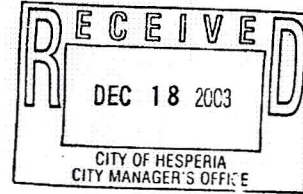


Prehistory and History of the Timbisha Shoshone

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Anthropologist, Historian

Four Directions Institute

The City of Hesperia, California is faced with the prospect of having an Indian casino being located in their community by the Timbisha Shoshone tribe. This paper is written to provide the citizens of Hesperia "accurate" information, so that they may better understand who the Timbasha Shoshone are.

Hesperia is located in the western Mojave Desert, bordered on the east by the Mojave River, the north by the City of Victorville, on the east its boundaries stretch beyond Interstate 15, and on the south by valleys and foothills San Bernardino Mountains region of the Transverse Range.

One archeological site rests within the city limits of Hesperia. It was a Vanyume village called Atongaibit located just southeast of Hesperia Lake. Evidence provided by Padre Francisco Garcés in 1576 and Jedediah Smith in 1828 indicated that about 5 families totaling about 30 persons lived in this village. There are six known Vanyume village sites along the Mojave River, the southernmost being near present Silverwood Dam, and the northernmost being in present Oro Grande. Though the Vanyume spoke the same language as the Serrano to the south, each village was autonomous and not part of the Serrano "tribe." Indeed, the so-called Serrano were autonomous villages like the Vanyume and were not a tribe in the classic definition. The designation of the Serrano peoples as a tribe is a product of the dominant European, and later, American cultures.

Nonetheless, the Vanyume were not the first residents of the Victor Valley. That distinction goes to Yuman ancestors of the Yuma (also called Quechan) and Mojave (Both are termed Yuman, that being their common language). The Yumans removed from the area about 2,500 years ago and were replaced by the Vanyume. The Vanyume apparently migrated from the Colorado River region to which the Yumans migrated. There are several Yuman sites in present Victorville and Oro Grande.

(Note: Only readily available citations are given in the paper in order to allow local readers to easily confirm the assertions herein. A large body of additional evidence exists in unpublished dissertations, harder to find publications, and in unpublished research, as well in the oral stories and knowledge of the Timbasha Shoshone and their neighbors.)

Finally, an interesting anecdote. The term "Shoshone" is a relatively modern one. Its etymology reveals that it was coined about the year 1700 by the Shoshone or, then, Numa people themselves when they first acquired horses. It literally means "men who ride." Neighboring tribes called them the Snakes, and indeed the plains hand sign for the Shoshone was making a slithering motion with the hand and arm.

The Timbisha Shoshone Story ...

The Shoshone are part of a great language phylum known to linguists as Aztec-Tanoan. Evidence indicates Aztec-Tanoans were probably a component of the hunter/gatherer Cochise Culture of southwestern New Mexico, southeastern Arizona, and northern Mexico. This culture began about 10,000 years ago, and lasted to about 500 B.C. But since this period began about the time of the end of

the last Ice Age, flora and fauna were becoming sparse and even extinct and many tribes, including the Uto-Aztecan ancestors of the Shoshone, apparently fissioned about that time from this Cochise Culture.

Evidence indicated that the Uto-Aztecs eventually appeared along the vast shores of huge Lake Lahontan which covered most of northern Nevada and reached into neighboring states. Lake Lahontan began to dry up between 9,000 and 7,000 years ago due to an altithermal, a global warming, and another fissioning happened to the culture. Only the Numic ancestors of the Shoshone remained in the general region. Those who would remove would become the Aztecs, Hopi, Pima, Serrano, Cahuilla, and numerous other tribes of the southwest and Mexico.

About 3,000 years ago, there would be more fissioning among the Numics with the Western Shoshone being a component of the Central Numic language along with what would become the Comanche, Koso, and Northern Shoshone. Linguistic evidence indicates that the Panamint, the ancestors of the Timbisha Shoshone, arrived in Death Valley within the last millennium, though there are many claims that they arrived earlier.

The Great Basin Culture, under which most anthropologists classify all of the Western Shoshone along with the Southern Paiute and Northern Paiute, are considered nomadic foragers, and indeed most are. Two exceptions would be the San Juan Southern Paiutes who were farmers, and the Panamint Shoshone who were semi-sedentary hunter/gatherers, more like the classic California tribes to the west.

(Note: The derogatory term for foragers, "diggers," apparently arose from the plains sign language name for the Great Basin tribes which was a digging with a stick motion first demonstrated by the Crow tribe to Lewis and Clark.)

California's classic semi-sedentary tribes typically owned a winter village and would travel from spring to fall hunting, gathering foods, and collecting materials for tools and utensils. This would be typical behavior for all tribes from northern Baja California north to the Central Valley and excluding the tribes east of the Sierras ... except for the Panamint Shoshone.

