

Biography of Sarah Winnemucca

By Kelly Sassi

Sarah Winnemucca was born around 1844 in Western Nevada. She was an American Indian of the Northern Paiute Nation. Her Paiute name was Thocmetony (Shell Flower). She grew up during a time when White settlers were moving west and taking away the Indians' lands. When her grandfather, Truckee, saw the first White person, he thought they looked like owls. He greeted them in friendship, but they burned down the tribe's whole supply of food for the winter (Winnemucca 1969, 12). Despite this traumatic event, her grandfather and the rest of her family pursued a peaceful coexistence with white people (Ruoff). Later in life, Sarah Winnemucca would become invaluable both to Whites and to her tribe for her skills as an interpreter. She was also the first Native American woman to publish an autobiography. Her contributions as a famous translator, teacher, writer, and speaker are commemorated by a statue of her in the United States Capitol building. She is one of only two people from Nevada to be honored in this way.

When her people were about to meet White settlers for the first time, Sarah Winnemucca's mother panicked. She had heard that White people eat children, so she buried Sarah Winnemucca and her cousin in some dirt up to their necks and surrounded them with sagebrush so they would be hidden from the Whites and protected from the sun. Once the Whites passed through the area, her mother came back and unburied her (Winnemucca 1969, 11–12). Because of this experience, Winnemucca was terrified of White people when she was a child, a challenge she gradually overcame as her tribe spent more time with White people.

Sarah Winnemucca's father, Chief Winnemucca, was an Indian chief who guided John Fremont during his 1843–45 exploration of Nevada's Great Basin and California. Fremont and Chief Winnemucca's friendship opened the door for Sarah and her younger sister to get an education in the household of William Ormsby. They were educated alongside Ormsby's daughter in his home. She learned to read, write, and speak English. This was an exceptional opportunity because there were no schools for Indian children in the area. At the time, she was one of just a few Paiute Indians who knew English, which led to many opportunities for her. In 1860 she attended a convent school for a short time, but parents of the White students objected, and she was forced to leave. Despite this discrimination, she pursued her education on her own and developed strong speaking and writing skills.

In 1860, her father and other family members died in the Pyramid Lake War, and she became acting chief at the age of 21. She worked as an interpreter for the Bureau of Indian Affairs at Fort McDermitt on the Oregon border. She married her first husband, Lt. Edward C. Bartlett, that year. When that marriage ended, due to Bartlett's alcoholism and him spending all her money, she rejoined her tribe at the Malheur Reservation in Oregon. She worked there as an interpreter and teacher's aid from 1875 to 1878.

In 1878 the Bannock War broke out. (The Bannocks were another Indian tribe in the area.) Because of her knowledge of English, she was hired by the U.S. army as an interpreter. This gave her an opportunity to learn about issues from both sides. It also put her in danger. She exhibited "courage and stamina as she risked being killed or raped as she rode back and forth between the Paiutes and the army" (Ruoff 1996, 301). When the Bannocks took her father and other tribal members hostage, Winnemucca volunteered to be a scout for the U.S. Army. She covered more than a hundred miles of trail through Idaho and Oregon before finding the Bannock camp and freeing her relatives. She shared intelligence with U.S. Army General O. O. Howard and acted as scout, aide, and interpreter to him for the remainder of the war against the Bannocks. She also translated for government agents at Malheur reservation in Oregon. Her skills as a translator were highly sought after at this period in U.S. history.

However, one of the challenges she faced was negotiating this difficult position. Indians grew angry with her when what she translated from the U.S. government turned out to be a lie or a false promise. The U.S. government agents grew angry with her for using her knowledge of English to make arguments on behalf of her tribe. These controversies were complicated by her role as a woman in a time when women did not have many rights. Adding to her controversial reputation was the fact that she had multiple marriages fail. White men tried to discredit her by writing slanderous letters about her.

Her people were put on the Yakima Indian reservation. Their life on the reservation was very difficult. Government agents stole the food and clothing that were to be issued to the Indians. As a result, her people suffered greatly. They were the targets of racism and victims of theft. The weather and living conditions on the Yakima reservation were harsh, even deadly, and they longed to return to their own lands.

Winnemucca went on a tour of cities on the East Coast in 1879 to lecture about the hardships of her people. She and her father met with President Rutherford B. Hayes. He promised that her people could return to the Malheur reservation, "but the order to that effect was never executed" (*Encyclopedia Britannica*). Winnemucca was very popular on the East Coast. There were many newspaper and magazine articles about her and her family. She gave hundreds of public lectures, with the help of two influential white women—Mary Mann and

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Elizabeth Peabody. In her speeches, she explained the situation of her people and their unjust treatment at the hands of the U.S. government, in the hopes that her White audience could influence the government's actions toward American Indians.

In 1881, she published a book titled *Life Among the Piutes: Their Wrongs and Claims*. It was an autobiography of her life and described the many hardships that she and her family experienced. Winnemucca was the first Native American woman known to secure a copyright and to publish in the English language. The book not only tells the story of her life but also the story of her people. Mary Mann helped her by editing the grammar for her. The book was sold at her lectures.

Later that year, she remarried, to an army lieutenant named Lewis H. Hopkins. He ran up large gambling debts and swindled Winnemucca's brother and other Indians out of profits from their wheat harvest (Ruoff 1996, 300).

In 1884, the passage of the Senate bill sponsored by Henry Dawes (called "The Dawes Act") resulted in two bands of Paiutes being moved to Pyramid Lake Reservation. Each head of household received 160 acres on this reservation. However, the land was non-arable, which meant the Indians could not farm it. Winnemucca wrote to Senator Dawes asking that her tribe be moved to the Malheur reservation in Oregon, which had better land, but the military wanted that land, so her people ended up at Pyramid Lake Reservation. What was particularly unjust about this decision is that the Malheur reservation had been set aside for the Paiutes back in 1867, and they had been "forcibly removed" from it (Senier 2001, 97).

When Winnemucca returned to Nevada after her book was published, she took on her final challenge: to start up a school for Indian children. It was a bilingual school near Lovelock, designed to promote the Paiute language and culture. At this time, many American Indian children were taken away from their homes and sent to boarding schools, where they were punished for speaking their Native languages. This practice was part of a larger effort to assimilate Indians into White American culture. Winnemucca valued her Native language, so she was looking for a way to preserve it and resist assimilation of Indian children. Creating the Peabody Indian School was a way for her to do this. "Many criticized her efforts, claiming Native American children must attend English-speaking schools as a means to assimilate them into the mainstream culture. In response to these claims, Winnemucca published a thirty-six page pamphlet in 1886 explaining the success of the school" (Dela Cruz and Kipp 2002).

Later in 1886, her husband died of tuberculosis. She became ill too, and moved to her sister's home in Monida, Montana, where she died on October 17, 1891.

"Although she was not always rewarded in life, Winnemucca continues to receive recognition. In 1993, The Nevada Writers Hall of Fame awarded Winnemucca entry based on her creative expression and her efforts to help Native Americans gain freedom from white oppressors" (Dela Cruz and Kipp 2002). She was the first woman to be honored with a Nevada state historic marker. In 1994 she was inducted into the National Women's Hall of Fame in Seneca Falls, New York. In 2005, a dedication ceremony was held for her bronze statue in the U.S. Capitol's National Statuary Hall.

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Flesch-Kincaid grade level according to coh-metrix: 8.778

¹ Another spelling of Paiute, the name of Winnemucca's tribe.