

INTERVIEW: BRUCE PARRY, NW BAND OF THE SHOSHONE NATION TRIBAL COUNCIL CHAIRMAN (at the Bear River Massacre Site, Preston, Idaho)

FORREST CUCH:

Ok, it's summer 2008, and we're at the site of the tragic Bear River Massacre. And, Bruce, this is the site of horrendous loss to your people. Tell us about it, I know it's very painful for you all these years later, but what took place here?

BRUCE PARRY:

Well, I think many of our members are more concerned about what happened years ago. I kind of look toward the future myself. But this was one of the defining events in our tribe's history, and probably the first big event. We lived here for thousands of years and actually had had no problem with anybody but because of some incidents that had happened along the California trail and this part of the country, with some Montana miners. Colonel Patrick Connor at Fort Douglas decided to come up and punish some group of Shoshones, and uh unfortunately he got the wrong ones. But actually, he decided to come do a winter march, and I think it was the first one in the history of the country where Indians had been attacked in the wintertime. And he loved Salt Lake City, and they marched at night so that the Shoshones wouldn't know that he was coming. However, we did know, and had we chosen to leave we could have left before they got here. But we decided to stay because of the leadership of the tribe who was at that time; Chief Bear Hunter and Chief Sagwitch were two of the principal bands here. They decided to stay and uh talk; only Colonel Connor didn't have any intention of talking. And so, if you look at the cliffs over here to the left of us... the soldiers came over those cliffs and crossed the Bear River. Fortunately, they couldn't bring their howitzer with them because it got stuck in the snow over by Preston (laughing) or they'd been bombing shells on us from long distance. But the cavalry and the infantry marched across that field right there. Actually where the river is now it's deviated from where it was at that point. It used to be closer over here to where we are. And there the ice was very heavy on the river, and the horses broke the ice and of course...I understand that many of the troops got frostbite because it was so cold. Fact, they say that it was so cold that it froze the whiskey in the canteens of the military troops. Which is probably 30 below 0 or worse. But the reason we camped here was because of the geothermal activity in the area. Down there where we had our horses, it was usually not very much snow because of the warm ground and so that's one reason they chose to camp here. And we've been camping here for years and years. In fact, earlier in the spring, in early January, they had had a big celebration here. The Shoshones did what they called the 'warm dance', and it was a celebration to hurry up spring, and I suppose at one time there may have been two to three thousand Indians in this valley. And most of them had gone home a couple a weeks prior to the massacre. So there were remnants of two or three bands of Shoshone here at the time of the attack. So it was pretty devastating. If you look at some of the history, they said that the Indians had dug holes in the side of the banks of the river so they could shoot. You don't dig very many holes of sticks when it's thirty below so. Those are holes that were dug over the years by children playing. And although it may have been a good site for an Indian warrior to hide, and shoot, ya know pop up and shoot his arrows - the holes weren't dug for that

purpose, because we had no intent of even having a fight here. So it was a quite a wild deal. I think it started right before dawn, Chief Sagwitch woke up, looked to the hills over there and saw steam rolling off the hills and he of course knew it was the horses sweating because some of their friends in Franklin had told 'em that the troops were coming. A couple three days before they actually got here. So they had an opportunity to leave, but they chose not to. Now two days before the massacre actually occurred there was an old Indian man named, Tindup, and he had a dream that uh the soldiers were going to attack the bands and so, he told the people the day before the massacre. He said "if you want to live you'll leave with me today", and some of them did leave, but a lot of them didn't. And the ones that left went down over the mountain toward the Malad Valley eventually made their way to Brigham City or Promontory Point where the other members of the band were camped. And so they were spared being massacred. But soldiers of course were, I think they were told "don't take any prisoners", and they were killing men, women, children. The old people in the tribe tell me that many of our younger braves were north up towards Soda Springs hunting for game to bring back to the tribe, and so a lot of our young men weren't here at the time. So who they mostly killed were older people and women and children

Forrest Cuch:

And the number killed has ranged between 250 to 350, but more recently we've heard of even higher numbers, higher death count?

Bruce Parry:

Yeah, soldiers originally the reports from the military said around 250, and then I've read reports from local residents who said it was more like uh 400.