Nonetheless, the Panamint maintained many cultural traits of their Great Basin relatives, including stories and ceremonies. They were among the best basket weavers in North America, including both water-tight coiled baskets and beautiful/functional twined carrying, leaching, and winnowing baskets.

Life was generally easy wintering in Death Valley. The Panamint would spend their preceding months gathering non-perishable pine nuts, mesquite beans, and various seeds. They would augment these foods with what fresh plants and game they could accumulate during the winter. The Panamint Shoshone lived in modest conical shaped huts. It seldom got uncomfortably cold in Death Valley during the winter, so substantial houses were not needed and Death Valley was relatively safe from marauding Mojaves who preyed on the tribes of Arizona and Southern California during the winter months.

Winter was a time for storytelling for all of the tribes of North America. The stories, besides being entertaining, held the tribal history, religion, laws, mores, traditions, and explanations of natural phenomena. More often than not, the stories were poems and songs, who's circularity, meter, and verse ensured against deviation over time.

In discussing the Mojave Desert, the National Park Service published, "To American Indian peoples known as Mojave, Shoshone, Paiute, Serrano, Chemehuevi, and Kawaiisu, the lands were occupied and used in many ways, with flexible boundaries among these tribal groups." (1) Indeed, the modern concepts of boundaries was non-existent in this pre-historic setting. Save the immediate villages, sacred

sites, and certain prized food gathering sites, the great Mojave Desert was public lands ... owned by all and visited by all as well. The steatite quarries of Lucerne Valley and Death Valley were visited by all. The obsidian gathering spots dotted the desert and were likewise visited by all. And in drought years when the piñon pines produce not one nut, the Panamint Shoshone traveled west to the Transverse Range to gather acorns lest they experience a winter of famine. There were no oak trees in the eastern Sierra. And, the region of present Hesperia provided the California juniper from which all of the Mojave Desert tribes preferred to fashion their hunting bows. "The bow is of juniper, short, and sinew backed." (2)

(Note: Acorns were the most important food of the tribes of California except along the immediate coast and in the northwest. The meat of the acorn was ground and leached in a basket in running water for eight or so hours. The resulting acorn mush was then cooked in a water tight basket by removing a heating stone from a fire and placing in the mush. This would bring it to a quick boil and it could then be eaten in the same vessel. A common name for acorn mush was *we-wish*. Many joke that it means we wish we had something else to eat. Not the case, though it is bland.)

All of the tribes of the Mojave Desert were peaceful and friendly except for the bellicose Mojave and Yuma of the Colorado River. Visiting tribes were always welcome and trading was conducted vigorously. Coastal tribes traded shells for the inland obsidian. Other trade items included steatite, flint, chert, crafted items, white sage, and feathers.

(Note: White sage is the most important religious plant to all of the tribes of the southwest. But, it grows well only on the up-slope areas facing the coast where fog is common. The Cajon Pass is therefore a prime growing area. Indeed, when the Timbisha first arrived in Hesperia for a public meeting in November, I first saw them praying in a group, burning white sage.)

Western Shoshone, Southern Paiute, and Kawaiisu rock art can be found as far west as Black Canyon, 35 mile northwest of Barstow (3) and Inscription Canyon, 42 miles northwest of Barstow (4). These petroglyphs depict bighorn sheep and fantastic animistic deities and rites. Petroglyphs attributed to Western Shoshone, Southern Paiute, and Vanyume can be found at Surprise Tanks, about 20 miles east of Barstow. These petroglyphs depict rattlesnakes, other animals, a large bee, a plant, and other fantastic images.

The sheep depicted in the aforementioned petroglyphs were not commonly found prehistorically in the Barstow region. They were common in the mountains around Death Valley, however, as well as San Jacinto Range far to the south and mountains as far to the east as the Rockies. Interestingly, bighorn sheep were not an important food source of the Western Shoshone. Nonetheless, at least half of the petroglyphs attributed to the Western Shoshone are of the sheep. If they depicted their most important food source, they would depict rabbits.

(Note: Shoshones believe that they descended from a tribe which lived in Yellowstone they call the Sheepeaters. Legend has it that the Sheepeaters made bows of bighorn sheep horns cooked in the hot springs of Yellowstone and then pounded into shape. Some believe that these petroglyphs reflect a spiritual tie to these ancestors.)

Though California has been inhabited by Whites since 1769, prehistory for the Panamint Shoshone did not end until 1849 when gold rush settlers first entered Death Valley. From that point until this day, the Panamint Shoshone, later called the Timbisha Shoshone, would be among, if not the, most oppressed people in the United States.

Throughout California, Indians who lived anywhere there was a possibility of gold or other riches were fair game. California's rush of American settlers continued the Indian genocide that had been begun by the Spanish and Mexicans. The exception was that Spanish and Mexican genocide had not reached the Shoshone. American genocide did.

