Public Commemoration: A Case Study

The Struggle to Control the Past: Commemoration, Memory, and the Bear River Massacre of 1863

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Abstract: On January 29, 1863, the United States Army attacked a band of Northwestern Shoshones at Bear River in southern Idaho, killing nearly 300 men, women, and children. This massacre is absent from much of the historiography. At the site of the massacre, however, a handful of monuments stand commemorating the same event yet telling the story in different—almost contradictory—ways. These monuments are anomalous in America’s commemorated history, and reveal shifts in popular and scholarly memory over the last 140 years: a visible struggle to control the past.

Keywords: Bear River Massacre, Bear River, Indian massacre, Shoshone, commemoration

Introduction

On a cold January morning in 2003 a few dozen people, myself included, gathered beside monuments at the site of one of the American West’s worst Indian massacres. Although readers might immediately think of Sand Creek or Wounded Knee, sites that rightly conjure images of brutality and slaughter, we stood far from them in a quiet corner of southern Idaho. We gathered
on its 140th anniversary to remember what has been both re-told and forgotten: the Bear River Massacre.

I was there because a few months earlier, in my fondness for long drives through the countryside, I had stumbled across the site. After a few minutes studying the monuments, I began asking questions. Those questions launched me on a journey through the past and eventually led me back to ground zero on that wintry morning. I was not alone. Among those present were a handful of American Indians from all over the region, curious folks from the area’s towns, local historians, newspaper reporters, an official from the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, and the man who organized and led the event—a local who, though not of Indian descent, founded a group called “Friends of Native Americans of Northern Utah.” Strangely absent were leaders from the Northwestern band of Shoshones, the ones whose ancestors were nearly wiped out at the site 140 years prior. But as I continued my research in the years after the ceremony, the reasons for their absence would become clearer to me, as the Shoshones acquired land around the site and built monuments of their own. Eventually they took control of their story and enshrined their memory of what happened. Theirs would be the newest addition to the mélange of commemorations at Bear River.

Nestled alongside Idaho’s Highway 91 in Franklin County, just northwest
of Preston, stand two monuments commemorating the same event (see figure 1). On the morning of January 29, 1863, not far from the monuments, Colonel Patrick Connor and 300 California volunteer soldiers attacked a Northwestern Shoshone winter encampment along the Bear River. Estimates place the number of dead Shoshones at 250 to 300, including 90 women and children. Eyewitnesses and participants recalled tactics and atrocities that, in the words of one historian, took the engagement “from battle to massacre.”

Americans are accustomed to having their history presented to them in a clean, orderly package. How often do we assume that what we see commemorated is the uncontested and unadulterated story? Bear River is an anomaly because the different monuments tell different, almost contradictory stories but stand together at the same site. The story has changed, disappeared, and reappeared not only in commemoration, but in scholarship as well. In The Politics of Memory: Black Emancipation and the Civil War Monument, historian Kirk Savage argues that while people may build monuments to commemorate specific battles, monuments themselves are often visible signs of battles between dueling memories and interpretation. “But the cultural contest that monuments seem to settle,” he goes on to write, “need not end once they are built and dedicated.” “Monuments,” Savage argues, “can be . . . combatted with countermonuments.” Bear River’s monuments show exactly what Savage is writing about—a visible battle between rival memories of the past, a struggle to control the past. It is a historical landscape that is anything but settled.

The Monuments

Bear River’s first monument did not appear until 1932. That seventy-year gap in and of itself tells us something. The Franklin County community erected a stone monument near the site of Bear River. The Daughters of Utah Pioneers (DUP), the Utah Pioneer Trails and Landmarks Association, and the Cache Valley Council of the Boy Scouts of America placed upon the monument’s east side a plaque commemorating “The Battle of Bear River” (see figure 2). In 1953, the DUP added another plaque to the stone monument, on the west side, commemorating the region’s “Pioneer Women” (see figure 3). The stone monument is a four-sided obelisk and approximately 11 feet tall. It is constructed of mortar and stones from the region and is topped by a small tipi lodge replica. The south face of the monument holds a metate, a concaved

stone block used by Shoshones and other American Indians for grinding corn and grains. A metal fence approximately 2 feet in height surrounds the monument’s base.

Combined, the two plaques tell a story of a battle between hostile Indians guilty of depredations against Cache Valley’s “peaceful inhabitants,” and brave soldiers who battled “deep snow and bitter cold” to defeat the Shoshones. More than that, they lavish praise on the residents “trained through trials and necessity of frontier living” who cared for and aided the wounded soldiers. This is a story of Indians who, in the words of a Cache Valley religious leader, “rejected the way of life and salvation which have been pointed out to them,” and thus “perished relying on their own strength and wisdom.”

These two plaques tell a story of marauding Indians getting what they deserved.

The second monument, placed by the state of Idaho in 1990, tells a different story. Framed in milled lumber and standing nearly 10 feet tall, this billboard-style marker has a 4’ × 8’ brown background with yellow writing. Large and conspicuous lettering across the top reads “Bear River Massacre.” On the left, a map of Idaho showing the location of Bear River and the surrounding area occupies almost one-third of the sign’s total surface. To the right is a large “216,” indicating the monument’s number in a series of markers placed by Idaho to commemorate the region’s heritage. The monument tells of how “very few Indians survived” as Colonel Connor “trapped and destroyed a band of Northwestern Shoshoni” (see figure 4). This marker speaks of massacre and disaster, a far cry from the sentiments on the original plaques.

