



Welcome to Bear Lake County, Idaho

Early History

Indians:

When the Indians first discovered the Bear Lake Valley is not known. Long before the whitemen arrived, the area was a favorite summer area of several tribes. Here they gathered to hunt, fish, and trade.

The Bannocks, Shoshones, Utes, and bands of Crows were familiar with the Bear Lake area. Among the Shoshones is a legend telling of the creation of Bear Lake, giving an indication that the area had long been used by their tribe.

Fur Traders:

It is believed that the first whitemen to visit the Bear Lake Valley were with Joseph Miller, a trapper who originally served with the Wilson Price Hunt Expedition. That group of men wintered near Rexburg on the banks of the Snake River during the winter of 1811 and 1812.

Five of the men, including Miller, were assigned to scout the area and trap it. During that winter, Miller apparently explored the Bear Lake Valley because a year later, he led a portion of the Stuart party through the valley, explaining that he had been there before.

Donald McKensie, a huge, redheaded, Scotchman, with the Northwest Fur Company was here at least twice in 1818 and again in 1819. During his visit in 1819, he named the river, lake, and valley with the name they hold today -- Bear.

McKensie established trade relations with the Indians here during 1819 and 1820. Seven years later, the popularity of the area made it the site for the third annual Fur Trader's rendezvous during the month of June and July 1827. At one time, he had a rendezvous of 10,000 Indians along the shores of the Bear Lake trading furs. This was the largest known gathering of Indian Tribes to have assembled in the Rockies.

Fur Trading left little permanent impact on the valley although the lake area served as a hub of the industry from 1820 until 1840. Virtually no signs of their presence remained within two years of their leaving. Hardly had the trappers left when the first of the explorers reached the area.

Explorers:

Among the more noted explorers coming into the area were Captian Bonneville, Tom “Broken Hand” Fitzgerald, Caleb Greenwood, and John C. Fremont. Bonneville probably camped with his group on the shores of Bear Lake during the summer of 1832 and again in 1833. It is thought he probably brought the first wagon into the area although the furtraders had two-wheel carts and a cannon back in 1827.

Not far behind came Dr. Marcus Whitman and Reverend Henry Harmon. By coming through South Pass, the Whitman’s brought wagons into the valley and on to Fort Hall in 1836. Whitman was back again in 1842 and, with the help of Elijah White, he led the first emigrant train through the valley.

Also in 1842, the noted “pathfinder”, John C. Fremont explored the area, naming many of the prominent peaks, canyons, and streams.

In 1842, Whiteman was back. Filled with the desire to colonize all of Oregon, he was leading another group. This time with 200 families and 120 wagons. From then on the ruts of the Oregon Trail were deeply imbedded in the valley soils.

Although hundreds, even thousands, were soon to cross the area, none established permanent residence here until Peg Leg Smith began the development of his trading post. To him went the honor of becoming Bear Lake’s first settler.

Resource: “Treasured Tidbits of Time,” by J. Patrick Wilde, pages 1-3.

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