



Sarah Winnemucca Hopkins

“

And by-and-by the dark children grew into a large nation; we believe it is the one we belong to, and that the nation that sprung from the white children will sometime send someone to meet us and heal all the old trouble.

— Life Among the Piutes

”



Biography

Born in Nevada State Territory in approximately 1844, Sarah Winnemucca witnessed many conflicts between Native American inhabitants and white government officials. Her first and only book, entitled *Life Among the Piutes*, was published in 1883 and is the first known autobiography written by a Native American woman. In her book, Winnemucca emphasizes the rewards and punishments she experienced as a female Native American activist. Winnemucca published other works including her 1886 pamphlet, *Sarah Winnemucca's Practical Solution to the Indian Problem*, intended as an effort to save a school she had a hand in creating. In 1891, shortly after the publication of her book, Winnemucca died. She remains an integral part of Native American history due to the attempts she made to help her people.

Using her autobiography as a forum, Winnemucca discussed Native Americans and their relations with whites. In 1860, the Pyramid Lake War claimed much of her family, including her father, chief of the Piute tribe. As a result, the twenty-one-year-old Sarah Winnemucca became the acting chief of her Piute nation in order to continue her family's legacy.

Quick Facts

- * 1828-1863 (?)
- * Native American author and activist
- * Her memoir is entitled *Life Among the Piutes*

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Biography continued

As acting chief, Winnemucca came to understand the hardships Native Americans faced as a result of white government officials. Much of the Piute nation's reservation rights had been taken by the federal government making many of Winnemucca's people homeless. Distressed by this tragedy, Winnemucca attempted to help.

Due to her grandfather's status within the Piute nation, Winnemucca learned to read and write English very well. She used this to the Piute people's advantage when she became an interpreter for the United States Army shortly after the Pyramid Lake War. This position of power allowed Winnemucca to become a superb diplomat as she heard both sides of the issues between her people and the federal government. As a result, some of the Piutes did not trust Winnemucca for consulting with the white oppressors: "It is said that I am working in the interest of the army, and as if they wanted all this care. It is not so . . ." (Winnemucca 1883). Despite the adversity she faced, Winnemucca pushed forward. In 1878, Winnemucca regained most of her people's respect when she fought in the Bannock War.

After the publication of her book in 1883, Winnemucca conducted a lecture series in which she discussed the conditions threatening her people and her efforts to seek citizenship for the Piutes. Continuing with activist efforts, in 1884 Winnemucca collaborated with sponsor Elizabeth Peabody in the creation of a Native American school. With the creation of this school, Winnemucca sought to promote Native American values and language. 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. Unfortunately, the school lost valuable funding when the Dawes Severalty Act of 1887 took effect, forcing Native American children to attend English-speaking schools.

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. Also, as of May 2001, a statue depicting an image of Sarah Winnemucca sits in Nevada's Statuary Hall in Washington, D.C. Moreover, Winnemucca has gained the respect of writers and readers everywhere for her perseverance and dedication to the Piute nation. Winnemucca's book creatively describes the events of her life in her own words, providing readers with a detailed description of her life as a Northern Piute.



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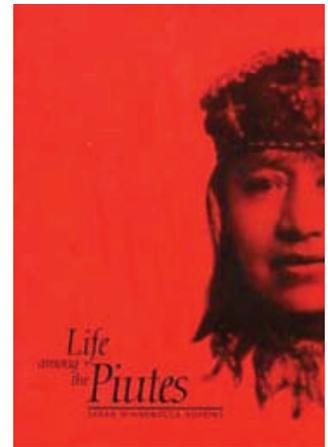
Biography continued

Sarah Winnemucca's *Life among the Piutes: Their Wrongs and Claims* is the autobiography of a member of the Northern Piute tribe who inhabited parts of what is now Nevada, in the Humboldt Lake region. She was assisted in writing the text by two white American women, Mrs. Horace Mann and her sister Elizabeth Peabody. Although Winnemucca could write and speak English, the two women assisted mostly in editing her grammar.

Winnemucca traveled the U.S. (focusing mostly on the East Coast), as well as parts of Europe, giving speeches pleading for support of her people. In order to explain the current situations and unjust treatment of her people by both the government and white settlers, Winnemucca decided that writing her story would be more beneficial. She hoped to gain support from a white audience who could more strongly influence government actions towards American Indian tribes (Bloom, 1998).

Much of Winnemucca's autobiography attacks the idea that her people are uncivilized. She hoped to destroy ideas that she and her people were savages without morals. She wrote so that the "civilized" white American population would look more deeply at themselves and American Indians.

Many of the themes Winnemucca captures in her autobiography deal with assimilation between her culture and white settlers. Winnemucca was taught to befriend and establish peace between her culture and the "whites" as a way to live among them and attain friendly relations. Throughout her autobiography, she relays this message as vitally important for the survival of her people. Winnemucca also discussed acts of racism that both she and her tribe experienced. The government's need for expansion in the west pushed Winnemucca's people and many other tribes in the area farther and farther into abandoned or unwanted land. They were given little or no rights.





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Biography continued

Winnemucca's famous journey to Washington D.C. -- where she met the President -- had little effect on her people. Winnemucca clearly described situations in which she and her people were taken advantage of or abused in some way because of their race. Although Winnemucca was "pushed" further and further into horrendous situations, she still fought and resisted the harsh treatments she and her people encountered, including their removal to a desolate location called the Yakima Reservation where the weather and living conditions were at times deadly. Winnemucca traveled and spoke of this unbearable region, and later she succeeded in having her people relocated to a more comfortable area in their native land.

Winnemucca also described the abuse of power by malicious reservation agents who were responsible for overseeing her tribe's living conditions. Many of the agents whose duty was to oversee the care of the tribe on the reservation were intolerable and often abusive. They would "skimp" on government rations of food and clothing as well as hold back profits for themselves that the tribe had worked for.

The language and tone of Winnemucca's text is strongly sympathetic. Winnemucca's descriptions of events and situations are explained in great detail and with powerful emotion. Although Winnemucca had a very strong and loving heart, there are times when she was pushed to a point where she could take no more abuse, voicing out her own personal opinions and statements against those who mistreated her and her people. The following passage describes an argument against a priest who has done such a thing:

"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" (Winnemucca 1883, 207).



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Biography continued

Much of her autobiography relates the harsh treatment of her people as a way to gain sympathy from her readers. She directly reaches out for reader understanding to gain support from the white population as well as the leaders in Washington, D.C. This is done in hope of having her people's rights supported by the government. "Dear reader, I must tell a little more about my poor people, and what we suffer at the hands of our white brothers" (Winnemucca 1883).

Winnemucca's tribe had been led by chiefs within her family. 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. Winnemucca learned to speak and write the English language and was often referred to as a "tool," given empty promises (McClure, 1999).

Although many of her people may have thought that Winnemucca was not to be trusted because of her contact with whites, there is no doubt they still relied on her as a leader. She traveled to Washington D.C. to meet with those who literally held the future of her people in their hands. She made excruciating journeys and withstood harsh physical conditions and treatment in order to fight for the rights of her people.

Her book clearly explains the events of her life by covering a multitude of the difficulties her people faced on a daily basis. The autobiography reads more like a "plea for understanding" or even a "cry for help" instead of a life memoirs. The reader may be taken back at first, feeling that the autobiography is strongly emotional, but Winnemucca's interest was to obtain reader sympathy in her own time and for generations to follow.



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