In 1990 the National Park Service placed another plaque on the stone obelisk, on the empty north face. Colored similar to the first two plaques, its language is short and direct (see figure 5).

There, within a few feet of each other, stand several monuments giving testimony to shifting memories of the same event. Beneath the inscriptions and figures at Bear River, beneath the painted letters and cast metal, is a story of one event—a thread that has woven its way through the last 140 years of history’s fabric—seen at some times and, at others, seemingly gone from view. The shape of that memory and its course have been guided by the biases, emphases, and understandings of each generation that has chosen to enshrine their memory, their understanding.

The Story Beneath the Surface

The most direct way each of the commemorations tells of Bear River is through wording. The language of each monument not only tells a different


4. This sign replaced one of identical design and layout that used different language to describe Bear River. The Idaho Transportation Department installed the original sign in 1971.
story, but also commemorates different people and events, and places each of them in different contexts.

The first plaque placed on the stone monument does not attempt to minimize the number of Shoshone dead at Bear River. Its proponents believed that a large number of Shoshones died there. “In Franklin County,” Watkin L. Roe, Sr., an editor of the *Franklin County Citizen* wrote, “we have one of the historic spots of the state . . . where a number of soldiers and hundreds of our dark skinned friends were slain.” Even the *New York Times*, reporting on Bear River weeks afterwards and two thousand miles away, printed accurate Shoshone casualty numbers. On February 26, 1863, a short news item appeared stating, “It is now ascertained that 255 Indians were killed at the battle of Bear River.” Throughout the twentieth century, historians and locals debated the number of Shoshones killed there. Estimates ran as high as 400 and as low as 100. In the most thorough study of Bear River written to date, *The Shoshoni Frontier and the Bear River Massacre*, Brigham Madsen weighed these estimates’ sources and concluded that the most likely number is 250 to

5. *Franklin County Citizen*, “Why Not Build a Monument?” August 31, 1932, n.p. File MS 455, Special Collections, Merrill Library, Utah State University, Logan. The letter, from the paper’s 1916 editor, Watkin L. Roe, Sr., was originally published on December 7, 1916, but was re-published in 1932 because he was a vocal proponent of a monument at Bear River.

300, as the first monument states.\textsuperscript{7} Research in the 1980s verified what Watkin L. Roe penned in 1916, and what the first plaque’s authors inscribed in 1932.

The 1932 plaque uses the phrase “combatant women and children” in reference to the approximately 90 killed at Bear River. In 1942, Merrill D. Beal’s \textit{A History of Southeastern Idaho} touched Bear River briefly. “The Indians,” he wrote, “fought like demons,” and “women and children fought with the greatest possible ferocity when trapped.”\textsuperscript{8} This local history written at a time so close to the placement of Bear River’s first monument reflected popular sentiment. In \textit{Sites of Memory, Sites of Mourning}, historian J. M. Winter writes of “traditional motifs” and “traditional modes of seeing” war that are “less challenging intellectually or philosophically.” Slaughter is acceptable when it is necessary. This approach eases one’s ability to deal with the knowledge and memory of horrific events, even one’s ability to “leave them behind” and move on.\textsuperscript{9} Local residents in 1916 and 1932 were aware that hundreds of Shoshones died at Bear River, as the first plaque’s text indicates. The label “combatant” serves as a justification for their deaths, and represents a “traditional mode of seeing” the massacre.

This monument’s language also minimizes the magnitude of Shoshone casualties by stating that they were “guilty of hostile attacks on emigrants and settlers.” That statement omits the other side of the story. In the decades prior to the settlement of Cache Valley, the Shoshones lived at the mercy of the region’s fragile ecosystem and scarce and seasonal resources. Settlement in the valley exacerbated these conditions. The Shoshones had to seek food and materials elsewhere, and they turned to the nearest viable alternative—the valley’s new residents.

Historically, the Cache Valley Shoshone incorporated regional change into their culture and lifeways.\textsuperscript{10} In their eyes, taking necessities from settlers and emigrants was a legitimate way of dealing with change. Not only that, but the Shoshones believed that these resources were due them in return for the settlers’ use of the land. Neither passing emigrants nor the valley’s settlers agreed.

The language of both plaques legitimizes the massacre and its bloodshed. The wording does not “obliterate the simple truth that people die in war.”\textsuperscript{11} To Cache Valley’s residents in 1863 and beyond, the slaughter of nearly 300 Shoshone men, women, and children was an acceptable fact. The first two plaques on the stone monument made that fact “indirect or muted . . . drowned in sentimentality or lies,” following Winter’s arguments.\textsuperscript{12} The plaques’ de-
signers simply enshrined their beliefs that the Shoshone deaths were justified and necessary.

