

Sarah Winnemucca—Native American Activist

By

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Sarah Winnemucca was one of the most notable Native American women of the nineteenth century. Recognized for her intelligence and fluency in English, she became widely known as an eloquent advocate on behalf of her Piute tribe. With the gift of oratory inherited from her father, she gave lectures to sold-out white audiences chastising the U.S. government for its treatment of Native Americans. The attention she received led to meetings with government officials and the nation's president.

Her talents were also recognized by the U.S. military for which she served as guide and interpreter while the army tried to maintain peace between white settlers and the native population.

Among her other accomplishments Sarah wrote an autobiography, the first book in English published by a Native American woman.

Sarah was born in 1844 in what was known as the Humboldt Sink, the terminus of the Humboldt River, about fifty miles northeast of present-day Reno. 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 east of the Sierra Nevada range in what is now Nevada, though their wanderings also took them into California, southern Oregon, and Idaho. Nearby tribes were the Washoes, Shoshones, and Bannocks.

Sarah's Piute name was Thocmetony, meaning "Shell Flower."

Her father, Chief Winnemucca, was head of one of the Piute bands.

Though she admired her father, Sarah had a closer relationship with her grandfather, Truckee, the tribal leader. In his younger years he had been a guide to several white explorers, including John C. Fremont. He counseled his people to make friends with the white settlers.

Sarah's first extended experience with whites was in 1851 when, at the age of seven, she and a group from her tribe were taken by her grandfather to the Sacramento Valley in California. They stayed with Truckee's white friends over the winter. Sarah recalled getting sick and being cared for by a kind white woman, one of her first positive encounters with whites.

Sarah was thirteen when she and her younger sister, Elma, went to live with the family of Major William Ormsby in Carson City. It was a happy year during which she learned to speak and write English. At the time her people were living near Pyramid Lake and were getting along peaceably with the white settlers in the area.

The death of Sarah's grandfather in 1860 was one of the most painful episodes of her life. She described being with him in his last hours:

I crept up to him. I could hardly believe he would never speak to me again. I knelt beside him and took his dear old face in my hands, and looked at him quite a while. I could not speak. I felt the world growing cold. Everything seemed dark...I was a simple child, yet I knew what a great man he was.

It was in 1860 that the Pyramid Lake War occurred, the first major outbreak of hostilities in Sarah's lifetime. This was a three-month encounter that was sparked by the kidnapping of two Piute girls and the killing of the white perpetrators. Militias were sent from California to help protect the settlers. During one of the skirmishes, Sarah's former benefactor, Major Ormsby, who had led an armed force against the Piutes, was killed.

In her adolescence Sarah became well-known for translating public speeches her father made urging peaceful co-existence with the settlers. Also, she joined her father, family members, and other Piutes, in putting on dramatic performances that were popular in towns of the area. In spite of periodic flare-ups, the settlers were fascinated with the Indians. Sarah was likewise curious about the white world and was already skillfully navigating between the two cultures.

In 1862, the Piutes welcomed the governor of the new Territory of Nevada, James Nye, in an elaborate ceremony. Nye was popular with the

Piutes because he was known for protecting their rights. Then eighteen, Sarah was not as pretty as her older sister, Mary, or tall like her father. Nevertheless, though short and stocky, with broad features like most of her people, she commanded attention with her engaging personality, flowing black hair, and colorful native dress. During the ceremony Sarah was offered to be the governor's wife, but he graciously declined. It was around this time that newspapers began calling Sarah the "Piute Princess."

By 1865 Sarah was living at the recently-established Pyramid Lake Reservation. She was 21 and beginning to speak publicly about the government's treatment of the Piutes.

The Bureau of Indian Affairs believed that the cheapest way to control Native Americans was to confine them to reservations, where they could be "civilized" and in some cases Christianized. Many of the bureau's officials who were put in charge of administration were unscrupulous and withheld from the Indians food, clothing, and other provisions to which they were entitled. Chafing under the poor conditions, Sarah and a small band of Piutes left the reservation and went to live near the Army's Camp McDermitt close to the Oregon border. She was soon hired by the commanding officer to be a translator in the on-going effort to keep hostilities from breaking out. This

was Sarah's first paid position. In this capacity she was instrumental in convincing other Piutes, including her father who was back living in the mountains, to come to Camp McDermit where they could be protected and given food and clothing. With few exceptions, the military treated the Piutes and other Native Americans far better than did the Bureau of Indian Affairs.

