

# Stories of a Place and Its Peoples

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This book is about a place, the Great Basin of western North America, and about the lifeways of Native American people who lived there during the past 13,000 years. We do not attempt to tell a single story or to convey a complete view of the region over this long time span. Rather, we offer a set of smaller stories or vignettes about how people lived in this intriguing place, written by archaeologists who know it well.

By emphasizing the changing nature of the Great Basin, we highlight the ingenious solutions people devised over time to sustain themselves in a difficult environment. They did so largely by hunting and collecting the animals, fish, birds, and plants of the region rather than by depending on domesticated species, as some of their neighbors to the south did. Only for about the last 2,000 years, and only intermittently in what is now Utah and parts of southern Nevada, have some Great Basin Native groups lived as part-time farmers.

No matter how people made a living in the Great Basin, they and the place have always been deeply influenced by changing environments and climates. The Great Basin is, after all, a semiarid and often harsh land, but one with life-giving oases. As the weather fluctuated from year to year, and the climate from decade to decade or even from one millennium to the next, the availability of water, plants, and animals also fluctuated. Even in the best of times in such a place, only people who learned the land intimately and could read the many signs of its changing moods were successful. The evidence of their success is there, but it is often subtle

and difficult to interpret from the few and fragile remains left behind for archaeologists to discover. Every researcher soon feels the adventure of learning about this place and its people through time.

Anthropologists (including archaeologists), ecologists, hydrologists, and geologists define various Great Basins. One is the *hydrographic* Great Basin, an area of about 200,000 square miles that drains internally, with no outlets to the sea. On the map of his 1843–44 reconnaissance across the West, published by the US Congress in 1844, Captain John Charles Frémont placed a legend that read, “The Great Basin; diameter 11° of latitude, 10° of longitude: elevation above the sea 4 and 5,000 feet: surrounded by lofty mountains: contents almost unknown but believed to be filled with rivers and lakes which have no communication with the sea.”

The *geological* Great Basin is part of the larger North American Basin and Range physiographic



province—the hundreds of generally north-south-trending mountain ranges separated by long, broad valleys extending from northern Mexico into central Oregon. Some 120 of these smaller basins and their intervening mountain ranges make up the Great Basin. The great nineteenth-century geologist Clarence Dutton said that a map of the many mountain ranges reminded him of a great army of caterpillars marching to Mexico.

The *biogeographic* Great Basin is for some ecologists larger and for others smaller than the hydrographic basin. In this book we consider the hydrographic and biogeographic basins to be identical. As Donald Grayson explains in chapter 2, plant life corresponds to elevation throughout the Great Basin, from the low-growing shrubs of the valley floors to the conifer forests of the high mountainsides.

There is also the *cultural* Great Basin, defined by anthropologists in the twentieth century. It is based on the distribution of present-day American Indian language families and material culture. This Great Basin encompasses the hydrographic Great Basin, parts of the Colorado Plateau, and the central Rocky Mountains.

Finally, for the purposes of this book, there is the *archaeological* Great Basin, which comprises the hydrographic Great Basin and a section of the western Colorado Plateau. As several of our authors tell the story, related peoples during what are called Archaic and Fremont times lived not only in the Great Basin proper but in a portion of the canyon country of the western Colorado Plateau. In its landforms, plant life, and patterns of water flow, this plateau area is somewhat different from the Great Basin. But the peoples who flourished there over thousands of years had relationships both with people to the west, in the Great Basin, and, after about 400 CE, with the farming-based, settled village cultures in the US Southwest. To properly tell our story of people's lives in ancient times, the western Colorado Plateau needs to be linked to the Great Basin proper.