In 1863 Cache Valley settlers believed the Shoshones had to be subdued. Shortly after the massacre, the *Deseret News* reported that “many of the animals” and goods taken from the Shoshone village “had been stolen from citizens of this Territory, by those thieving red men.” The reporter went on to discuss how passing emigrants had also fallen prey to the Shoshones, and how Connor’s soldiers discovered numerous stolen goods in the camp:

> There were numerous evidences [sic] of emigrant plunder, such as modern cooking utensils, looking glasses, combs, brushes, fine rifles and pistols, and such things as the Indians were likely to consider worthy of preservation, when they had attacked and robbed the emigrants.¹³

Cache Valley residents and passing emigrants faced this reality every day. Prior to 1863 the valley’s settlement patterns indicated a defensive posture—closely grouped settlements with stockades—as people lived in fear of harassment and theft by Shoshones. “From 1859 to 1864,” historian Leonard Arrington writes, “the settlers lived in fort style, with homes placed close together in rows facing each other for protection and convenience.”¹⁴ Settlers also commented on difficulties with local American Indians in the early 1860s. A local named Ralph Smith recalled in his journal that Bear River had “helped ease the burdens of the citizens of Cache Valley, as they were always worried about the Indians attacking their stock and their settlements.”¹⁵

That memory persisted even to 1932, when the first monument was erected. Reporting on the unveiling of the stone monument, the *Franklin County Citizen* insisted that Bear River was important because it “marked the close of hostilities in these nearby valleys.” The new monument, the *Citizen* reported, “will mark the spot where difficulties between the races were settled for the last time in bloodshed.”¹⁶

Watkin L. Roe, editor of the *Citizen* in 1916 and an early advocate for a monument, insisted that “something is due to the soldiers who came here and died that this country might not be troubled by those maurading [sic] Indians.” In Roe’s mind, the community needed to erect a marker commemorating “the events which meant much to the lonely settler in this territory.” Roe wanted something that “would be a good advertisement for the entire county.” He felt that Franklin County had “one of the historic spots of the state,” and he lamented that “every summer hundreds of tourists and travelers pass over the battle ground . . . without ever knowing it.” His solution to the problem was a “good, durable monument made of cement and boulders,” and “if

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boulders are used, large ones will be necessary to make the monument imposing.”17 Roe wanted something that people would see, and he was not alone. In July 1932, the DUP decided to change the proposed location of the monument “to a place where a better view could be had of it from the roadway.”18 The proponents and designers of the monument wanted to build something that would be noticed, and they wanted something specific made known and remembered: that what happened at Bear River was acceptable, even noble. A persistent memory re-appears: the massacre made settlers’ lives and property safer in Cache Valley. The end of Shoshone depredations meant greater prosperity and a much freer day-to-day existence.

The settlers in Cache Valley owed a debt of gratitude to the soldiers who eliminated the primary threat to their safety and livelihoods, and both the 1932 and 1953 plaques reflect that gratitude. Connor and his soldiers performed a great service for Cache Valley’s settlers. J. M. Winter argues that “almost all commemorative monuments express a sense of indebtedness. The living can go about their daily lives in freedom because of the selflessness and dedication of the men who fell.”19 As a result of the massacre, Cache Valley could live in relative peace. In that sense, both plaques commemorate the soldiers who fought and gave their lives so that others could live in peace.

In light of the contentious relationship between settlers in greater Utah and the U. S. Army during the 1860s, the 1932 plaque represents a memory shift. The language commemorates soldiers who fought, suffered, and died but were themselves not part of the local or religious community. Shortly after his arrival in the territory in 1862, Col. Patrick Connor wrote to his superiors insisting that the Mormons were a “community of traitors, murderers, fanatics, and whores.”20 The hostile feelings were mutual. Peter Maughan, a religious official in Cache Valley, spoke derisively of the soldiers and told Brigham Young that “they manifested the most filthy and disgusting code of Civilization I have ever heard.”21 Young himself battled back and forth with Connor over political and economic control of the region for years. Yet in 1932 the plaque’s authors chose to memorialize people with whom the region’s 1863 Mormon population wanted little association.

According to the Deseret News, Connor’s soldiers fought with “indomitable will and bravery,” and the “Savage ferocity” of the Shoshones “was outmatched by generalship, brave men and good rifles.”22 The previous week the editor of the News wrote: “we conclude that the [California] Volunteers must have met the Indians with a bravery seldom equalled [sic] by regulars. Instances

19. Winter, Sites of Memory, Sites of Mourning, 95.
21. Ibid., 212.
of individual daring are so numerous, that it would be invidious to give the names of only the few that may have reached our ears.”23 The Logan Latter-day Saints ward, in their official minutes and records, went so far as to insist that Connor’s actions at Bear River constituted “an intervention of the Almighty.”24 Destroying the Shoshone earned Connor’s soldiers a special place in local memory. Soldiers hated in Salt Lake City and Cache Valley before Bear River were remembered with admiration and praise after the massacre. Connor’s deeds trumped, at least for a brief time, any animosities. The memory shift took the soldiers from villains to saviors. But even if how the soldiers were remembered changed, one theme remained: the peace and security achieved by Bear River were of greater importance in visible memory than was the slaughter of hundreds of Shoshone men, women, and children.

Knowledge of that slaughter was widespread in the region. Brigham Young knew of Bear River, and wrote to a friend in New York mentioning the massacre: “Col. Connor, as you saw notices, went into Cache Valley and attacked and defeated a band of Indians . . . the particulars you will see in the [Deseret] News.”25 Likewise, Latter-day Saints church elder George A. Smith knew of the massacre shortly after it occurred. Discussing affairs in Cache Valley, he wrote, “Col Connor and his soldiers destroyed some 250 men, women and children of the Indians, the latter have manifested no hostilities to any of the Saints, or disposition to disturb any of the settlements.”26 Smith was more concerned with the fact that life was now stable in the valley than that 250 Shoshones died to make it thus. On February 3 after the massacre, Salt Lake City resident Wilford Woodruff wrote in his journal that Connor’s soldiers “shot as long as they could find anything to shoot at. The result of the battle is reported to be 225 Indians killed, 400 horses taken and the Indians [sic] encampment taken.”27 In 1863, shortly after the massacre, Utah’s territorial Indian superintendent James Doty wrote: “The battle with the Shoshones . . . on Bear River was the severest and most bloody of any which has ever occurred with the Indians west of the Mississippi. It struck terror into the hearts of the savages hundreds of miles away from the battlefield.”28 People well beyond Cache Valley knew about the bloodshed.