Forrest Cuch:

As many as 493-

Bruce Parry:

Yeah, and more recently there was a young man who wrote a journal, and he was a muleskinner, and he worked for the guy that took supplies to the silver camps in Montana. And when they came through he went and counted the bodies... and he said there were almost 500, and he went and got his boss to confirm what he had counted and his boss counted and that's where we get the very latest numbers and it's around 492 to 500.

Forrest Cuch:

That would make it one of the largest massacres in Western United States, larger than Sand Creek, and larger than Wounded Knee-

Bruce Parry:

Wounded Knee was a hundred, I think, and Sand Creek was around 250. So it was uh two or three or four times larger than those battles, which were, well they weren't battles either, but... They were more widely known because it wasn't during the time of the Civil War. Ours happened in 1863 which was right in the middle of the war and there wasn't

much press around here to record what happened so- It still uh pretty well unknown... except for those who lived it and have been writing about it in the last few years. But the Bear River Massacre was a lot larger and I think we were saying at one point that it was the largest massacre of Indians in the United States, but we went back and the Pequot told us that they had had 2000 killed. But of course that was really pre-country, and before the country was organized and I understand that there were British troops and Mohegans was involved in that massacre.

Forrest Cuch:
And the Narragansetts?

Bruce Parry:
Yeah, so, as far as we're concerned it was the largest United States military massacre. The other thing for us, we need to take into consideration, is that many of our tribal members that were killed were thrown into the Bear River, and had floated away before they counted. So it could have well exceeded 500 people. They said the combatants were women using winnowing pans to fight...crazy.

Forrest Cuch:
Tell me more about the massacre.

Bruce Parry:
Well, on January 29, 1863 troops from Fort Douglas under Patrick Connor, bit of surprise attack on the Shoshone, they thought, but we kind of knew they were coming a few days ahead. So it really wasn't a total surprise; we stayed here intentionally because we didn't expect to be fighting. But uh if you look over at the left there you see some cliffs toward Preston that the troops came over, they crossed the Bear River and I guess it was, you know, it was purported that Chief Bear Hunter-before they crossed the river-stood up and was yelling uh insults at them, like uh 'you SOBs' and things like that, I kind of discount that though because Bear Hunter couldn't speak English. (Laughs) And uh it's kind of funny that he's yelling English cuss words at em, you know, when he didn't even speak the language. But at any rate we had a village of about probably 500 or so; most of our young men were away hunting up toward Soda Springs. So basically who got attacked were the older folks and women and children. And they didn't give us any quarter they were vicious and killed children as well as older folks.

Forrest Cuch:
And the order was to kill all?

Bruce Parry:
Yep, to kill all, yeah, and I guess it was originally called a battle but it probably was for about 5 minutes, some of our older guys settled rifles and three or four rounds of ammunition to hunt with, but we didn't ever expect to be in uh battle so it quickly turned to a massacre. After we shot our few arrows and the four or five bullets we had to hunt.

Forrest Cuch:

Bruce why is this um a defining moment for the Shoshone people?

Bruce Parry:

Actually it was the first time in history, I guess, that anyone had ever paid attention to us. And it was such a devastating event. The thing that happened as a result of that is that the pioneers were moving in more and more. Lot of the wild grasses that the Indians use for food and a lot of the game were being destroyed and I think our tribe leaders recognized the fact that we couldn't be gatherers and hunters much longer and survive. And so some of our tribe leaders approached the leaders of the LDS church and said 'how can you help us, you know, become farmers'. And as a result of that, the church actually tried to start three or four farms, one near Franklin originally, and then one near Malad and one near Corrine, and eventually we ended up at Washakie, Utah. Which is where the church set aside 1400 acres, and we lived there from 1875 until probably the 1960's. And as a result of the massacre, I think, uh that's one reason that our tribe all joined the church in 1875. Because of the assistance of the LDS church in starting farms and teaching us a different way of life. So it was quite interesting. The reason we camped here in the winter was because of the geothermal activity, warm water, you know we could bathe down there in the Bear River when it was 30 below 0, and have a nice comfortable 90 degree bath. It was good for grazing for our animals because the land didn't freeze, and it's interesting today we're back here at the same site, and we're using those geothermal sites to develop power. We have five sites online... uh hopefully 100 megawatt sites, and we're selling most of our power to southern California. That we'll be developing, we already have a contract with Riverside California for 65 megawatts starting in two years and we'll make about uh 1.9 billion dollars on that project. If we can develop all 5 sites in the 100 megawatt plants over the next 30 years it will be worth 15 billion dollars, in revenue, so it's funny that we're back to where we started. We're here first because of the warmth and now we're here to create power for the country, which is in desperate need of power at this point.