Only one year later in 1850 during the California State Constitutional Convention, California's first law was enacted (5). It was the Act for the Government and Protection of Indians. This act was essentially a slave act. Any White citizen could take any Indian child to any justice of the peace and state that he wanted to adopt the Indian child. The Indian child was immediately placed in the custody of that person. Not only could Indians not testify in this hearing, none could speak English anyway. Likewise, any White could follow the same process with an Indian family and they would be immediately indentured to that person's property. To leave was punishable by death at the hands of the property owner or others. This law was only enforced to the benefit of the White population. This law was finally repealed in 1863.

Squatters grabbed the nearby mountains in 1849 which the Panamint depended upon for food, especially their staple, pine nuts. Violent miners ran the Panamint from the water resources of the valley floor. Many of those who survived became slaves. Others foraged meager lives in the wilderness ... still others perished. The repeal of the act turned most into virtual slaves of abusive employers for meager wages. Indian/White violence reached its zenith in the 1860's.

It is impossible to know exactly what the population of the Panamint Shoshone was in 1849, but one would expect it to have been in the range of 150 or so persons living in four small winter villages on the floor of Death Valley. Their population was estimated at less than 100 in 1891 (2).

Congress ratified the Treaty of Ruby Valley in 1866. The treaty was a statement of peace and friendship between the United States and the Western Shoshone. But, it also granted the United States rights-of-way across Western Shoshone territories.

By the time the federal government officially took the Panamint Shoshone primary ancestral lands with the creation of Death Valley National Monument in 1933, most of the men of the tribe were working in the mines or in construction. The tribe had been living in three villages in Grapevine Canyon, Wildrose Canyon, and Furnace Creek. It would be three years before the Park Service would set aside 40 acres for the tribe. Twelve small adobe structures were built to house the 150 or so tribal members. These structures had no water, indoor plumbing, nor electricity.

Several of these homes were bulldozed by the Park Service when their Panamint Shoshone inhabitants left to spend time in the nearby mountains to escape 120+ degrees summer heat. In the '70's and '80's, however, trailers and mobile homes were added to the small village and utilities with funds provided by several federal agencies.

The Panamint Shoshone finally became a federally recognized tribe in 1983, naming their tribe the Timbisha Shoshone. But few of the benefits of being federally recognized were realized.

As a result of continued mistreatment by Park Service employees and feeling like they were being "corralled like cattle", most of the Timbisha Shoshone removed from Death Valley and ventured north to Bishop, California to live as guests of their distant cousins the Northern Paiute on the Bishop Reservation. There many were able to find employment, some in the casino owned and operated by the Bishop Paiute.

In 1994, the Desert Land Protection Act directed instructed the Secretary of the Interior to work with the Timbasha Shoshone in finding a suitable reservation for the tribe. Nonetheless, Interior Secretary Bruce Babbitt, "...decided to throw the Tribe off the last remnant of its traditional homelands in Death Valley." (6). Mr. Babbitt was unsuccessful, and in September, 1998 the tribe reached an agreement with the Department of the Interior to establish a Timbisha Shoshone reservation.

The Timbisha Shoshone Homeland Act was ratified in November, 2000. A total of 7,700 acres were restored to the tribe as a reservation. But, the tribe was forced to waive certain rights to secure ratification of this act, rights related to economic viability such as rights to game, construction of a casino, and others. As a result, the restored reservation was not an economically viable one, and was still in violation of the Desert Land Protections Act, except that it also provided that "... the Secretary of the Interior shall acquire additional lands for the tribe for the purpose of economic development ..." This provision gives the tribe the right to place into trust land in the City of Hesperia, which falls within the tribe's traditional ancestral homelands.

It is important that we understand that in history, and especially in prehistory, there are no facts ... only evidence. Historians and anthropologists consider the body of evidence available and draw conclusions which are then called history or prehistory. I have long since concluded that, in their irregular travels, the Panamint Shoshone ranged into the area of Hesperia.

Further, the term "traditional ancestral homelands", could not be more vague. Is it only the immediate property around it's permanent village where a tribe had a strong sphere of influence, especially when one considers that the tribe in question is only semi-sedentary, spending three fourths of the year as nomads. If the territory over which the tribe wandered during their hunting and gathering travels is not considered "traditional ancestral homelands", then no tribes of the Great Basin or the Great Plains would have any ancestral homelands. Indeed, the Cheyenne, and the Arapaho, and the Blackfeet, and all of the other Shoshone tribes, and numerous others would have no rightful claim to ancestral lands and therefore have no right to a reservation. This is, of course, a ludicrous conclusion. Hesperia is part of the vast ancestral homeland of the Panamint Shoshone, the people now called the Timbasha Shoshone.

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... and if you really want to do some serious research, visit www.fourdir.com click on "California Indians", then click on "Western Shoshoni", then go to the "Shoshone Bibliography" link and click on it. There are many other valuable links on that site.