The New York Times first reported Connor’s “clear sweep of an Indian nest” at Bear River on February 25, 1863, and their correspondent termed it “a short, sharp and decisive Indian war,” resulting in the “extermination of the Ban-

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nock and Shoshone Army by Col. Connor’s command.” “Though Col. Connor cannot say ‘I came, I saw, I conquered,’ he may report ‘I went, I fought, I exterminated,’ for such, indeed, was the fact.” On March 8, the Times noted that “there appears a general satisfaction at the destruction of this thievish and murderous crew.” The Times also noted the strained relationship between settlers and Shoshones in Cache Valley even before they first reported on the massacre: “If Col. Connor succeeds in laying a few of the really guilty Indians beneath the sod, it will be a good thing, and may teach a necessary and salutary lesson.” One year after the massacre, the Times mentioned briefly the anniversary by noting “a grand day was Friday in camp [Douglas], in celebrating the first anniversary of the battle of Bear River.”

The memory prevailing at the time of the massacre—the memory passed on and stamped in metal in 1932—was not merely local. Many people from outside Cache Valley and even beyond the western states were aware that hundreds of Shoshones died at Bear River, and thought the slaughter acceptable, even justified.

The plaque placed by the Daughters of Utah Pioneers in 1953 commemorates not so much the engagement itself, but the Mormon women settlers who came to the aid of wounded soldiers. More than simply a battle between innocent settlers and marauding Shoshones, Bear River held a deeper significance within the community’s history. This plaque does not celebrate the achievements of a military or community leader; it celebrates the actions of common women whose skills and experience saved lives. The DUP later insisted that the 1953 plaque was “a lasting tribute to their courage, understanding, and resourcefulness.” Their experience, forged “through trials and necessity of frontier living,” cannot be understated. J. M. Winter refers to this type of monument becoming a hallowed place “where the nation worship[s] itself,” its values, and its past. In this way, the 1953 plaque does not celebrate the soldiers (even though the women acted on their behalf) or the Shoshone defeat (an event the residents saw as necessary for their safety). Rather, this plaque serves to “affirm community,” and “assert its moral character.”

Approval of what happened at Bear River underpins the memory enshrined by the DUP in 1953. Their official 1957 catalogue of monuments states that “Col. Connor . . . sent his cavalry down the hill with orders to kill everyone.” After the “fight,” “practically all the Indians had been annihilated.”

33. Kate B. Carter, ed., Treasures of Pioneer History, vol. 6 (Salt Lake City, UT: Daughters of Utah Pioneers, 1957). 499. Special Collections, Merrill Library, Utah State University, Logan. This book catalogues all monuments erected by the DUP and gives popular historical background to each one.
34. From text of 1953 DUP plaque on original stone monument at Bear River.
35. Winter, Sites of Memory, Sites of Mourning, 93, 80.
is no outrage, no condemnation or mention of the murder of women and children, no discussion of circumstances. This was good guys and the wives of local settlers versus the evil Shoshones. The memory of “this critical time” when “every man, woman, and child was a ‘Minute Man’” is neat, clean, stamped in metal, and affirmed through later writing.37 This memory is clear, and it comes through not only in the plaque’s language, but also in how the monument fits in the broader scheme of DUP commemorations throughout not only Utah proper but also the broader Mormon region. That the DUP built a monument to pioneer women at Bear River and included it in their series of markers demonstrates their belief that the women performed noble deeds and special service to the community, all deserving memorialization.

The 1953 plaque also speaks using more than words. An oxen yoke and

37. Ibid.
beehive carving adorn the plaque’s top. This symbol of the DUP asserts the image of the earliest settlers in the Great Basin. The oxen yoke represents the animals—noted for their strength and endurance—that carried Mormon settlers from the East. The beehive (also a symbol of the state of Utah and the broader Mormon “Kingdom of Zion”) symbolizes industry and thrift. Combined, these images represent not only the civilization the Mormons believed they brought to the region, but specifically, the qualities their women embodied: strength and endurance through trials of difficult frontier living. These images embody not only the folklore surrounding Cache Valley’s settlers, but that of all who came West in the Mormon emigrations. The message meshes well with the plaque’s praise of the pioneer women whose knowledge and experience—derived from the very folklore the symbols memorialize—saved the soldiers’ lives.

The monument’s shape and layout suggest a communal gathering point, something around which the community can gather to remember. Winter writes of how European World War I monuments were placed to allow gatherings alongside. That setting does not have the same effect on those gathered around to view. The Bear River monument is more of a focal point, even a rallying point, for celebration of the community’s heritage and values. A fence two feet high surrounds it. The monuments that Winter writes of share this feature: “a fence, doorway, or border clearly marking the distinction between an area adjacent to the monument, a space set apart from the rush of daily life.” The designers placed a fence too small to serve any purpose other than aesthetic and symbolic separation. The community did gather around the stone monument to celebrate. In 1932, when the marker was unveiled, festivities at the site included the local Boy Scouts, band concerts, singing, an invocation, prize-winning essay readings, pioneer talks, a camp fire, and sundry community patriotic activities. The community invested a great deal of time and energy into commemorative activities for Bear River. The place where Connor’s soldiers killed so many Shoshone men, women, and children was a hallowed place around which the community gathered to celebrate, and to remember.

