of the emigration. The mounted bands and those foot-going bands, like Pocatello’s, that adapted to raiding along the trails had generally become more cohesive.

The opposite was true for many of the smaller pedestrian groups hardest hit by emigrant violence and resource appropriation. They were atomized and for safety probably withdrew from the trails and moved in even smaller groups.

From the beginning of the eighteenth century to 1860, Newe peoples experienced large-scale social and economic changes that for the first time established band organization and set the stage for ethnic identity. To a great extent, all of the bands shared territory and membership. On the upper Snake River Plain in the vicinity of Fort Hall were the mixed buffalo-hunting bands who exhibited the greatest social cohesion and band organization. Their annual range took them from the lower Snake River, where they fished, traded, and intermarried with the Newe people of the region, to the high plains of Montana and Wyoming, where they hunted and intermarried with their close relatives, the Eastern Shoshones. They were the Bannocks, although the majority were Shoshone speakers. In western Idaho, Shoshone populations along the Boise, Payette, and Weiser rivers owned horses and occasionally participated in buffalo hunts with the Fort Hall peoples. However, they never adopted an equestrian lifestyle to the extent of the latter group and were able to survive quite nicely as the most sedentary of Newe groups because of the rich resources of their homeland. With intensive white settlement, these people would develop a greater band identity as the Boise Shoshones, as would the Bruneau band that lived farther east.¹⁰⁸

Scattered along the lower and middle Snake River were small, pedestrian Shoshone groups. They were far less mobile than the mounted people but lacked the resource base found farther west. Thus, they tended to exploit a wider range of resources in a more limited geographic area. They fished extensively, collected camas roots and piñon nuts at various times of the year, and hunted small game. Organized principally in small, kin-based groups, they wintered north and south of the Snake River from approximately Glenn's Ferry to American Falls. In the decades to come, white misconceptions and the effects of treaties and reservation would compress both lifestyles together, and these peoples, so often called Diggers, would become known simply as Shoshones.¹⁰⁹ The economic and social divisions evident by 1860 would later emerge as "ethnic" identities. Snakes and Diggers would become Bannocks and Shoshones.