In telling the archaeological stories of the Great Basin, our contributors generally look more at the deep past than at the immediate past or the present. Great Basin Indian people today do not distinguish

between “history” and “prehistory,” and we have adopted their view. It is a view of an ever-unfolding continuum from the time of the ancestors to the current-day people, all of whom shared parts of this one place. The story over that long span is a multifaceted one, many parts of which are incompletely known, especially when researchers have to rely on the subtle clues uncovered through archaeology. Many of the interpretations our authors make come from combining those clues with knowledge of lifeways in this place that Indian people have shared with others over time. It is this information that is so helpful in fleshing out the uses and meanings of artifacts and understanding environmental clues. To use only this knowledge to interpret the past would be to deny that present-day Indian people profited from the ancestors' experiences and changed over time, but their contemporary wisdom and counsel are nonetheless invaluable.

Because we emphasize the archaeological past, readers may wonder who the Native Americans of the Great Basin are today. They include roughly 10,000 residents in some 40 federally recognized tribes with land bases ranging from a few dozen acres to half a million. In addition, several thousand people live independently in urban settings rather than in reservation communities. Traditionally, anthropologists have grouped the tribes according to their indigenous languages. The Washoe people, centered on Lake Tahoe and several large valleys immediately east of it, speak a language affiliated with several languages in California, all part of the large, diverse Hokan language stock. Groups whose indigenous languages are affiliated with the so-called Numic branch of the widespread Uto-Aztecan language family cover most of the region. Linguists divide Numic into three pairs of languages: Mono and Northern Paiute in the western Great Basin, Panamint and Shoshone in the central Great Basin, and Kawaiisu and Ute in the southern and eastern Great Basin (see fig. 6.9). Different federally recognized tribes and cultural groups are included in each of these language divisions.

Today this way of dividing peoples is less useful, because everyone speaks mainly English. The groups maintain some differences in traditional culture, but they are more homogeneous than differ-

ent. Some tribes and reservation communities are reasonably well-off economically, with viable tribal businesses, including casinos. Others, especially in rural settings, struggle to make ends meet and provide services for their members. Throughout the region, communities and individuals retain varying degrees of knowledge of older lifeways and skill in their indigenous languages.

Many Great Basin Natives are deeply concerned about their land, whether present-day reserved land or former larger territories. They feel a custodial relationship to the land that extends to its resources—animals, plants, and archaeological evidence of the ancestors. People still visit sacred sites, collect important food and medicinal plants, and pray to the many spirits who inhabit the land. Some take care of the land and its plants and animals in the old way, by selectively harvesting plant foods, cleaning and clearing springs, pruning, and burning overgrown areas.

Most tribes today have environmental and cultural preservation departments or committees and are seriously involved in consulting with land managing agencies both in their former territories and on reserved land. They routinely monitor archaeological and environmental activities, especially on federal and reserved land. Some are trained in the skills of archaeological survey, and more are seeking certification or professional degrees in scientific disciplines. As Brian Wallace, former chair of the Washoe Tribe of California and Nevada, said during a 2006 tribal environmental training session, “having the ability to read the land and interpret the world we live in is something that every Indian person should have as a skill. The traditional way,

that’s what we Indian people come from. That’s the way Indian people were. And one of the most important abilities and skills to have is to be out on the ground and be able to reconnect with that wisdom and from that place to our land. That comes from the history of our people, and the land’s well-being rests and resides in that.”

Native interpretations of the past do not always coincide with those of non-Native anthropologists, archaeologists, historians, and ecologists who carry out research in their regions—but Indian people are usually interested in others’ results. More and more, Great Basin indigenous people are reviewing archaeological projects and requesting a say in decisions that affect their land and the region in general. They are especially interested in the designation and protection of sacred sites, whether specific places or larger districts, and they speak eloquently for their protection. The Washoe Tribe, for example, has partnered with the US Forest Service in a long battle to prevent climbing at Cave Rock, a site on the western shore of Lake Tahoe with important spiritual meaning for both Native persons of power and tribal members in general. Western Shoshone people, especially the Battle Mountain Shoshone Tribe, have similarly made their opinions known to federal agencies over the years about the sacredness of the Tosawihī quarries area in central Nevada.