People in and beyond Cache Valley knew what happened on the morning of January 29, 1863, and most indications are that they offered little, if any, protest or outrage. Cache Valley’s residents in 1863 accepted the brutality and carnage because life was easier without the Shoshones. Many decades later, a monument appeared commemorating the “battle” and justifying the killing of women and children. Years later a memorial appeared honoring the valley’s brave women who exemplified their times and answered the call of duty. David Thelen writes that in remembering the past, often “people reshape,
omit, distort, combine, and reorganize details from the past in an active and subjective way.”41 J. M. Winter echoes this when he argues that commemoration “touch[es] all the chords of local loyalties, petty intrigues, favoritism, apathy, and indifference.”42 This is the case at Bear River, not only for people in Cache Valley in 1863, but beyond into Salt Lake City and even the nation.

Looking ahead from 1863, 1932, and 1953, one now turns to the latest efforts at commemorating Bear River. The year 1990 proved important in the massacre’s commemorative history. On June 21, the National Park Service officially designated the “Bear River Massacre Site” as a National Historic Landmark.43 A few months later, the Idaho Transportation Department changed its marker commemorating the “Bear River Massacre,” as described earlier. Idaho had, decades earlier, erected a similar billboard that read “Bear River Battle,” and told of how the Shoshones held “a strong position” but suffered a “loss of over 400” in “the greatest Indian disaster in the West.”44 In 1956 Idaho began building historical markers throughout the state. The “Bear River Battle” billboard, installed originally in 1971, was part of that project.45 In 1990, at the request of Allie Hansen, president of the Bear River - Battle Creek Monument Association, Idaho replaced it with the “Bear River Massacre” sign. They changed the wording to “reflect the recent National Park Service designation of the Bear River Massacre site to National Historic Landmark status.”46 In this case, local commemorative memory changed to reflect the shift in national memory.

The Shift in Scholarly Memory

The new monuments represented a sea change, not only in Bear River’s commemorative history, but also in how historical scholarship approached the massacre.

In 1987, historian Patricia Nelson Limerick argued for a new approach to the American West—a place as opposed to a mere process, as Frederick Jackson Turner had understood it. In that place people and groups were the victims of conquest that “basically involved the drawing of lines on a map, the

42. Winter, 90.
44. Preston Citizen, June 13, 1974, n.p. Caine Collection, Newell Hart Papers, MSS 3, Box 33, Folder 6, Special Collections, Merrill Library, Utah State University, Logan.
definition and allocation of ownership (personal, tribal, corporate, state, federal, and international), and the evolution of land from matter to property.”

Her argument spawned the “new western history” that challenged historians to view the American West less in terms of American exceptionalism and more in terms of those people and groups who occupied the land before settlement fundamentally altered their traditions and environments. Most of the writings on Bear River from the early 1900s and into the 1970s looked at Bear River as yet another event in civilizing the frontier, in the taming of a wild land. Few histories written prior to the 1980s took a close look at the massacre’s brutality, at its truly human dimension.

An assortment of local and regional histories written between 1916 and 1938 told similar stories. Orson F. Whitney’s *Popular History of Utah* spoke of how “Connor’s victory proved a great boon to the settlers of Northern Utah. It sounded a warning to the savages that did not need repeating.”

C. J. Brosnan, in his *History of the State of Idaho*, wrote that “the savages were surprised and nearly 300 were killed in a few hours.” The battle “put an end to Indian depredations in that region.”

In 1932, R. Ross Arnold’s *Indian Wars of Idaho* told of Bear River’s “fearful slaughter,” and “the fearful punishment received by the Bannacks [sic] in return for their “thieving depredations.”

In 1937, and again in 1941 and 1959, writings spoke of how the “battle” of Bear River broke the will of Cache Valley Shoshones to resist. These works discuss Bear River in terms of how it ended Shoshone resistance to settlement, and how the “battle” made settlers’ lives and property safer. These same themes appear in the commemorations. Numerous other works on western, American Indian, United States, and military history published in the 1960s do not mention Bear River. Even as it was remembered locally, Bear River was forgotten nationally.

In 1974, hints of a scholarly shift began to appear in regional historical writings. In *The Idaho Heritage*, one author described Bear River as “the most colossal Indian disaster in the west.” In 1976, F. Ross Peterson argued that “the California troopers turned the battle into a massacre as women and children were shot indiscriminately.” It took nine years for historians to begin


echoing him. In 1982, in *Idaho: A Guide for the Curious*, Cort Conley referred to the battleground as “the bloodiest ground in Idaho,” where “more persons died . . . than at Sand Creek, or Little Big Horn, or Wounded Knee.” “The Saints,” he said “settled on Indian lands without any recompense, and the Northern Shoshone watched the encroachment . . . with growing resentment.”54 This was a side of the Bear River story new to historiography.

