Timbisha Shoshone Tribe of Death Valley

Here in a National Park that receives a million visitors each year, few people are aware that there is a Native American Tribe living in the heart of Death Valley.

Ancestors

The ancestors of the Timbisha Shoshone Tribe came into the area over a thousand years ago. This land provided them with all of their needs. There were plants, springs and many kinds of wildlife from bighorn sheep to rabbits and lizards. The People ranged over the land in a seasonal pattern to harvest the fruits, seeds and plants. Pinyon pine nuts and mesquite beans were major parts of their diet. Family members gathered to listen to storytellers who told the history of the world, the animals and the People in story form. People were close and religion was an important part of life. Different dances were held for healing and to influence the weather. All things were seen as part of a whole. Group hunts and gatherings for dances, games and socializing brought people from different villages and districts together.

Men made bows and arrows and hunted, while women collected plants and made baskets. The People used rouge paint in ceremonies that symbolized from where the tribe got its strength: the earth. The word Timbisha means "red rock face paint" and would later become the official name of the tribe.

A time of change

In 1849 emigrants from the East who became lost in this area, not only brought news of Death Valley to the outside world, but they also started the end of the way of life for the Panamint Shoshone people. With the advent of mining and boomtowns in Death Valley, Panamint Shoshone Indians could no longer pursue their traditional way of life. Anglos inhabited the watering areas. Pinyon pine trees were cut down for wood and mesquite bushes disappeared. Eventually the People revolted at this encroachment on their way of life. Hostilities between Anglos and Native Americans surfaced in the 1860's and resulted in the deaths of both miners and Indians.

In 1866 Congress ratified the Treaty of Ruby Valley, which was a statement of peace and friendship that granted the United States rights of way across Western Shoshone territory to California, but did not cede to the United States any Western Shoshone land.

Survival

The People had to learn to survive by the Anglo rules and their economic condition declined. For them, the important thing was that the People be able to provide for themselves off the land, and if they could do that, they were rich. Now the People were treated as if they were poor because they lacked material wealth. They worked at any job they could find. These jobs included guides, miners, message carriers, woodchoppers and packers. They were responsible for finding many gold and silver ore veins for Anglo prospectors. Women did laundry in boomtowns. Some married prospectors like Montillion Murray Beatty, founder of the Nevada town named after him. Often Native American culture and values were misunderstood.

In the 1920's they worked in construction jobs at Scotty's Castle and at the Furnace Creek Inn. In the 1930's, when Death Valley became a National Monument, the Timbisha were living in Grapevine Canyon, Wildrose Canyon and at Furnace Creek. In 1936 the National Park Service set aside 40 acres of land for the People. With help from Indian Service funds, Civilian Conservation Corps and local Shoshone labor, a village of 12 small adobe structures was built. There was no indoor plumbing or electricity in the structures. The village had a trading post which operated until the 1940's. A road leading to the village was paved. In 1977 8 trailers were added and in 1983 6 mobile homes. In recent years additional community municipal improvements were made with funds from several federal agencies.

The people today

Today 50-60 people live in the Indian Village of Death Valley. Job training has not been readily available to the People to help them learn skills needed in the job market. The traditional skills of basket making have not been lost entirely, even though no market has been developed for the sale of modern made Timbisha basketry.

In spite of the challenges the tribe faces today, there are bright spots to be seen. In 1983, the Timbisha Shoshone became a federally recognized Native American tribe by the United States government. A greater emphasis on preserving their history has been encouraged by some members of the tribe. The modern challenges are many including:

- --mandates to cooperate on a governmental level with a number of county, state and federal agencies
- --limited employment and training possibilities
- --lack of a land base (which the Tribe feels has affected their economic development).

Today several members of the tribe work for local companies and organizations. Included in the tribe's current populations are several members who went to college and came back to work for the tribe. One member is a counselor associate in the youth program, and one has traveled all over the world working with environmental groups on the nuclear testing issue through the Western Shoshone National Council. There is a Tribal Chairperson who implements the decisions of the Tribal Council, and several members who are compiling an oral history of the tribe and mapping out sites of significance to the tribe from a National Park Service grant. A number of years ago, one member of the tribe compiled a Shoshone dictionary and stories so that the younger members of the tribe could learn the language. Several of the younger members are studying the Shoshone language today and the tribe is getting more involved with issues relating to their homeland and conservation. These issues include the recycling program and water issues facing this part of the country.