

History of Great Basin Ethnography*

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The history of Great Basin ethnographic research can be divided into two periods. These may be conveniently designated as the professional and the pre-professional periods, since A. L. Kroeber's work among the Mohave in 1900 marks the beginning of professional interest in the area. It is true that by the dawn of the century there had already been a small amount of professional work in the Basin, for instance Otis T. Mason's work on technology and Major Powell's explorations on the Colorado and its tributaries, but by and large the ethnographic contributions had come from casual observers--fur traders, explorers, and Indian agents.

The pre-professional period begins in 1776 when Father Escalante set out from Santa Fe (in the same year Father Garcés touched the fringes of the Basin in Southern California) and entered the Great Basin to find a suitable overland route from Santa Fe to Monterey. Although he did not reach California, Escalante made a complete tour of what is now the State of Utah. Crossing the Green River near Jensen, Utah, he proceeded west to touch on Utah Lake and discover the Sevier River, then he went south again to the Virgin River and the Colorado. Escalante recorded his experiences in detail and his account remains the most important early source on the Indians of southern Utah.

The entrance into the Great Basin by the Spanish priests appears to have been followed by many Spanish and Mexican trading expeditions but the records of these parties have, for the most part, remained unpublished, so their ethnographic value is not known. It is not until the 19th century that we begin to get additional and fuller information on the Great Basin, this time by parties entering from the east and the north. The Lewis and Clark expedition of 1804-1806 was the first of these. Although these most famous of American explorers of the Far West did not reach the region of internal drainage, they did enter the Lemhi Valley and characteristically left a good record of the Shoshoneans of that area.

Following Lewis and Clark the American and Canadian fur companies began their penetration into the Great Basin. Some of the notable expeditions during the early years were the Astoria party on the Snake River in 1811; the expeditions of the Northwest Fur Company (subsequently absorbed by Hudson's Bay Company) operating under Alexander Ross and Peter Skene Ogden from 1818 through the 1820's; the Ashley expeditions of 1822 and later, into the country northeast of Salt Lake; and the adventures of Captain Bonneville in the Rockies and along the Snake River during 1832 and 1833. In about 1820 the fur companies began their practice of holding an annual rendezvous, usually on the upper waters of the Green River, at which time the Indians and American trappers would trade their accumulation of peltries for store goods.

* Read by title at the 4th Annual Great Basin Conference, San Francisco, California, August 27, 1957.

The names of the great mountain men of American history are associated with these enterprises--James Bridger, Thomas Fitzpatrick, the Sublette brothers, Etienne Provot, and Jedediah Smith. Memoirs written by the mountain men are often particularly valuable because they come from persons who lived with the Indians for many years.

The most lasting result of the efforts of the fur traders and trappers, aside from the depletion of fur bearing mammals, was the opening of the area to settlers, particularly Mormon settlers. The Mormons first entered Utah in 1847 and rapidly settled most of the eastern Great Basin. The accounts of early Mormon settlers, for instance that of Egan, often contain much valuable ethnographic information.

Finally in the period from about 1840 to 1880 there was a series of reports by employees of the United States government--the U. S. Army Corps of Topographical Engineers, the U. S. Geological and Geodetic Survey, and the Bureau of Indian Affairs. Perhaps the most notable of these reports concern the expeditions of the Pathfinder, John C. Frémont. Frémont made three trips through the Basin that were sponsored by the U. S. Government (although it is said he was as much under the orders of his father-in-law, Senator Thomas Hart Benton, as of the Secretary of War). Frémont wrote a good record of his first trip in 1843 and 1844 but the narrative of his second trip is poor and of his third trip nonexistent. Frémont was a sympathetic observer of the Indians, unusually so for his day, and some very good information is to be had from the account of his first trip. It is unfortunate that the other two journeys are not as completely recorded.

The reports of Indian agents also contain a certain amount of ethnographic information but because they are scattered and difficult of access they have not been much used. Dr. Robert Murphy of the University of California Department of Anthropology has recently gone over the agents' reports now in the National Archives pertaining to the Northern Great Basin and has found them to be useful. His bibliographic research should do much to make these data available in the future (see also the recent paper by Dr. Erminie Voegelin, published in Ethnohistory).

The ethnographic information contained in the documents of the pre-professional period is uneven, to say the least. For some areas, particularly along the Snake River, it is quite good. Julian Steward's masterful analysis of sociopolitical groups of the Northern Shoshone, that is the Shoshone groups in Idaho, is evidently based largely on the historical sources. In other parts of the Great Basin, sections of Nevada for instance, the older sources are either nonexistent or useless.