Not only was there a shift in local and regional histories regarding Bear River, but also in broader, national histories. Two early works—J. P. Dunn, Jr.’s *Massacres of the Mountains: A History of Indian Wars of the Far West*, and Helen Hunt Jackson’s *A Century of Dishonor*—carry no mention of Bear River or the Northwestern Shoshones.55 Both works were premised on how horribly the United States treated American Indians, yet one of the worst examples is absent. Dee Brown’s classic *Bury My Heart at Wounded Knee: An Indian History of the American West* is also silent on Bear River. In his introduction, Brown asserts that 1860 to 1890 “was an incredible era of violence, greed,” and that “during that time the culture and civilization of the American Indian was destroyed.”56 He never mentions Bear River, one of the worst massacres of American Indians by U.S. soldiers in the West. Brown’s thesis is, in part, based on Indian accounts, yet he paid no attention to the Northwestern Shoshone account of Bear River, written by Mae Parry, great-granddaughter of Shoshone Chief Sagwitch (who fought in and survived the massacre). Parry’s “Massacre at Boa Ogoi” is a chilling firsthand account of Bear River’s horror, passed down through the generations by oral telling.57

Brigham Madsen’s *The Shoshoni Frontier and the Bear River Massacre*, published in 1985, represented a major turning point in scholarly memory of Bear River. Madsen’s research, more exhaustive than any done before or since, resulted in the first piece of scholarship devoted solely to Bear River. Many works following *The Shoshoni Frontier* discussed Bear River in much more detail, and in very different ways, than previous writings. Alvin M. Josephy’s 1991 *The Civil War in the American West* devotes several pages to Bear River. He analyzes the delicate relationships between the California volunteer soldiers and the Mormons, as well as relations between Cache Valley’s settlers and local American Indians. Josephy’s conclusions are much like Madsen’s—what began as a battle quickly turned into a massacre.58

In 1999, the *Utah Historical Quarterly* published an article by Harold

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Schindler documenting new evidence that Bear River had begun as a battle but degenerated into a slaughter.\(^{59}\) Sections of a journal written by Sergeant William Beach, under Connor’s command at Bear River, surfaced in 1996. Beach wrote that at a certain point in the fight “the work of death commenced in real earnest. Midst the roar of guns and sharp report of Pistols could be herd [sic] the cry for quarters but no quarters were given that day.” Beach visited the field after the massacre and reported 280 dead.\(^{60}\) This new evidence verifies what Madsen wrote in 1985, and what Josephy discussed in 1991. Schindler’s article represents yet another piece of the modern shift in the memory of Bear River, a shift seen in commemoration as well.

In 2003, historian Thom Hatch published *The Blue, the Gray, and the Red: Indian Campaigns of the Civil War*.\(^{61}\) He discusses Bear River in a depth not seen since Madsen’s *The Shoshoni Frontier*. Hatch calls it “the least-known act of brutality in warfare between the military and Indians.” He further departs from Bear River historiography:

> Some may justify the actions of the soldiers by pointing out that the Indians had been tormenting the settlers, and this was the only manner in which to punish them, in order to discourage further raids. This argument holds little water when taking into consideration the brutal rapes and murders of women and children.\(^ {62}\)

Here Hatch does not gloss over or justify the slaughter of hundreds of Shoshones. The same sensibilities that influenced the revision of Idaho’s billboard marker as well as the creation of the NPS plaque, the same sensibilities that lead so many to express shock and regret when they gather each January for the massacre’s anniversary, echo in Hatch’s analysis.

Kass Fleisher’s 2004 book *The Bear River Massacre and the Making of History* explores why the massacre’s memory has taken such a curious course in the last 140 years.\(^ {63}\) In addition to raising important questions, the book itself is another chapter of Bear River’s memory.

Fleisher asks why have “the U.S. public, and their officials, attended to [massacres such as] Sand Creek, but not Bear River?”\(^ {64}\) She wonders why the Cache Valley community in 1863 was content with the slaughter; why most historians in the last few decades have paid so little attention to Bear River, even as they scrupulously combed other massacres and battles for details; why was the U.S. government slow in deeming Bear River a National Historic Landmark, and why are they dragging their feet in creating a Na-

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60. Ibid., 307.
62. Ibid., 45.
64. Ibid., 68.
tional Historic Site? Though awash with questions, Fleisher’s work does not offer many answers. Focusing primarily on issues of local memory, her claims about responsibility for Bear River’s inconspicuousness rest on her belief that the Cache Valley community, as well as the broader Mormon culture, have shown a willingness to overlook and forget Bear River for the sake of moral and socioeconomic convenience. If correct, Fleisher is highlighting sentiments seen throughout Bear River’s early commemorative and scholarly history: it was a tragic and unfortunate event, but one necessary for the survival and safety of “civilization” in Cache Valley, and today is best left in the past. Fleisher’s book is very clear in one respect: modern memory of Bear River is now unfolding in ways that cause even nonhistorians to question and examine past amnesia.

Recent Memory Shifts

Just as Bear River begins to shift in scholarly memory between the mid-1980s and the early twenty-first century, that same memory shift occurs in commemoration. The 1990 “Bear River Massacre” sign placed by the state of Idaho, the one that replaced the original “Bear River Battle” sign, tells a different story than the earlier monuments both in language and style. Funded and erected by the state, the billboard does not tie Bear River to the local community, as do the 1932 and 1953 metal plaques. More than that, the billboard shows a map of Idaho and indicates where the massacre took place. There is no mention of the local community and no reference to Utah. This monument also places Bear River in a much broader historical context by stating what the original plaques do not—that Bear River was “a military disaster unmatched in western history.” In terms of American Indian casualties, no U.S. army battle or massacre in the West parallels Bear River. That broader context replaces local minutia that fills the original metal plaques. There are no precise casualty figures for either the Shoshones or the army, no details of troop movements, no attempts at justifying certain killings, and no references to specific people other than Connor. The newer monument commemorates the massacre and nothing else. Its language is broad, its shape and placement simple, and its message clear.

