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Women in History

Sarah Winnemucca: Native Educator and Human Rights Advocate

Bernita L. Krumm

On March 1, 2005, Congressman Jon Porter of Nevada addressed Congress on a bill to allow for the placement of a statue of Sarah Winnemucca into the National Statutory Hall. "Sarah led an incredible life," Porter asserted, adding that Winnemucca "has become a part of Nevada history that will never be forgotten" (Porter, 2005). One of only eight women represented in the National Statutory Hall Collection, Winnemucca was a spokesperson and advocate for Indian rights. Her autobiography, *Life Among the Piutes*, the first published book by a Native American woman, relates the story of white settlement from the Native American perspective. Although she died at the age of 47, Winnemucca's accomplishments were numerous; she is revered as an educator and defender of human rights.

Born into the Northern Paiute tribe in Nevada State Territory around 1844, Winnemucca lived in various parts of Northern Nevada, including Pyramid Lake, McDermitt, and Lovelock. Her first experiences with white people occurred at the age of six when her grandfather, Chief Truckee, took her to California. "Winnemucca's grandfather believed that assimilation was necessary in order for their people to live in peace with the whites. He informed his family and his people how important this was" (McClure, 1999). At age thirteen, Winnemucca stayed with the family of Major William Ormsby at Mormon Station, later known as Genoa, Nevada. By the following year, Sarah knew five languages, including three Indian dialects, English, and Spanish. In 1860, Winnemucca went with her sister Elma to San Jose, California, to be educated in a convent school. The two girls were never officially admitted to the school because "complaints were made to the sisters by wealthy parents about Indians being in school with their children" (Hopkins, 1994). This experience gave Winnemucca a new perspective of the white culture.

By the time Winnemucca reached adulthood, white emigration forced Native Americans onto reservations, first to the Pyramid Lake Reservation in Nevada, then the Malheur Indian Reservation in Oregon, and finally to Yakima, Washington. "Because she became fluent in English and fully

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proficient with Euro-American customs, she inherited the role of translator, mediator, negotiator, and all-purpose go-between for her people as they lost more and more of their land. In the process of becoming acculturated to Western customs and language, Winnemucca never lost her Paiute identity, nor did she devalue or abandon it" (McClure,1999). In 1871, Winnemucca began working as an interpreter for the Bureau of Indian Affairs at Fort McDermitt on the Nevada/Oregon border. At this time, Winnemucca was married to Lt. E. C. Bartlett; the marriage lasted less than a year, and her later marriage to an Indian man was also short lived (Women's Biographies).

When Indian Agent Samuel Parrish on the Malheur Reservation in Oregon was replaced with a less reliable agent and reservation problems increased, Winnemucca began the journey to Washington, D.C., to speak on behalf of her people. However, when she learned that her father and members of her tribe had been taken hostage in the Bannock War of 1878, she offered to help the Army. She helped free her father and the other hostages, and continued to work as an interpreter and scout for the army.

Winnemucca traveled to Washington, D.C. in January of 1880 to meet with Secretary of the Interior Carl Schurz and President Rutherford B. Hayes. She procured promises of improvements in living conditions for her people; however, these promises were later broken by the government, causing many of Winnemucca's people to distrust her. Winnemucca was not deterred from her cause; with support from the Peabody sisters, Elizabeth Peabody and Mary (Mrs. Horace) Mann, she traveled throughout the Western and Eastern United States, and Washington, D.C., giving more than 400 speeches on the behalf of her people, and seeking citizenship for the Paiutes.

Winnemucca was self-educated, spoke fluently, and could write in English. Aided by Elizabeth Peabody and Mary Peabody Mann, who edited her grammar, Winnemucca eventually decided to write her story to explain the mistreatment of her people by the government and white settlers. In a

time when Native Americans were not even considered citizens in their own land, Winnemucca wrote as an advocate of human rights, striving to gain support to improve living conditions for her people. Published in 1883, *Life Among the Piutes* is Winnemucca's legacy to the Native American and white cultures.

Following the oral tradition of her people, she reaches out to readers with a deeply personal appeal for understanding, recording a portion of the history of the far west from the Native American perspective. The book was a monumental achievement, recording the Native American viewpoint of whites settling the west, told in a language that was not her own and written and published by a woman during the time when even white women were not allowed to vote, second only to the work she performed every day to promote understanding across cultures. (Women's Biographies)

Winnemucca, given the name Thocmetony, meaning "shell flower" in Paiute, was just a child when white settlers began coming to her homeland. Members of the Paiute tribe held differing views on their presence: Sarah's father, Chief Winnemucca, distrusted the whites and warned his people to stay apart from them; however, Winnemucca's grandfather, Chief Truckee, welcomed the arrival of his "white brothers." Winnemucca had to negotiate between the opposing philosophical views of her elders. In *Life Among the Piutes* she described the coming of the white people:

I was a very small child when the first white people came into our country. They came like a lion, yes, like a roaring lion, and have continued so ever since, and I have never forgotten their first coming . . . When the news was brought to my grandfather, he asked what they looked like? When told that they had hair on their faces, and were white, he jumped up and clasped his hands together and cried aloud--"My white brothers--my long-looked for white brothers have come at last!" (Hopkins, 1994)

Chief Truckee's response was based in his own belief of the traditional Indian story handed down through his ancestors that all mankind began as one family. In *Life Among the Piutes*, Winnemucca retold this story in her grandfather's words:

In the beginning of the world there were only four, two girls and two boys. Our forefather and mother were only two, and we are their children. You all know that a great while ago there was a happy family in this world. One girl and one boy were dark and the others were white. For a time they got along together without quarrelling, but soon they disagreed, and there was trouble. They were cross to one another and fought, and our parents were very much grieved. They prayed that their children might learn better, but it did not do

any good; and afterwards the whole household was made so unhappy that the father and mother saw that they must separate their children; and then our father took the dark boy and girl, and the white boy and girl, and asked them, 'Why are you so cruel to each other?' They hung down their heads, and would not speak. They were ashamed. He said to them, 'Have I not been kind to you all, and given you everything your hearts wished for? You do not have to hunt and kill your own game to live upon. You see, my dear children, I have power to call whatsoever kind of game we want to eat; and I also have the power to separate my dear children, if they are not good to each other.' So he separated his children by a word. He said, 'Depart from each other, you cruel children;—go across the mighty ocean and do not seek each other's lives.'

"So the light girl and boy disappeared by that one word, and their parents saw them no more, and they were grieved, although they knew their children were happy. And by-and-by the dark children grew into a large nation; and we believe it is the one we belong to, and that the nation that sprung from the white children will some time send some one to meet us and heal all the old trouble. Now, the white people we saw a few days ago must certainly be our white brothers, and I want to welcome them. I want to love them as I love all of you. But they would not let me; they were afraid. But they will come again, and I want you one and all to promise that, should I not live to welcome them myself, you will not hurt a hair on their heads, but welcome them as I tried to do." (Hopkins, 1994)

Honoring her grandfather's request, Winnemucca sought throughout her life to create understanding between her people and the whites. She worked for peace and friendship between the two cultures, believing that friendship with the whites was vital to the survival of her people. Winnemucca attacked the idea that her people were uncivilized. She hoped to destroy the idea that she and her people were savages; she wanted the "civilized" white population to examine themselves as they did the American Indians.

Winnemucca described acts of racism that she and other tribal members experienced. She also described abuse by reservation agents who were responsible for overseeing her tribe's living conditions. Unscrupulous agents gave the Indians only meager supplies of government rations of food and clothing and kept profits for themselves (Voices from the Gaps). Winnemucca expressed her opinion of those who mistreated her and her people; she described an argument against an abusive priest:

Oh for shame! You who are educated by a Christian government in the art of war; the practice of whose profession makes you natural enemies of the savages, so called by you. Yes, you, who call yourselves the great civilization; you who have knelt upon Plymouth Rock, covenanting with God to make this land the home of the free and the brave. Ah, then you rise

from your bended knees and seizing the welcoming hands of those who are the owners of this land, which you are not, your carbines rise upon the bleak shore, and your so-called civilization sweeps inland from the oceans wave; but oh, my God! Leaving its pathway marked by crimson lines of blood and strewed the bones of two races, the inheritor and the invader; and I am crying out to you for justice -- yes, pleading for the far-off plains of the West. (Hopkins, 1994)

Winnemucca was witness to the conflict between the Native Americans and officials of the white government; she met with those who controlled their future. She made long journeys and endured harsh treatment in order to fight for the rights of her people. Although her interaction with the white people caused many of the Paiute to believe she was untrustworthy, they still saw her as a leader.

Winnemucca devoted the last years of her life to teaching Paiute children. In 1884 she worked with Elizabeth Peabody to open Peabody's Institute, a Native American school that promoted Native American language and values. The school drew criticism from people who believed that Native American children must attend English-speaking schools as a means to assimilation. Winnemucca responded to the criticism with a pamphlet published in 1886, *Sarah Winnemucca's Practical Solution to the Indian Problem*. However, the Dawes Severalty Act of 1887 forced Native American children to attend English-speaking schools. The Peabody Institute lost valuable funding and, subsequently, closed. When her husband, Lt. L.H. Hopkins died, Winnemucca moved to Montana to live with her sister, Elma.

Sarah Winnemucca died on October 17, 1891, at the age of 47. Her writing remains as a testament to the struggles of all Native Americans; she was posthumously awarded the Nevada Writers Hall of Fame Award from the Friends of the Library, University of Nevada, Reno. Sarah Winnemucca devoted her life to building communication and creating understanding between the Native and white cultures. She is remembered as an educator, translator, and communicator, a dedicated advocate of human rights, and an integral part of Native American history.

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