It was in 1870 that Sarah, now 26, wrote her first letter on behalf of the Piutes. Published in several newspapers and reprinted in *Harper's* magazine, it attracted widespread attention. According to Sarah's biographer, Sally Zanjani, the letter "won recognition as a classic statement of the Indian plight."

Written from Camp McDermit and dated April 4, 1870, the letter is addressed to Major H. Douglas, the U.S. Army's regional administrator, who had inquired about the conditions of the Piutes at Pyramid Lake. Sarah began by stating that her people didn't want to return to the reservation because they would starve:

I think that if they had received what they were entitled to from the agent, they would never have left....We were confined to the reserve, and had to live on what fish we might be able to catch in the river. If this is the kind

of civilization awaiting us on the reserves, God grant that we may never be compelled to go on one, as it is much preferable to live in the mountains and drag out an existence in our native manner...If the Indians have any guarantee that they can secure a permanent home on their own native soil, and that our white neighbors can be kept from encroaching on our rights, after having a reasonable share of ground allotted to us as our own, and giving us the required advantages of learning, I warrant that the savage (as he is called today) will be a thrifty and law-abiding member of the community fifteen or twenty years hence.

Major Douglas found Sarah's criticisms justified and wrote to the Bureau of Indian Affairs in Washington, D.C. His letter fell on deaf ears.

As Sarah increasingly became a public figure, her personal life came under constant scrutiny. While newspapers lauded her for her impassioned speeches, they also called attention to her occasional drinking, gambling, and hot-tempered behavior. She often carried a knife to protect herself against unwanted male attention, and once was arrested for slashing a man's face. She was defended in court by a savvy and sympathetic lawyer and the case was dropped. The aggressor, a white man, was never charged.

The three-month-long Bannock War of 1878 was the last Indian uprising in the Pacific Northwest. The confrontation was begun by a band of Bannock Indians who, like the Piutes at Pyramid Lake, were suffering from

starvation at their reservation, and took up arms. Sarah and others tried to talk peace but were unsuccessful.

The U.S. military detachment was headed by General Oliver Howard, who had a reputation for treating Native Americans humanely. Hiring Sarah as a scout and interpreter, he relied on her to help his detachment track down the rebellious Indians. Sarah and three other Piutes set off to convince her people not to join the Bannocks and instead seek protection of the military. After an arduous ride, Sarah found Chief Winnemucca and a small band being held prisoner by the Bannocks. A daring rescue took place at night. Then Sarah and one of the Piutes rode on ahead to give their report to the general. Their three-day ride, which took them over treacherous mountain terrain, was an astonishing feat of bravery, horsemanship, and stamina. The rescue brought Sarah much acclaim.

After a number of small battles, the Bannock War ended with no clear victory on either side. In addition to the Bannocks, some of the Piutes who had joined the uprising were also taken prisoner.

What followed after the war was disastrous for the Piutes. Whether they fought in the Bannock War or not, the Piutes of the area would be sent along with other Indians to the Yakima Reservation north of the Columbia River.

Sarah felt betrayed by General Howard, who had promised that her people would return to the Malheur Reservation. However, he was overruled by the Bureau of Indian Affairs. Because she was the one who informed her people, many blamed Sarah for the government's decision. In addition, some Piutes accused her of disloyalty for cooperating with the military during the conflict in which many Piutes had been killed.

Yakima turned out to be a nightmare. The reservation agent treated the Indians badly and soon forced Sarah to leave the reservation because of the Piutes' complaints of his harsh treatment.

Following Sarah's departure in November of 1879, she embarked on a series of lectures in San Francisco that brought her widespread attention. She was now 35. On stage she was a striking figure, in her native costume and long black hair. Speaking extemporaneously, she enthralled audiences with her scathing criticism of the government's Indian policies and the Yakima agent in particular. The following is an excerpt from one her presentations as reported in a newspaper:

Ah, for shame! You who are educated by a Christian government in the art of war...Yes, you who call yourselves the great civilization...I am crying out to you for justice—yes, pleading for the far-off plains of the West.