The 1990 National Park Service marker is also significant. Like the 1990 Idaho billboard, the NPS plaque is simple and relatively austere. This plaque commemorates Bear River by deeming it a “massacre” and assigning it significance in the broader history of the United States. The Idaho billboard gave Bear River significance in western history, and the NPS plaque enshrined a belief that Bear River has significance in the national history of the United States—significance not in terms of “taming the West,” but in terms of a greater sensitivity toward the American Indians who suffered throughout United States history. The commemoration was not without protest. One local resident then went so far as to write a letter to Pocatello’s Idaho State Jour-
nal insisting that Bear River was not a massacre, contrary to what the NPS plaque and Idaho billboard claim.  

J. M. Winter’s writings on World War I commemoration, though they refer to another time and place, resonate with Bear River’s story as well. In both cases, memory shifts resulted in some degree of discord. While modern interpretations, for the most part, “didn’t obliterate traditions,” “they stretched, explored, and reconfigured them in ways that alarmed conventional artists, writers, and the public at large.”

Winter’s “traditional versus modern” method of understanding memory and commemoration provides an insightful framework for comparing the various monuments at Bear River. “Traditional motifs,” he argues, incorporate “an eclectic set of classical, romantic, or religious images and ideas” to produce “patriotic certainties, . . . euphemisms about battle, ‘glory’, and the ‘hallowed dead’. “The language, ornamentation, and overall design of the stone monument and its plaques are full of these messages. They combine to tell a story in which the massacre’s abrasive brutality is mitigated and polished, filtered through the perspectives and understandings of those who built the monuments. There, the massacre itself is clouded in the effusive praise of the community and its values.

66. Winter, Sites of Memory, Sites of Mourning, 5, 2.
67. Ibid., 3.
Modern commemorative language, in echoing the memory shift over time, turns such a telling on its head. The newer Idaho billboard and the NPS plaque are a new telling of an old story for a new generation—a generation that distills the events through its own perspectives and understandings and then chooses to enshrine those memories in metal and wood.

Neither the NPS plaque nor Idaho’s billboard monument obliterated the older commemorations. Both markers simply reconfigured an old story by removing it from a purely local “traditional” memory and incorporating it into the much broader regional and national “modern” historical landscape. The modern has not supplanted the traditional, and therein lies an intriguing aspect of Bear River. Only in the case of Idaho replacing its original billboard in 1990 did one monument—one memory—do away with another. At the site a person can stand in one place and witness the unfolding of Bear River’s memory—the unfolding of how the community, the region, and even the nation have remembered the event over the course of 130 years. All of the stories and memories stand side by side on the same site. This is unique amongst American’s historical monuments.
During the 140th anniversary commemoration ceremony in 2003, attendees gathered at the base of the Idaho billboard marker, with their backs to the original stone monument. It was almost as if they were turning their backs on the memories enshrined there and embracing as unadulterated truth the story told on Idaho’s monument.

Reporting on the gathering, Kristen Moulton of the *Salt Lake Tribune* opened her article like this: “The fight over what to call the West’s bloodiest Indian massacre is pretty much settled.” She acknowledged that the memories of Bear River struggled against one another and shifted between 1863 and 2003. Moulton went on to write that “fifty people from Utah and Idaho gathered to remember . . . and to wonder why this piece of history is so invisible to Idahoans and Utahns.” Not long after the ceremony, a woman from Pennsylvania echoed Moulton’s sentiments in a letter to the *Salt Lake Tribune* with the pointed question: “I, too, ask why are this place and this incident so lost?” These words echo those of Kass Fleisher, who wondered why Bear River has been forgotten. Modern memory of Bear River now focuses on questioning past memories, past interpretations.

In 1999, the 136th anniversary ceremony had prompted similar reactions of conciliation and regret, as well as acknowledgment that Bear River had been, to a great extent, lost. “Acknowledging what happened here,” wrote *Salt Lake Tribune* reporter Christopher Smith, “means facing painful facts and prejudices.” Smith cited a symbolic and tearful moment where army re-enactors presented Shoshone members with brass buttons clipped from their uniforms. The re-enactors told the Shoshones that “we do this out of respect and honor to the Shoshone people and for what happened in the past.” “When people see us without the top button and question us about it,” one re-enactor told the Shoshones, “we will tell them the story.” Smith emphasized how “several speakers . . . said the healing had begun,” and he opined that “maybe remembering, educating, and memorializing the tragedy on the Bear River will mean history won’t repeat itself.”

*One More Story Enshrined*

In March 2003 the Trust for Public Lands purchased a 22-acre portion of the massacre site and deeded the land to the Northwestern Shoshones. “We’ve waited many years for this day to happen,” remarked tribal chairwoman Gwen Davis. “Our dreams have become reality today.” Alina Bokde, a project man-

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ager with the Trust for Public Lands, said, “this is a story that must be heard, not just locally, but regionally and nationally.”

On a bluff overlooking the massacre site, the Shoshones, in conjunction with the Idaho Transportation Department, erected seven interpretive signs in 2006. The signs, laden with maps, images of local American Indians, soldiers, and geography, tell the story of the Shoshones and the massacre using descriptive phrases such as “the largest Indian massacre in the West” and “one of the largest mass killings of Indians in U.S. history” (see figure 6). One sign discusses the carnage in emotional detail, pushing the casualty estimate up to as many as 500 Shoshones killed. Another sign speaks with gratitude about the local Mormons who, after the massacre, took in the band’s surviving members, teaching them how to farm, and encouraged “community assimilation.” It does not mention how descendents of those locals refused to commemorate the massacre until seventy years later, and then the monument they did erect paid tribute to the soldiers’ heroism in the “battle” and the courage of the community’s women.

