

Shivwits Band of Paiutes

Of all those now living in Washington County none have been here as long as the Shivwits band of Paiutes. The southern Paiutes probably entered Utah about 1100 AD. There were larger groups of the people that settled along the rivers and smaller groups that stayed near springs.

1. The Paiute were mainly foragers, hunting rabbits, deer, and mountain sheep, and gathering seeds, roots, tubers, berries, and nuts (especially pine nuts.) They also had some irrigated fields along the banks of the Virgin, Santa Clara, and Muddy rivers. They raised corn, squash, melons, gourds, sunflowers, and, later, winter wheat.

These small bands of people were mainly family groupings which camped together and were often named after the locations they inhabited. Spring and summer were spent in areas where they could gather, plant, and hunt food for the upcoming winter. In the fall after the growing season was over, large Paiute groups gathered together for dances and marriages. In the winter stories were often told of the supernatural world and activities of Wolf and Coyote and other spirit animals.

Wolf was the elder brother and more responsible, while Coyote was the trickster and troublemaker.

The Paiutes' first contact with Europeans probably occurred when the Escalante-Dominguez party encountered Paiute women gathering seeds in 1776.

Around 1827 Jedediah Smith established an overland route to California through the Paiute territory. The presence of trappers, traders, and emigrants and their animals along this route had a serious effect on the Paiutes. Their grasses, corn, and food were eaten and trampled down by the travelers and their animals and the Paiute young women and children were often stolen and traded to the Europeans by the Utes and Navajos.

This and the arrival of the Mormons in the 1850s and other permanent settlers ended the Paiutes' traditional lifestyle. Those who came to stay settled, cultivated, and fenced places that had traditionally served the Paiutes as foraging and camping areas.

The first reservation for the Paiutes was established in 1891 on 100 acres of land near the Santa Clara River at Shivwits, about 10 miles west of St. George. At the end of 1891 a census was taken showing that there were a total of 194 at the reservation: 114 males and 80 females. Of this number there were fifty heads of families and forty children between six and sixteen years of age.

Having lost their major sources of traditional food, contracting contagious diseases from the settlers, and other problems resulting from the settlement of the county have greatly reduced the number of the tribal members. In the 1950's the Utah Paiutes' tribal status was terminated by Congress. This caused many problems for the people for nearly 30 years.

In the 1970s award money was given to the people to pay for land that was taken many years before (27 cents per acre!) On 3 April 1980 President Carter signed legislation that restored federal recognition for the Paiute. This has made it possible for the people to once again have a tribal council and the help of social programs.

The Shivwits settlement at Shem has changed over the years, most of the early homes are gone and newer homes have been built east of the old site. The cemetery is still in use. The people of the Shivwits band and the other Southern Paiute remain a close knit group. As always their culture is very important in making them a unique and proud people.