Forrest Cuch:

What always amazes me about your band, is that for the most part you were wiped out, and for you to come back, as a people, to retain what little you have, and to be able to do what you are doing today is incredible. Bruce this in one of the most powerful tragedies that could ever befall an American Indian tribe and I'm just amazed at how your people have been able to recover, tell us a little bit about that. Your people definitely have great strength among them.

Bruce Parry:

Well you know... the massacre really changed the situation about our lifestyle. Before we had been hunters and gatherers for hundreds, if not thousands of years, when the pioneers came and their animals were eating the natural grains and the game were being killed by the non-Indians as well for food. It really created a very difficult time for us, and that's one of the reasons that we approached the church to help us to learn to become farmers. But doing that, you know, during that same period of time they had created before hauling Indian reservation, in Idaho, and were asking us to go there. And

at one time congress created a reservation for us at Carlin farms, Nevada. Another point they wanted us to move out with the Utes in the Uintah Basin, I think they were trying to move all the Utah tribes out there. And we just said, you know the last time we dealt with you Federal people we didn't fair very well. So we're just gonna to throw our lot in with the church and learn how to live a different way and that, and so as a result a farm was created we worked there learned how to do farming. A lot of our cultural ways kind of went the wayside, because we didn't live in a large Indian area where those things were preserved, and so since 1875 we've been kind of competing with everybody in the world for jobs and for, you know, and schooling. And as a result I think it's put us a little further ahead as far as thinking about business. We've had to go to non-Indian schools, we've had to go to non-Indian universities, and we were just thrown in and had to compete, and so, I think that's probably why some of our leaders are a little better educated, and a little more apt to think about creating businesses to support our tribe, and so that's what we've done. A few years ago we created an economic development corporation, and now we're doing construction, we've done over 100 projects for the federal government. Mostly for department of defense, we do a translation work for the security agencies of the United States. We're doing energy development. We've just been awarded 10 military bases, to make independent as far as their energy is concerned. And that's just the beginning, uh we're creating three more corporations here in the next month or two...To do various other things like resort development travel plazas...we'll be doing things at airports; you know those conveyors that move luggage? We'll be doing that at airports and we're actually putting together a company to drill at our geothermal projects. We'll own the company that does the drilling also. So we've been kind of more entrepreneurial. I think it's because we were thrown out in a society where everybody was doing that.

Forrest Cuch:

And you were landless for the most part, right?

Bruce Parry:

Yeah, we were till 1987 when we got our first 187 acres, and that's the base of our whole reservation today is that 187 acres. And we've acquired some other land since, but it's not in trust. So we do hope to increase our trust land and right now we're negotiating for another three to 4000 acres so we're getting a little more land but we've found that you don't have to do business on your own land, we can do it anywhere in the country, and we are doing it.

Forrest Cuch:

And most of this land's in Idaho, right?

Bruce Parry:

Uh yes...

Forrest Cuch:

So I would think now this is hallowed ground because so many people were killed here?

Bruce Parry:

Yeah the only bad thing about it Forrest, was that none of the people, that were massacred ever got a decent burial. The old people up here and the Indians have told me that the Indian bones just lay on the ground for years and years and years. And uh right over in the middle of our property, you know that road we drove on today? Where they built that road they found uh numerous bones, from people that were killed, you know, a hundred and forty something years ago and they just pushed 'em off to the side of the road and so- We have probably Indians all over here under the ground not very far, and there hasn't ever been one burial of any of those people. And so we kind of consider the whole area a graveyard.