There are, no doubt, some sources dating from the 19th century and even earlier that have not yet been mined as extensively as they could be. These would include material in Spanish, both published and unpublished; unpublished documents in the U. S. National Archives; and unpublished records of the Hudson's Bay Company and the American Fur Company. The

interest in these sources will doubtless be accelerated by the recent appearance of Ethnohistory and research in the field will proceed apace.

Before going on to a consideration of the work of the professional anthropologists, initiated by Kroeber and Lowie, it is appropriate to say a word about the work of John Wesley Powell. It is fair to say that Major Powell provided the link between the professional ethnographers and those who had gone before them. His enthusiastic explorations of the Colorado River place Powell with Frémont as a pathfinder, while on the other hand his work in organizing the Bureau of American Ethnology and his classification of the North American Indian languages show a high level of professional anthropological ability. If Powell's field work was not all that it might have been we may console ourselves with the observation that it was among the earliest done in the Great Basin.

Turning now to the work of professional anthropologists, we see that investigations between 1900 and 1927, when Steward entered the field, were performed primarily by three men--A. L. Kroeber, R. H. Lowie, and E. Sapir. Professor Kroeber's work was mostly confined to the western margins of the Basin; he worked among the Mohave from 1900 to 1905 and less intensively with other groups. The results of Professor Kroeber's investigations have mostly been published, largely in his Handbook of the Indians of California, but some of the Mohave material has not yet appeared.

Robert Lowie is also one of the pioneers of Great Basin ethnography. The first field work of his career was done among the Northern Shoshone in 1906. He subsequently worked among several other Great Basin groups--Northern and Southern Paiute, Ute, and Wind River Shoshone. Professor Lowie has described his first months at Lemhi as being among his most difficult field experiences. In 1906 there seems to have been no Indian at the Lemhi agency who spoke English, and Professor Lowie of course spoke no Shoshone. It was not until the last two weeks of his stay, when a boy returned to the reservation from boarding school and acted as interpreter, that Lowie was able to communicate satisfactorily. The fact that this was Professor Lowie's first field trip must have made the experience doubly difficult.

Edward Sapir worked in the Great Basin among the Ute and Southern Paiute in 1909 and 1910. Most of his work was on language and only linguistic publications resulted. According to Lowie, Sapir had ethnographic notes on the Southern Paiute and we may hope that these will some day be edited and published.

Other work of this period that should be mentioned is R. V. Chamberlin's study of Gosiute ethnobotany and ethnozoölogy (1907) and L. L. Loud's brief efforts among the Northern Paiute (1912). These and other works of that period are peripheral or skimpy.

Following the pioneer work of Lowie, Kroeber and Sapir, intensive work in the Great Basin was begun in 1927 by Julian Steward in Owens Valley and in 1930 by Isabel Kelley in Surprise Valley. Steward worked with nearly all

groups in the Great Basin intermittently from 1927 until 1936 and there is no doubt that Great Basin ethnography will always be identified with him. His major monographs are the Ethnography of the Owens Valley Paiute and Basin-Plateau Aboriginal Sociopolitical Groups but in addition he produced several important theoretical papers as well as a dozen or more minor papers. Steward's work alone would have been sufficient to change the Great Basin from an ethnographic no-man's land into one of the better known areas of the world.

At the same time other anthropologists had also become interested in the Great Basin. Two papers on Great Basin tribal distributions which appeared in the *American Anthropologist* in 1938 indicate that at least 13 people were working in that area in the 1930's. Not all the results of these efforts have been published as yet but we at least have such notable papers as Bernice Blyth Whiting's Paiute Sorcery, Willard Park's paper on Paviotso shamanism, acculturation studies by Jack Harris on the White Knife Shoshone and by Marvin Opler on the Southern Paiute, and Shimkin's various papers on the Wind River Shoshone. All this, together with the culture element lists by Julian Steward and Omer Stewart which in my opinion are among the best of that series, add up to a rather impressive body of information. Much of this ethnography, especially that of Julian Steward, is particularly well done from the standpoint of the archaeologist, with adequate attention being devoted to technology and ethnogeography.

Unquestionably the major work on the Great Basin to emerge during this period or previously is Julian Steward's Basin-Plateau Aboriginal Sociopolitical Groups. This paper, in addition to being one of the most important theoretical contributions by an American anthropologist, is a splendid descriptive cultural geography of the Great Basin peoples. The demonstration of the functional relationships between ecological and social factors must stand as a monument to scientific insight and thoroughness.

To conclude this discussion it is appropriate in the present circumstances to outline the interpretations of Great Basin culture history that have been made by some of the ethnographers and to evaluate them in the light of present archaeological opinion. In doing this I will confine myself to the opinions of Kroeber, Lowie and Steward. Others have also advanced theories about Great Basin cultural development but none have done so explicitly or from first hand knowledge.