Most tribes are concerned about the return of human remains and sacred objects under federal legislation known as the Native American Graves Protection and Repatriation Act (NAGPRA). They object to the disturbance or collection of such items in the region. Most are also concerned with protecting rock art sites throughout the Great Basin and



react with special revulsion to the vandalism of rock art. They are vocal about issues of access to and protection of naturally occurring hot springs and other important water sources. And they hold companies' and agencies' feet to the fire on issues of mine cleanup and acts of land contamination. Pauline Esteves, former chair of the Timbisha Shoshone Tribe of Death Valley, California, declared, "We never give up. The Timbisha people have lived in our homeland forever, and we will live here forever. We were taught that we don't end. We are part of our homeland and it is part of us. We are people of the land. We don't break away from what is a part of us."

From the stories that the land and peoples of the ancient Great Basin have to tell, we hope readers will gain a new appreciation for the human and environmental history of this place. The people and the land have much to reveal if only we stop to explore or pause long enough to truly listen.

Before turning to the stories themselves, we need to offer a few notes about maps, technical terms, dates, and further readings.

Cave and rockshelter sites figure prominently in this book, as do several of the thousands of recorded open and surface archaeological sites. Maps 2 and 3 show sites prominently mentioned in the following chapters.

Archaeologists, like other scholarly groups, have their own technical jargon, which is often impenetrable to the uninitiated. Our authors have kept technical terms to a minimum, but some are required. The contributors have tried to explain these terms the first time each appears.

Throughout the book, authors give dates of climatic and environmental phenomena, archaeological time periods, and artifacts as some number of "years ago." These statements are based on clusters of averaged radiocarbon dates. The radiocarbon (carbon 14) method of dating ancient organic materials yields ages in "radiocarbon years," usually given as statistical estimates such as "2000 ± 250 radiocarbon years." For complex reasons, there is no one-to-one correlation between radiocarbon years and calendar years, so researchers have developed correlation tables to produce "calibrated" radiocarbon years. For editorial simplicity we have

substituted "years ago" for "calibrated radiocarbon years." The original radiocarbon dating method, first developed in 1949, and the later, refined radiocarbon dating method known as accelerator mass spectroscopy (AMS), are described in chapter 8.

Some of the chapter authors mention a "Mazama ash" layer as a time marker. The cataclysmic volcanic eruption of Mount Mazama in Oregon roughly 5,670 years ago, which left the caldera that became Crater Lake, spread a layer of ash over thousands of square miles of western North America. The distinctive ash fell into lakes, marshes, ponds, rockshelters, and caves. Any sediment or artifact found below the ash layer is older than 5,670 years, and anything above it is younger. How much older or younger has to be determined by other means.

When our contributors use conventional European calendar dates, they give them as BCE ("before the common era") and CE ("of the common era"), rather than as BC and AD. They also divide archaeological time into named periods such as Paleoarchaic and early, middle, and late Archaic. Consensus estimates of the lengths of these periods are given in the cultural chronology chart and in the various chapters.

Last, our use of the term *Archaic* and its divisions may appear inconsistent with usages in other archaeological regions of North America. In the Great Basin, as elsewhere in North America, "Archaic" refers to a mobile, hunting-gathering way of life. But in most parts of the Great Basin, unlike elsewhere, that lifeway continued, with some technological changes, from earliest times until the arrival of Euro-Americans in the 1770s. In other regions of North America, such as the Southwest, a farming-village lifestyle labeled "Formative" persisted into the Euro-American period, after 1540. A similar lifestyle, featuring settled villages, domesticated crops, and pottery making, had appeared by 400 CE in parts of the southern and eastern Great Basin, but it did not last much beyond 1350. After that time people returned to hunting and gathering, with minimal farming, until the advent of Euro-Americans disrupted their subsistence cycles and traditional modes of living.

The chapters in this book are distilled from the

information contained in an enormous number of scientific and historical studies. A suggested readings section at the end of the book provides introductory guidance to published studies that will help readers expand their knowledge of Great Basin archaeology and environmental history and their many facets.

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