When I saw the new monuments I began to realize why Northwestern Shoshone leaders had been absent at the 140th anniversary ceremony, why those who did appear took no official role in that ceremony, and why their voice had largely been missing from the public discourse about Bear River.

and the earlier monuments. They had waited patiently for the opportunity to reclaim their story, their narrative. Unlike the earlier monuments that tell only part or one side of the story, the Shoshone markers tell a complex story of competition for resources that resulted in disaster, while not mincing words about the seriousness of the massacre. The language in the new monuments makes it clear that the Shoshones, having become a fixture in the local community whose progenitors once cheered their destruction, are moving forward without vindictiveness.

One more story has been added to the memories enshrined at Bear River. The Shoshones’ story, their memory, is the same one passed down to Mae Parry—the story of the “Massacre at Boa Ogoi.” That memory has remained constant, though relatively silent, compared to the shifting emphases, interpretations, and understandings—sometimes vocal, at other times subtle—expressed in non-Indian local, regional, and scholarly memory.

The day after the 140th anniversary, Kristen Moulton of the Tribune penned an article entitled “Mourning a Massacre.” She wrote with a very different tone than that seen in newspaper reports seventy years prior. Bear River “was the first and bloodiest massacre in the Far West, and among the most forgotten.” “Few would call it anything but a massacre today.” Rather than shower local settlers or troops with praise, the author interviewed Mae Parry, who described the heartache that still throbs today because of the massacre, and the slaughter of her ancestors: “It’s on my mind every day of my life.”

The years following 1990 proved important for Bear River’s place in commemorative and scholarly memory, as the memory unfolded in new ways, and in ways that caught the attention of many in the region and beyond. Bear River’s commemorative memory became what one sees today at the site: several stories standing within a short distance of one another, each recounting the same event and time period but through different lenses.

In an effort to demonstrate how easy it is for someone to overlook Bear River, Kass Fleisher chronicled her own tour of the monuments in 1998. In a slightly sarcastic tone, she remarks, “U.S. citizens who haven’t heard [about the massacre] may speed through this area at 65 miles per hour (at least) and note nothing except an odd sign that hangs midway along the valley’s pastureland—a sign that marks the entrance to a small trailer park.” Ironically, her words echo those of Watkin L. Roe, Sr., who in 1916 lamented that many people passed by the Bear River site without knowing what happened there. Eighty years and several monuments later, Fleisher’s story shows that people can still pass by without realizing what happened at Bear River. In many ways the massacre is still an obscurity, buried in America’s historical landscape.

73. Fleisher, The Bear River Massacre, 135.
Conclusion

Over the last 140 years, Bear River has been forgotten, remembered, told, and commemorated in different and often opposing ways. The earliest memories—local, regional, even national—made little or no effort to conceal the slaughter of hundreds of Shoshone men, women, and children, but accepted that carnage. The earliest monuments, and the sentiments that built them, also accepted the carnage but added a small dose of lamentation. Foremost in recorded memory was how Bear River brought peace to Cache Valley, and on that note, historians and the valley community celebrated their past. Throughout the 1920s, 1930s, and into the 1970s, historians and aficionados, when they spoke of it at all, passed along the memory of the Bear River “battle” where Connor’s soldiers broke the will of marauding red men. The winds of change carried Bear River’s memory to new places and gave it new words briefly in the mid-1970s, then more firmly in 1985 and the 1990s. Now, the memory of Bear River is taking new forms as the Shoshones take control of their past.

Between 1863 and today, the memory of Bear River has changed and taken different shapes in different generations. Some facts have remained relatively constant—for example, each generation that has spoken of Bear River accepted that nearly 250 Shoshones died there. But other facts—matters of emphasis, context, justifications, comparison—have shifted over time. Some generations have ignored it altogether. Although the “facts” of the event are the same now as they were in 1863, how those facts are understood, remembered, and commemorated has changed.

The significance of the story told in the monuments at Bear River is at once provincial and far-reaching. The Cache Valley community is taking steps unheard of in the past—selling massacre land to the Shoshones, speaking about the massacre in conciliatory language, and publicly coming to terms with the slaughter and the silence. In light of Bear River, historians of American Indians, the American West, and warfare in general need to reconsider their evaluation of conflicts between American Indians and soldiers. In their efforts to document atrocities, many have overlooked one of the worst of them all.

Those who study public history or historical memory can also learn from Bear River’s story. Its turbulent past both answers and produces questions about memory and commemoration. It shows that the act of enshrining a memory does not necessarily give it permanence. In addition, commemoration shows that people and communities often place on a monument those traits and ideals by which they define themselves. In that sense, the act of commemoration runs much deeper than simply placing words on a marker and leaving it at that. At the same time, Bear River confronts historians with an important question—how does local memory affect the formation of broader, national memory, and vice versa?

No one knows how many people visit Bear River each year, or how many spend time moving from one monument to the next, reading and studying.
Some, undoubtedly, continue along their way without giving much thought to the differences between the monuments. Others begin asking questions about how and why past interpretations stand side-by-side with present ones, and ideally, after looking at this struggle to control the past, people will see America’s commemorated heritage in a new light. One thing will become clear: the struggle that culminated in the Bear River massacre began long before 1863, and continues to this day—as we question past memories, interpretations, and amnesias, and as we build new monuments.

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