“Sho-Ban”

Discovering this barn in Idaho came purely by accident. I stumbled upon it in early September, 2016, while showing my son Jon around the Fort Hall Indian Reservation. We had come to Pocatello to run the annual marathon, which I had run ten years ago with a friend. My trip out West focused on spending time with my son and his young family, who moved to Salt Lake City six months ago.

Jon and I were looking for the tribal gift shop where I hoped I’d find a present for his wo-year-old son Colin. But we couldn’t find it. Instead, we drove by this old wooden barn, a charming one with a decorative shingled cupola perched on top. “This one has to be painted,” I told Jon. So he stopped the car and parked on the roadside berm. He stayed there while I walked down the gravel driveway, hoping for a pleasant welcome. Luckily I got one.

After I knocked on the door of a small house, I heard a voice inviting me inside. Kelly Wright, a tall hulk of a man, the program manager for environmental waste on the reservation, made me feel welcome. He offered to show me the barn and give me some wood for framing my painting. I promised to send a small study painting, along with this essay.

Kelly is a Sho-Ban – from the union of two Indian tribes that I’ll explain later – told me that in 2012 the tribe acquired this barn and farm from the Hendrick family who had owned it for several generations. It was built in the 1890s and originally housed horses, though it eventually was used for cattle. The small barn – full of saw cut boards but only a few hand-hewn beams – likely could tell many stories about what life was like on this reservation a century ago.

The Shoshones and Bannocks were hunters and gatherers. Their most famous was a female – Sacajawea, born into the Lehmi Shoshone tribe around 1788 in Salmon, Idaho. In 1800 the Hidatsa raided the village, killed Shoshone warriors, and captured several young girls including Sacajawea, taking them to their home near Fort Mandan in the Dakota territory. A year later, when she was about 13, Sacajawea was taken as a wife by the French trapper Toussaint Charbonneau.

President Thomas Jefferson sent Captains Lewis and Clark and about 50 men on a perilous mission to explore the great West and Northwest in 1803. They began their journey in May of 1804 and by November they reached the Mandan-Hidatsa villages, where they spent the winter. Since they wanted to know more about the tribes of the Rocky Mountains, they hired Charbonneau because Sacajawea spoke the Shoshone language and was familiar with the tribes that Lewis and Clark would encounter. Sacajawea also spoke Hidatsa, which her husband understood. He communicated in French to a Frenchman in the group who, in turn, spoke English to Lewis and Clark. At that time she was pregnant.

They left on the mission in the spring of 1805, a few months after Sacajawea delivered her baby, Jean Baptiste, whom she strapped to her back on a cradleboard. She guided the troops through the Rockies and by August they met a group of Shoshones, who, by luck, were Sacajawea’s band. Their chief, Cameahwait, was her brother. This happened in southeastern Idaho, possibly near where the Fort Hall reservation and this barn sits today.

Rather than return to her tribe, she convinced the Shoshones to sell much-needed horses for the difficult journey and continued on – with her infant son. She was an heroic woman and her presence on this trip proved invaluable since many of the tribes had never seen white men and wouldn’t know if they came in peace. But, since a war party would never bring a woman along, especially one with a baby, tribes would know the group was peaceful.

By November of 1805 the Corps of Discovery reached the mouth of the Columbia River where it opens into the Pacific. Their mission completed, they wintered on the Columbia and then returned, thanks to Sacajawea guiding them through the Rockies, to the Hidatsa-Mandan villages. Her help earned her a significant place in American history and today there are more statues of this brave Indian than any other American woman.

However, exploration led to immigration of the West as white settlers, fleeing Europe and leaving the crowded eastern America, sought new land, land where western Indians lived and had lived for centuries. This led to conflict, wars, and loss of life. In 1834 Fort Hall was established as a trading post, but troubles continued. In 1863, while the Civil War continued in the eastern United States, California volunteer soldiers massacred hundreds of Shoshones near the Bear River in southeastern Idaho. In 1868 a treaty was ratified in Fort Bridger, Utah territory, between the Shoshone and Bannock tribes, giving them 1.8 million acres. This acreage, through surveying “errors,” was gradually reduced to present-day 546,000 acres, of which 251,000 are owned by the tribe.

Kelly told me that the Shoshones and Bannocks didn’t like each other much when they were first placed together on the reservation. But, through intermarriage and generations later, they peacefully co-exist, call themselves Sho-Bans, and number about six thousand. About 5,600 live on this reservation. I felt privileged to paint this barn and frame it in its own wood.