

Archaeologists study largest Native American massacre site in history

- By Melanie Fenstermaker for The Herald Journal
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When Col. Patrick Connor led a group of U.S. calvarymen in a daytime attack on the Shoshone in Idaho, at least 250 men, women and children were killed. The events of that bitter cold January morning in 1863 are referred to as the Bear River Massacre, and although it was the largest Native American massacre in U.S. history, few people know the story.

For years, the exact location of the massacre was lost — but now, more than 150 years later, archaeologists are searching for the site, hoping to better document the event and educate the public about its significance.

“This was the largest single killing of Native Americans, but kids out here don’t know about it,” said Ken Cannon, the president of USU Archaeological Services. “Hopes are there will be better knowledge and interpretation to let people know that this very important event happened here.”

USU Archaeological Services was hired last year by the Idaho State Historical Society to do the first-ever survey of the area, which is located just north of Preston. The American Battlefield Protection Program gave a grant to Ken Reid, director of the State Historic Preservation Office in Idaho, to fund the project as part of Idaho Territory’s 150th anniversary in 2013.

The archaeologists are using a series of geophysical and excavation techniques to find the site, where they hope plaques will be erected to commemorate the historic battlefield.

Challenges and Promising Data

Fifteen decades have changed southeastern Idaho: farming, irrigation and natural processes have altered the land, even diverting the course of the Bear River and one of its tributaries, Battle Creek. Part of the archaeologists’ goal is to locate where the Bear River and Battle Creek originally flowed, then use the information to find key massacre sites, such as the Shoshone village, initial assault and fleeing of tribe members.

“One of the first things we’ve been trying to do is bring together all these various historical maps and documents to try to understand the landscape we see today,” Ken Cannon said.

In addition to historical document interpretation, the team used geophysical instruments to survey the land in search of possible historic items. Although most of what has been found so far is “farm trash,” some recent geophysical data has been promising, said Molly Cannon, who works at USU Archaeological Services.

A magnetic gradiometer, a tool that measures magnetic differences beneath the surface, revealed a heavy, black, square signature in the area.

“The size and shape of it is pretty suggestive of what a house floor might look like,” Molly Cannon said.

The archaeologists suspect the mark may indicate the location of the old Shoshone village. The village likely has the “biggest archaeological signature” of the Bear River Massacre sites, Molly Cannon said, which makes it a natural place to start the excavation.

“The area we are most interested in is trying to find out where the village was,” Ken Cannon said. “If we can identify where the village was, we can work back from that.”

Although the image suggests a house floor might be buried beneath the surface, the archaeologists can’t be certain until they excavate, she said.

“With geophysics all we’ve got are images. It just looks like shades of white and gray,” Molly Cannon said. “We can see patterns, but we won’t know what they are until we excavate them.”

Ground-penetrating radar and metal detection results also revealed the area as a point of interest, she said.

The dark print is the most “interesting” of the geophysical results, Molly Cannon said, and USU Archaeological Services plans to take a small group to the site to excavate in October.

Results of the excavation, Reid said, will be made public in November or December.

The excavation, however, will be modest, and supervised carefully by the Shoshone people.

A Watchful Shoshone Eye

Patty Timbimboo-Madsen, the cultural and natural resource manager of the Northwestern Band of the Shoshone Nation, knows the story of the Bear River Massacre from her tribe’s oral tradition, and doesn’t like the idea of archaeologists telling her the history of her people.

“To me, the work of archaeologists is still a one-sided story,” she said. “They’re telling us who and what we are, and that kind of gets a little hurtful.”

Many commemorations of the massacre by non-Shoshone people have been insensitive to Shoshone losses. For years the incident was known as the Battle of Bear River, and it wasn’t identified as a massacre until a 1993 review by the National Park Service.

“They realized it shouldn’t have happened the way it did ... the killing of children, elders, women,” Timbimboo-Madsen said.

Although incident’s name has changed, evidence of the mislabeling still exists. A monument erected in 1953 says the incident was caused by “an attack by the Indians upon peaceful inhabitants” and that the Shoshone were “guilty of hostile attacks on emigrants and settlers.”

“There is a monument erected by the Daughters of the Utah Pioneers who, bless their hearts, did the best they could in the time that they put it up,” said Darren Parry, the vice chairman of the Northwestern Band of the Shoshone Nation. “It wasn’t the Battle of Bear River and it’s slanted toward the savage Indians and the brave soldiers that fought, so it doesn’t tell the whole story.”

The Shoshone are purchasing land in the area. If the location of the massacre is found, Parry hopes they can erect a monument that tells a more accurate version of the story.

Col. Patrick Connor was called upon when settlers felt they needed protection, Timbimboo-Madsen said, so he brought a group of volunteers from California to help.

“He told them, ‘I will come and protect the overland mail routes, I’ll keep my eye on the Mormons and I’ll deal with the Indians,’” she said.

During the time of the attack, the Shoshone were gathered for a ceremony to welcome in a new year and hope for an abundance of food sources, Timbimboo-Madsen said, and that's when Connor's army attacked with gunfire.

The Shoshone were armed and returned fire, but they seem to have run out of ammunition, Ken Cannon added. What began as a battle turned into a massacre.

"One of the tribal members foresaw the killing of our people and he kept telling the people we better go, we better go, they're going to kill us," Timbimboo-Madsen said. "A few other people survived, but that was it."

The massacre was rarely talked about because it was overshadowed by events from the Civil War. Others chose not to discuss the massacre or its location because it was so devastating, she said.

"It was a place where no one really wanted to talk about because of what had happened there," Timbimboo-Madsen said. "It was a sad, sad day, not only for the Indian people, but I think some people in the community who made friends with the Shoshone people were horrified by what had happened."

Although sharing the story sometimes makes Timbimboo-Madsen feel sad, she believes it is important to educate others about the massacre.

"As a tribal member, you know, I go through periods of being really saddened by it," she said, "but it's my job as a descendant to tell their story."

Despite any hesitance from tribe members, the tribal council voted unanimously to allow the archaeologists to excavate, provided at least one member of the tribe supervises at all times.

Out of respect for the deceased, no uncovered remains from the excavation will be shown to the public.

"A lot of people in the community have expressed a desire that any human remains found not be displayed, and we're certainly sympathetic to that," Reid said. "We've got laws to protect the graves on the state and federal level. We certainly do not want to excavate any bodies."

The archaeologists are working to cooperate with and respect the Shoshone people in order to uncover the history of the Bear River Massacre.

"I respect what they do and what they're trying to do, which is trying to tell a story about what happened," Parry said. "We can all learn from it, and the more we know about it, the more we understand it."