

Two 19th Century Women Who Were Advocates
on Behalf of Native Americans

by

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One of the most contentious issues in the 19th century was the United States government's relationship with Native Americans. It is a sad story of tribal dislocation and much suffering.

Among the critics of the government's policies were two women who became well-known advocates of Native American rights. One was Helen Hunt Jackson, who grew up in Amherst, Massachusetts; the other was Sarah Winnemucca, a Piute Indian from Nevada.

Though they were from vastly different cultures, their messages were very similar. Each communicated her message by publishing a book, but Winnemucca was also known for her feisty speeches. Their lives paralleled one another in many ways, but apparently they never met.

Helen Hunt Jackson was born in Amherst in 1830, the same year as Emily Dickinson, who was a classmate and close friend. Jackson was a well-known writer and poet, but what brought her the most recognition was her book, *A Century of Dishonor*, published in 1881. Carefully researched and relying heavily on government documents, the book is a scathing indictment of the government's policies toward Native Americans. She was inspired to take up the Indians' cause in 1879 after hearing a lecture in Boston by the Ponca Indian Chief, Standing Bear.

In his introduction to the book, President of Amherst College Julius H. Seelye wrote, “The problem is not with the Indians but with the government and her people.”

Jackson takes the reader through a history of the U.S. government’s troubled relations with Native Americans, beginning with the earliest treaties with the Delaware Indians in 1779 and the Cherokees in 1785. The story that is repeated over and over is one of treaties made and broken, promises of reparations not kept, and removal of one tribe after another onto reservations. Once they were confined, Indians were often mistreated and deprived of basic necessities by the agents of the Bureau of Indian Affairs who administer the reservations. Separated from their tribal lands and no longer able to support themselves through trapping, hunting and farming, Indians had to depend on inadequate government subsidies. The possibility of illness and starvation was ever present.

In 1869, President Ulysses S. Grant appointed a commission to look into the government’s treatment of Native Americans. The following is part of its report.

“The history of the Government’s connections with the Indians is a shameful record of broken treaties and unfulfilled promises. The history of the white man’s connection with the Indians is a sickening record of murder, outrage, robbery, and wrongs committed by the former, as the rule, and occasional savage outbreaks and unspeakably barbarous deeds of retaliation by the latter, as the exception.

“The testimony of some of the highest military officers of the United States is on record to the effect that, in our Indian wars, almost without exception, the first aggressions have been made by the white man; and the assertion is supported by every civilian of reputation who has studied the subject.”

Jackson was highly critical of Secretary of the Interior Carl Schurz for his policies toward the Indians. She wrote letters to friends and acquaintances, including Henry Wadsworth Longfellow and Oliver Wendell Holmes, urging them “to denounce” Schurz.

Jackson's book was widely read, but it is not clear to what extent it influenced the politicians.

Sarah Winnemucca was born into a Piute tribe in 1844 in a region north of what is now Reno, Nevada. The Piutes, made up of numerous bands, numbered only a few thousand and had lived a semi-nomadic life for centuries in the austere arid land centered primarily east of the Sierra Mountains in Nevada. Her father and grandfather were both tribal leaders.

Recognized for her intelligence and fluency in English, Winnemucca became known in her early twenties as an activist for her tribe as she began to speak publicly, giving lectures to white audiences as far away as San Francisco. With the gift for oratory she inherited from her father, her dramatic presence was enhanced by her flowing black hair and colorful native costume.

In her talks, Winnemucca had two major criticisms of the government. The first was the policy of forcing her people off their tribal lands and onto reservations. The second was the unscrupulous government agents who, being poorly paid, kept for themselves and resold clothing, blankets, food and other necessities that lawfully belonged to the Indians.

While many settlers were sympathetic to Winnemucca's cause, there was widespread prejudice toward Indians and many whites maligned Sarah through the press. Newspapers had a field day.

In 1870, now 26, Winnemucca wrote her first letter on behalf of the Piutes. Published in several newspapers and reprinted in *Harper's* magazine, it brought widespread attention. (Jackson includes this letter in the appendix of her book, but otherwise does not mention Winnemucca.)

As a result of the negative publicity the Bureau of Indian Affairs was receiving, Secretary of the Interior Carl Schurz invited Winnemucca to meet with him in Washington, D.C. Schurz promised to improve conditions on her reservation and allow the Piutes to return to their own lands. He never kept his promise.

In 1881, Winnemucca married Lewis Hopkins, a former soldier and her third white husband. She was 37, he was 31. In the spring of 1883, they set out for Boston with letters of introduction from supporters in San Francisco. The couple's hosts were two elderly sisters, Elizabeth Peabody and Mary Peabody Mann, widow of Horace Mann, the noted educator. The sisters were socially well connected and advocates of many causes. Both took a keen interest in Winnemucca by scheduling lectures and encouraging her to write her autobiography, which was published in 1883. It was the first book in English published by a Native American woman. (Sarah Winnemucca Hopkins, *Life Among the Piutes: Their Wrongs and Claims.*)

Over the following year Winnemucca gave more than 300 lectures in Boston, New York, Philadelphia and Washington, D.C. to enthusiastic audiences. On April 22, 1884, she testified before the House Sub-Committee for Indian Affairs, appealing for a permanent home for the Piutes.

Winnemucca's testimony may well have influenced legislation called the "Lands in Severalty Act," also known as the Dawes Act., named after its sponsor, Senator Henry Dawes of Massachusetts, whom Winnemucca had met in Boston. The objective of the legislation was to encourage assimilation of Indians into American society by granting ownership (in severalty) through land allotments, eventually abolishing the reservation

system. This legislation eventually passed in 1887, but the grant of land for the Piutes never came to pass because by then white settlers had taken over.

While Helen Hunt Jackson's book was well received, it had its share of critics. More popular was her novel, *Ramona*, published in 1884. Set in Southern California, it is a story of a half Native American orphaned girl who encounters racial discrimination.

Born Helen Maria Fiske, Hunt's first husband, Edward Hunt, died at a young age in an accident. In 1875 she married William Jackson, a wealthy banker, and eventually moved to California. Helen Hunt Jackson died of cancer in San Francisco in 1885 at the age of 55.

Abandoned by her husband who absconded with her modest savings to pay gambling debts, Winnemucca's speaking career rapidly declined and the school she founded for Piute children eventually failed for lack of funds. In 1891, while visiting a sister at Henry's Lake near the border with Yellowstone National Park, Sarah Winnemucca died unexpectedly at the age of 47. Yet her legacy is alive today. In 2005, the state of Nevada honored her by installing her statue in the National Statuary Hall at the U.S. Capitol in Washington, D.C.

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