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# Bear River Massacre

## The Massacre at Boa Ogoi

# Just north of Preston, Idaho...

there is a farmers field just off of US Highway 91 where it crosses the Bear River. There is a bluff just north of that field where you can stand and look down upon field., If you stop to read the plaques there, you can find out the history of that place. Many people drive by and never stop. They don't know that they are at the place where largest massacre of Native people in what is now the United States took place.



**The word massacre is now used to describe this event. In the past it was called a battle. What does each of those words mean to you? Why do you think that the name was changed?**

## A very cold day, January 29, 1863

The Bear River Massacre happened on a cold winter day in the Cache Valley, which is in northern Utah, southern Idaho. It is estimated that the temperature was close to negative twenty degrees Fahrenheit which is about negative twenty-eight degrees Celsius. What does that feel like? Why is this painting of the event, done in 1941 by the artist Edmond J. Fitzgerald, an unrealistic depiction of that day?





**This painting, done in 1941 by watercolor artist Edmond J. Fitzgerald, is a depiction of the Bear River Massacre. Knowing what you know about the weather on the massacre day, why is the painting unrealistic? Why do you think the artist chose to paint it this way?**

## What Happened that Day

It is believed that at the Bear River site, more than 400 Shoshone people died at the hands of over 200 well armed United States soldiers. Fourteen soldiers were killed and 49 were wounded. Seven of those soldiers later died.

Later on, after the battle was over, the troops took their wounded and dead and headed back to Camp Douglas. They gave an official count of 250 Shoshone people dead. Others, who visited the site immediately after the event, gave a much higher count of people dead.

# Share Your Ideas

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Can you think of any reason why the people in charge of the army felt that they needed to undercount the number dead?

# The Northwestern Shoshone

The Shoshone people were one of the largest tribes in North America at the time of European arrival on the continent. The Northwestern band of Shoshone were a hunting and gathering tribe that roamed areas of northern Utah and Nevada, and southern Idaho and Wyoming. They set up their seasonal camps in the same areas year after year, usually near water, as water is vital when living in a mostly arid land. One of their regular camping sites was in the northern part of what later became known as the Cache Valley.

# A Struggle to Survive

Survival for the Northwestern Shoshone people depended on their ability to find food. When people from other places started moving into the areas they hunted, gathered, and camped in, it became critically difficult for the people to find the resources that they needed to keep themselves fed.

Other times there were misunderstandings between the native people and groups of people that passed through, and sometimes settled on, the lands where the natives found food. Both settlers and native people were guilty of crimes against each. Only a few people sought to cause trouble, but fear caused people to blame and kill even those who were peaceful.

# Latter Day Saint Settlements

In 1856, the LDS people were moving into the Cache Valley, starting in the south at Wellsville, and gradually moving north. In 1863, the far north of the valley was still unoccupied by these settlers, and it remained a place that was the Shoshone could make their camps.

Brigham Young, leader of Latter Day Saints in Utah, realized that the settlements might cause some problems for the natives in the area. He directed the settlers to avoid fighting if possible. “Feed them rather than fight them,” was his directive.

# Share Your Ideas

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Brigham Young said to feed the natives, not fight them. What are the advantages of following this policy?

# The Oregon Trail



To add to the pressure of settlers coming in from the south, on the northern side of the Cache Valley people were moving along the Oregon Trail. It wasn't unusual, after 1848, for those travelers to head south to Salt Lake City to get supplies. The route they used passed through many traditional Shoshone hunting and gathering areas.

# Rushing to the Gold

Miners, and future gold prospectors, were also traveling through Cache Valley. Although the major part of the California Gold Rush was between 1848 and 1855, people crossing overland from the eastern states played a large role in the reduction of the numbers of game animals available for food.

Montana later had its own gold rush in the 1860s and 1870s. In 1862, a trail was established through Cache Valley from Montana to Salt Lake City as a route for these miners to bring their gold to market.

# Hunger

As early as 1859, Jacob Forney, the superintendent of Indian Affairs for the Territory of Utah, wrote, “The Indians... have become impoverished... by the introduction of a white population”. He suggested a reservation to protect the resources for the Shoshone people, but his superiors in the United States department of the Interior didn’t think it was important. In 1862 another superintendent of Indian Affairs admitted, after spending time in Cache Valley, that the Indians were starving and destitute. In return, some native people turned to robbery in order to sustain life.

# Civil War and Troops in Salt Lake

California entered the United States as a non-slavery state in 1850, and in 1862 Lincoln ordered troops stationed in Utah to protect mail and travel routes during the civil war.

Camp Douglas, later renamed Fort Douglas, was established in Salt Lake on land where the University of Utah is now located. Colonel Patrick Connor was its first commander, and he brought with him volunteers from California and Nevada.

The volunteers were hoping to participate in the Civil War. What might they feel when they discovered they were doing guard duty in Utah instead?