Forrest Cuch:

And you've acquired some of that land?-

Bruce Parry:

Yes, we've uh acquired originally 20 acres, and then 7 more and then 4 more, and we're looking at acquiring about a really important piece about 14 acres, and then...The elk farmers offered to sell us 90 acres that go further up Battle creeks. It's a beautiful area but we probably weren't up that far at the time of the massacre, but we were up the creek a little ways.

Forrest Cuch:

Bruce what were some of the stories that were passed down to you of the Bear River Massacre?

Bruce Parry:

Oh boy I heard a lot of stories, Forrest, from my mother [Mae Parry]. A lot of them were about people escaping and jumping into the river and you know hiding below the banks. My great-great grandfather, Sagwitch, had a son, and he was escaping and threw his girlfriend on the back of the horse, and was afloat in the river and try get away, and someone shot his girlfriend off the back of the horse. Of course, Sagwitch got shot in the hand when he was trying to get, out and there are newer stories. I think one of the worst ones is Sagwitch had a young son named, Bishop, and he was somewhere between 2 and 5 years old, and anyway he was shot seven times by the military-

Forrest Cuch:

Seven?

Bruce Parry:

Seven times and survived... so that's John Warner's great-great grandpa. So, it was a quite a deal. And then another famous story is the Sagwitch hung his little daughter up in the tree, and hoped someone would pick her up, and I think the day of the massacre some people named Hull, that were living here came over and took her out of the tree and raised her. And we've kind of traced her genealogy now to the Hull family that's in Hooper Utah. So yeah, they're a lot of stories.

Forrest Cuch:

From what we know about the massacre Bruce, it's a wonder any of your people survived.

Bruce Parry:

Yeah like I mentioned to you before it's, I think in many cases it would have been better off if they had been killed, because for example Sagwitch's youngest son, Bishop, who was 2 to 5 years old somewhere in that range, was shot 7 times by the military, and survived. And he happened to grow up he was kind of of a - this interesting story, he was living over by Willard and Sagwitch went to Salt Lake to see Brigham Young, and he left he left Bishop with his nephew and while he was gone the nephew traded Bishop for a goat and a couple of bags of wheat and so he was raised by a white family in Willard. Who eventually gave him to one of their brothers up here in Cache valley, and he ended up going to Brigham Young Academy, which was prior to Utah State University. He graduated and was probably was the first Indian schoolteacher in the state. I know he was the first one from our tribe. And he traveled on his buggy like kind of one of those little judges- circuit judge, he'd go from town to town and teach in the elementary schools. So he made a good life for himself, after the massacre, but it was pretty difficult when he was very small.

Forrest Cuch:

Bruce, what started the whole thing, the conflict? Do you recall?

Bruce Parry:

You know actually there were originally 10 bands of northwestern Shoshone, and Pocatello's band was the most aggressive and the California trail went right through their territory, right through Fort Hall, and they would attack wagon trains quite often and a lot of times it was provoked by the people on the wagon trains, they'd shoot at the Indians as they'd go down the trail and then the Indians would wait till dusk, and then attack em. But this particular incident I think there was a massacre out there just west of Fort Hall, and then there were some miners coming out of Salt Lake terry supply for the silver mine up there in Montana. And so, some Indians got in a fight with 'em and, ya know I think all of them, there was like 6 of them and 5 of them were killed. And so when they got the report in Salt Lake...I think some of em went to the federal judge there and got a warrant for Sagwitch, Sandpitch, Pocatello, and Chief Lehi. And I think the federal marshal was gonna come up and try to serve it to get those chiefs to court and then by the Colonel Connor he says 'I've already got plans to go up there' but he said 'we're not taking any prisoners'. So, just a couple little incidents like that as what I think provoked the attack. You know uh had you really wanted to attack the people that were causing the trouble, you'd have gone further up than Idaho to Pocatello's band and found them. But actually our people had been pretty peaceful and they they'd made friends with a lot of the Mormon settlers. And they didn't have any reason to attack wagon trains because they were getting goods from the bishop's storehouse over at Franklin. Church is giving them flour and bread and all kinds of things. But that's kind of what provoked the whole thing. And then of course... the real historians know that as

soon as Colonel Connor went past Franklin, Idaho; he was in Washington territory, which is out of his jurisdiction, he shouldn't have even come up this way to attack Indians. But there was no line on the ground so he just kept coming-

Forrest Cuch:

Cause Franklin, this town right over here, is actually in Idaho, right?