You take the nations of the earth to your bosom but the poor Indian...who has lived for generations on the land which the good God has given them, and you say he must be exterminated...Where can we poor Indians go if the government will not help us?

As a result of the negative publicity the Bureau of Indian Affairs was receiving, Sarah was invited to meet with Secretary of the Interior Carl Schurz, and informally with President Rutherford B. Hayes. Her delegation arrived in Washington in January 1880. Schurz promised to improve living conditions at Yakima, plus he gave permission for the Piutes to return to their homeland. All that was promised never came to fruition. Sarah was quoted as saying, "Promises which like the wind were heard no more."

On December 5, 1881, Sarah married Lewis Hopkins (her third white husband), a former soldier. Prior to his discharge he had been demoted from sergeant to private; his record included the notation "no character." She was 37, he was 31. It is not clear whether Sarah was aware of Lewis's addiction to gambling, a problem that would later lead to disastrous consequences.

Sarah's biographer suggests that Sarah's decision to marry white men reflected the fact that she was far more acculturated to the white world than any Piute male and that she saw having a white husband as an asset in the

white culture. Also, her choice of Hopkins, clearly her inferior, put him in a subservient position of an aid when it came to her public appearances.

In the spring of 1883, Sarah and Lewis set out for Boston, carrying with them letters of introduction from supporters in San Francisco.

The couple's hosts in Boston were two elderly sisters, Elizabeth Peabody and Mary Peabody Mann, widow of Horace Mann, the noted educator. The sisters were socially well-connected and supported many social causes. Both took a keen interest in Sarah, introducing her to Boston intellectuals, scheduling lectures, and providing editorial help while Sarah wrote her autobiography. Not only is that work an absorbing account of her remarkable life, but it has been recognized by scholars for its valuable description of Native American culture. Sarah's book, *Life Among the Piutes: Their Wrongs and Claims*, was published in 1883 and sold well.

During the following year Sarah gave more than 300 lectures in Boston, New York, Philadelphia, Washington, D.C., and other cities to enthusiastic audiences. As always, she spoke without notes and rarely repeated herself. With her dramatic delivery and colorful native dress, she charmed her

listeners and attracted many admirers with stories of her early life and pleas for the just treatment of her people.

Sarah had her critics as well. Coming mostly from religious groups, they vigorously objected to Sarah's desire that Native Americans be allowed to preserve their own culture and not be forced into Christianity. In general, however, the public remained supportive.

By April of 1884, Sarah and Lewis were in Washington, where they found the administration of President Chester A. Arthur less than sympathetic. Sarah then turned to Congress and testified on April 22 before the House Sub-Committee for Indian Affairs. In addition to calling for better treatment of Native Americans, Sarah appealed for a permanent home for the Piutes.

Still in Washington, Sarah was shocked to discover that Lewis had suddenly left town, having stolen money from her and her supporters to pay his gambling debts. In despair, Sarah returned to Nevada alone.

Sarah arrived at Pyramid Lake in the summer of 1884. After much effort, she opened her own school a year later. Though initially successful, it was difficult to keep the school open due to dwindling donations from supporters in the East.

Then Lewis unexpectedly reappeared, dying of tuberculosis. His final egregious act was to steal much of Sarah's resources and take off for San Francisco. He soon returned and died in October of 1887. Sarah's school eventually closed in the summer of 1889 for lack of funds.

It was during this time that Sarah and her sister, Elma, were reunited following the death of Elma's husband. The latter two had been living at Henry's Lake in what is now Idaho.

Sarah and Elma returned to Henry's Lake in the spring of 1891. It was there that Sarah suddenly died on October 16, after suffering severe stomach pains following a meal accompanied by chokecherry wine. She was 47 years old. There was the suspicion that she may have been poisoned by Elma because of rivalry over a man. The true cause of her death remains unclear.

As we consider the life of Sarah Winnemucca, the following might well be the message that she would want us most to remember:

My people are ignorant of worldly knowledge, but they know what love means and what truth means. They have seen their dear ones perish around them because their white brothers have given them neither love nor truth...They are innocent and simple, but they are brave and will not be imposed upon.

In 2005, the state of Nevada honored Sarah by installing her statue in the National Statuary Hall Collection at the U.S. Capitol in Washington, D.C. Indeed, her legacy is very much alive today.

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