# Decision to Move Troops

In the summer and fall of 1862, several things happened that led Colonel Connor and his soldiers into conflict with Shoshone people.

All over the west, there were reports of attacks by Natives Americans on travelers. In Cache Valley, a few incidences led to both native people and settlers/travelers being killed and losing property. A final event that lead to Colonel Connor deciding to attack the Shoshone in their Bear River Encampment was a reported attack on miners making their way through the valley on their way to Salt Lake.

## The Coldest Time of Year

Although Colonel Connor moved his troops as secretly as possible, the Northwestern Shoshone who had set up camp near the Bear River had some advance warning that they were coming, and prepared as they could. They did not, however, prepare for a battle. One of their leaders happened to be in Salt Lake City, trying to negotiate a peace deal to prevent any more bloodshed in the valley. As they waited at Boa Ogoi, they expected that the army officers were coming to talk with their leaders, and to try to come to an understanding.

Just as dawn was breaking over the mountains on the morning of January 29, Chief Sagwitch saw a cloud from the cold mixing with the horses' breath. As soon as the soldiers were close enough, they began firing.

## The Power of Stories

A metal plaque on a monument to the massacre erected in 1953 by the Daughters of Utah Pioneers says the massacre was provoked by an “attack by the Indians on the peaceful inhabitants” in the area and that the Indians were “guilty of hostile attacks on emigrants and settlers.” This is their story of what happened.

The story told by the Shoshone survivors of the massacre is about women and children fleeing and getting caught. It is about survivors playing dead in the fields. It is about people who were unprepared but still managed to survive, and then after the massacre was over, returned to the site to retrieve and warm those who weren't dead.

# What is the Truth

There were many incidences that cumulated in the massacre. The truth is that people were angry and mistrusted each other. Native people were hungry because their resources were depleted. Some settlers blamed natives, whether or not they were at fault, for theft, and people were punished unjustly and severely. Revenge on each other became common.

The truth is also that Colonel Conner had some unhappy soldiers on his hands, and he himself was not inclined toward benevolence when it came to native people. This was true in his dealings with the people both before and after the Bear River Massacre.

# Aftermath

Boa Ogoi was a meeting place, and there people from many areas gathered. After the attack, after the people fled the area, the survivors made their way south and west and north, many back to their homelands.

The site of the Bear River Massacre no longer was a gathering place. Settlers moved into the area.

Some of the Shoshone never came back, and went on to live in other places. Some got help from the Latter Day Saint people of the area, and many of Northwestern band converted to the religion.

Colonel Connor was promoted to Brigadier General.

# Snow

**The day after the massacre, snow fell.**

**The Shoshone people believe that the snow that next day cleaned the land. Not only did it hide the footsteps of those who fled, but it allowed the spirits of the people who were killed to move onward to the afterlife.**

# Healing and Remembrance

Mae Timbimboo Parry, a Shoshone historian and storyteller, understood how vital it is that the tribe tell the story of the Massacre. It was with her guidance that the tribe began the work to purchase land at the site and develop a plan for a cultural center that will be a testament to the resilience, optimism, and perseverance of the people.

Today the Northwest band of Shoshone people own more than 550 acres of land at the site, and with the help of an architecture firm and students at Utah State University have planned a cultural and interpretive center to honor the victims and survivors of the Massacre. The land will also be returned to what it looked like in 1863.



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# BOA OGOI CULTURAL INTERPRETIVE CENTER



Boa Ogoi or Big River in the native Shoshone language is the name of the massacre of more than 400 Shoshone in Southeast Idaho. It

<https://boaogoi.org/>

the country. The new Shoshone Cultural Interpretive Center will be built to honor the enduring spirit of the Shoshone people today.

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## Restoring the Land

Watch the following video, and afterwards write three or four sentences about your thoughts on the plans to restore the site, and any ideas you might have.



Restoring Sacred Land: USU Students Help Develop Shoshone Tribe

Unlisted

229 views • Sep 15, 2020

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**What are your thoughts about the plan to restore the site. Do you have any further ideas?**

## Utah Educational Standards Addressed

UT Standard 2.4: Students will research multiple perspectives to explain one or more of the political, social, cultural, religious conflicts of this period, including the U.S. Civil War and more localized conflicts such as the Utah War, the Mountain Meadows Massacre, the Bear River Massacre, the Black Hawk War, or other Federal-Mormon conflicts. (history)

UT Standard 2.1: Students will explain the causes and lasting effects of the Mormon migration to Utah. (history)

UT Standard 2.2: Students will compare the causes and lasting effects of various non-Mormon groups' migrations to Utah. (history)



# References and Acknowledgements

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I want to thank Rios Pacheco, Educator and Tribal Member of the Northwestern Band of Shoshone for his Stories and for Answering so many of my questions about what happened in 1863, and the lives of the people afterwards.

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