Lowie and Kroeber may be grouped as having approximately the same ideas on this subject. Lowie regards the Great Basin and Californian cultures as basically the same and feels that the southwestern cultures resulted "from the superimposition on the primeval ultramontane layer of the horticultural complex originating in the south." Kroeber's opinion is essentially similar. He says "the relation of California to the Basin is best viewed as resting on an early kinship of California and primitive Basin-Southwest cultures." In other words Kroeber and Lowie believe that there was once a basically similar culture over the Great Basin, California, and in the Southwest, and that the later Southwestern cultures grew out of this through the influence of Mesoamerican high culture.

Steward's opinion has been quite different from that of Kroeber and Lowie. He feels that Great Basin culture as revealed ethnographically is basically derived from the San Juan Anasazi. The bulk of Great Basin culture he thinks of as emanating from the Southwest in early Basket Maker times and subsequently developing its own regional specializations.

Present archaeological opinion evidently supports the theory of Kroeber and Lowie rather more than it does that of Steward. I believe that Heizer, Jennings, Cressman, Harrington, and other workers in Great Basin archaeology would agree that there was an ancient and widespread culture which is ancestral to historic Great Basin culture and further that the Southwestern cultures, acquiring horticulture and pottery from the south, grew out of this.

Jennings' position on this matter is, of course, explicit and rather specialized. He refers to this basal layer as the Desert Culture and regards it as a regional specialization of the early big game cultures found east of the Rockies. He attributes an antiquity of the order of 10,000 years to the Desert Culture and believes that it persisted with no basic change during this time except in the Southwest where the horticultural-ceramic complex emerged only relatively recently.

This seems to me to be a rather different idea than that of Kroeber and Lowie. Jennings' idea suggests, to me at least, that the basic similarities which persisted over such a long period were enforced by a combination of ecological and technological requirements. Kroeber and Lowie, on the other hand, evidently believe that the basic similarities derive merely from the fact that there had been no divergence from a basic culture.

Now this may sound as though it were the same thing phrased in different ways, but I think it is not. Jennings' view implies that the culture was held uniform by some force; the Kroeber-Lowie view implies merely that there was no divergence, either because there had not been enough time for change or simply out of cultural inertia.

I do not suppose that Kroeber and Lowie had in mind anything like 10,000 years for the duration of the basal culture of which they speak. Furthermore it would appear that the similarities they were thinking of were specific historical likenesses. Jennings, on the other hand, speaks of relatively abstract things like settlement and subsistence patterns that were the same throughout the Desert Culture. In going over the list of traits common to the Desert Culture agreed upon by the 1955 seminar on the American Southwest (of which Jennings was chairman), I see very few items that are truly specific, in the sense that one would say L-shaped scapula awls or Catlow-twined basketry are specific.

It seems evident then that Kroeber and Lowie are speaking of specific historical patterns and of ideas and artifact types that are connected by diffusion, acculturation, or population movements, whereas Jennings is speaking more of a developmental level with generalized similarities due to

a similar response to a common environment. The two ideas cannot, therefore, be said either to conflict or to harmonize--they have nothing to do with one another.

If Jennings' ideas do not conflict with those of Kroeber and Lowie, they quite obviously do clash with Julian Steward's. Since Steward believed that Lovelock and similar cultures were derived historically from the Anasazi, the divergence of opinion could hardly be more striking. In this connection it is interesting to note that Steward's own work provides the greatest support for Jennings' ideas. One might say that Steward, in his Basin-Plateau Aboriginal Sociopolitical Groups, proved that, given the lack of agriculture, only one form of culture is possible in the Great Basin--the kind of culture that Jennings calls Desert Culture. If this is true then the mere existence of people in the Basin 10,000 years ago demonstrates a priori that the major part of Jennings' contention is correct. As both Steward and Jennings have pointed out, the question of the distribution of large game animals in the Great Basin during the last ten millenia is crucial here. If these large animals were present in great numbers during this time, the ecological balance would have been much different than it is at present and Steward's proofs would not apply. If, on the other hand, bison, sloth and camel have been absent from the Basin during this period then the natural resources would have been very much as they are today and we would expect a Desert Culture in the most general sense of that term. There are some suggestions that certain of the large game animals lasted quite late in the Great Basin, for instance at Gypsum Cave and in the highest level of Sandia Cave, but as yet the cultural associations are uncertain and we are left with one of the major problems in Great Basin pre-history.

From what I have said it is clear that Steward would not have held the opinions he did had he known that the cave cultures of Oregon, Nevada and Utah pre-dated the San Juan Anasazi. Since these cultures have turned out to be several thousand years old it is clear that they could not have been derived from the Anasazi or any other of the known Southwestern cultures. Many of the specific connections that Steward pointed out, however, remain as clear now as they did then and no amount of radiocarbon dates will change them. Only our ideas about the direction of the diffusion are altered.