Bruce Parry:

Yeah, it is. Franklin's the first town in Idaho, and then Preston, of course developed later, it's just over the hill here.... So that's why our tribal members weren't necessarily worried about an attack because they really hadn't done anything, other than probably steal a few cattle here and there. Huh, well you know sharing. The games all gone so they took what they needed, usually they'd get it from the bishop's storehouse though. Know they had beef, beef and all kinds of things that they'd give Indians.

Forrest Cuch:

We found it was the perception among some of the other tribes in Utah that once the domestic game came in and replaced the wild game that-that this was part of the deal that that the Indians could go head and kill some of the livestock, but coach really that wasn't acceptable to the -to the Mormon settlers. Considered it theft, a serious theft at that.

Bruce Parry:

Well little after the massacre we had a tribal member in Ogden that took a few cobs of corn in a field, and the owner came out and shot him. So uh they looked at it as thievery, and you know we looked at it as sharing. If we had it, and they needed it, we'd give it to them, and they-we figured they'd do the same but it didn't work that way.

Forrest Cuch:

Bruce, before the Europeans came, the Shoshone people were originally quite wealthy with the resources in this area?

Bruce Parry:

You know Forrest; we travel around different times of the year. We spent the winter or spring here. Uh and there were big herds of buffalo in here till the late 1830's. And we had all kinds of berries, and uh and choke cherries, and all kinds of wild grasses and an abundance of game. Fishing rivers like this...

Forrest Cuch:

Salmon to the north

Bruce Parry:

Salmon to the north, on the Salmon and Snake rivers. And to the west we had pine nuts in eastern Nevada. Yeah we had really a pretty good living till we started disappearing. And even our teepees you know we wintered here it was 30 below - 0 sometimes, but we were down in kind of a groove and kept the wind off us.

Forrest Cuch:
And the geothermal-

Bruce Parry:
Geothermal in the area, yeah it was really, really quite nice; I remember telling my mother a lot of times, that it was probably really hard for the Indians to live then. She said 'oh don't feel sorry for those Indians, they had abundance of stuff to eat'. Yeah so it was good.

Forrest Cuch:
Knowing what we know today about the massacre, it's a wonder any of your people survived.

Bruce Parry:
Actually it is a miracle, some escaped on horseback and were shot, others jumped in the river and hung on to the river bank until the troops left; which means they were there in the water for hours, and it really was a miracle that anybody survived the massacre. We had about 500 people killed, I don't know how many survived, but I know that eventually 9 of the survivors ended up over at Washakie, where we had our first settlement, and that's not very many. Now I think, some probably went to Fort Hall to be with the other Shoshone bandits up there, but uh the original home site at Washakie we only had 9 of the survivors, and that's not very many when you consider how many were killed.

Forrest Cuch:
How far away is that from here?

Bruce Parry:
Washakie? It's just over the hill here, in the Malad Valley about probably 30 miles from here.

Forrest Cuch:
Bruce what happened to Chief Sagwitch after the massacre?

Bruce Parry:
Well, did you know the tribe was pretty well decimated except for the groups that we had at Brigham City, and out at Promontory Point. But they kind of gathered back in the Malad valley and really wondered what they were going to do because; you know there life as they had experienced it was going to change drastically. And I think they gave a lot of thought to what they were going to do, and of course, Bear Hunter was killed at the massacre. I don't really ever know what happened to Sanpitch, but Sagwitch kind of got the people back together over there, and...Of course then they made their inquiries with their friends in the church to see if they couldn't teach them how to farm. Then the church helped them settle at the Washakie settlement, and he continued there, but in 1875 all of our tribal members joined the LDS church. Which is another big change for

them, and we kind of got away from chiefs and that, we became elders and high priests and, you know, like the LDS church does, and chiefs didn't become so important to us at that point.

Forrest Cuch:

The chiefs became bishops.

Bruce Parry:

Yeah, (chuckles) exactly.