UC Merced
Journal of California and Great Basin Anthropology

Title
Canfield: Sarah Winnemucca of the Northern Paiutes

Permalink
https://escholarship.org/uc/item/1vx9q7p0

Journal
Journal of California and Great Basin Anthropology, 5(2)

ISSN
0191-3557

Author
Stewart, Omer C.

Publication Date
1983-07-01

Peer reviewed
Hunt, Edward E., Jr., and Izaac Gleiser

Johnson, F. E.

Suchey, Judy M.

Ubelaker, D. H.

Sarah Winnemucca of the Northern Paiutes.

Reviewed by OMER C. STEWART
Dept. of Anthropology
Univ. of Colorado
Boulder, CO 80309

Sarah Winnemucca Hopkins’ own book, Life Among the Paiutes: Their Wrongs and Claims, privately printed in 1883, for which she received editorial and financial assistance from Mrs. Horace Mann and many other Boston society ladies, was one of the first and has been one of the most enduring ethnographical books written by an American Indian. In his “Notes on Shoshonean Ethnography, Professor Robert H. Lowie (1924) cited Sarah’s book thirteen times. In my “Culture Element Distributions: Northern Paiute” (Stewart 1941), I cited her twenty times. It seems like no official report or scholarly study has been written in the last one hundred years about the Northern Paiute of western Nevada and southeastern Oregon that does not make some references to Sarah.

She was born about 1844 into a family of Paiute at Pyramid Lake who were pushed forward by their fellow tribesmen or stepped forward to speak to the first strange Euro-Americans to reach Pyramid Lake and joined them as guides to California. John C. Fremont was the most famous of these strangers and Captain Truckee, Sarah’s maternal grandfather, spent some time with him in California. Her father was called Chief Winnemucca, later Old Winnemucca to distinguish him from sons, grandsons, and nephews who carried on the tradition of leadership. They learned to speak English, which allowed them to talk to strangers.

Sarah’s first stay in California was at age six, when her family worked in the cattle industry at Bonsall’s Ferry across the San Joaquin River near Stockton. Before age thirteen, when Sarah was hired by Major W. M. Ormsby of Genoa, Nevada, to be companion to his daughter and work as maid, Sarah had spent several years in a Catholic school near Santa Clara, California. Thus, by chance of being of a leading Paiute family that encouraged friendship with non-Indians and her chance to live almost as one of the family with a wealthy civic leader, Sarah had both language and social skills upon which she built a most remarkable life. Her life experience until 1860, when Major Ormsby was killed by Pyramid Lake Paiute during an attack he led of an “army” of drunken miners from Virginia City against well-armed Paiutes, indicates that Sarah led a charmed and unique life for a “poor, ignorant, Digger Indian,” as natives of Nevada were usually called.

It is not always clear whether Old Winnemucca alone developed a taste for pomp and circumstance, or whether Sarah guided him to it. He received a ceremonial visit at Pyramid Lake from James W. Nye, the first territorial governor.
Mrs. Canfield has documented the wild swings of fortune of the Winnemucca family and the fact that Sarah was in a leading family role most of her life.

Following the defeat of the rag-tag army of miners by the Paiute at Pyramid Lake in 1860, the usual American idea that the Indians needed to be punished to remind them of who was really in charge was kept alive in Nevada. For five years (1860-1865) the Winnemuccas, with Sarah as star, were literally on stage, either in Virginia City at Maguires Opera House (pp. 38-39) or in San Francisco. Billed as the Paiute “royal family,” they earned their way and gained experience. The brutal pay-off occurred in the spring of 1865 when Captain Almond B. Wells led a troop of Nevada Volunteer cavalry back and forth across northern Nevada, raiding and killing any group of Paiute accused by non-Indian settlers of anything. The usual charge was stealing cattle. Without evidence of wrong-doing, and without any arrests or trials, at 3 a.m. on March 17, 1865, Captain Wells and his well-armed cavalry raided Old Winnemucca’s camp of 30 old men, women, and children on the shore of Lake Winnemucca. Twenty-nine were killed, including two of Old Winnemucca’s wives. Old Winnemucca and Sarah were in Dayton, Nevada, and had seen Captain Wells and the cavalry ride out of town, but had to read in the *Virginia Union* of the massacre of his extended family.

As soon as possible the Winnemucca family moved to Camp, later Fort McDermitt, on the Nevada-Oregon stateline and started a long collaboration between Sarah and the U.S. Army. Sarah sought protection of the family from the undisciplined Nevada Volunteers. She often served as interpreter for the commanders, but also as teacher, messenger, etc. Sarah’s movements were so frequent that only a chart can summarize the remainder of her life.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Canfield Book Page</th>
<th>Approximate Date</th>
<th>Movement of Sarah Winnemucca</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>56</td>
<td>1868</td>
<td>Led 490 Paiutes to McDermitt.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>61</td>
<td>1870</td>
<td>Sarah’s letter reprinted in <em>Century of Dishonor</em>.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>65</td>
<td>1871</td>
<td>Married First Lieutenant E. C. Butler in Salt Lake City; Sarah abandoned, returned to McDermitt; trips to San Francisco to ask for a new agent at Pyramid.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>76</td>
<td>1873</td>
<td>Moved to Winnemucca, Nevada.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>86</td>
<td>1875</td>
<td>Sarah, her brother Natchez, and Old Winnemucca in San Francisco.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>92</td>
<td>1875</td>
<td>Sarah, Natchez, and Old Winnemucca at Malheur Reservation, Fort Harney, Oregon.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>116</td>
<td>1877</td>
<td>Winnemuccas in Idaho.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>117</td>
<td>1877</td>
<td>Old Winnemucca and Natchez in San Francisco.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>123</td>
<td>1878</td>
<td>Sarah, Prairie City, Oregon.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>134</td>
<td>1878</td>
<td>Sarah rode 223 miles to save father and brother at start of Bannock War.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>137</td>
<td>1878</td>
<td>Sarah served as scout and messenger for Gen. O. O. Howard during Bannock War.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>154-55</td>
<td>1879</td>
<td>543 Paiutes put in concentration camp on Yakima Reservation after Bannock War.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>158</td>
<td>1879</td>
<td>Sarah to Vancouver to ask Gen. Howard to help release Paiute—no avail.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>162</td>
<td>1879</td>
<td>Sarah in Portland, Oregon; to San Francisco by ship to seek aid for Yakima internees.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>171</td>
<td>1880</td>
<td>Four Winnemuccas to Washington D.C. for month to lobby to get Paiutes freed from Yakima.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Sarah hired by Gen. Howard to teach Shoshone prisoners at the Dalles, Vancouver Barracks.

Sarah and Lieutenant Lewis H. Hopkins married in San Francisco then moved to Pyramid Lake.

Sarah visiting sister at Henry's Lake, Idaho, when Old Winnemucca died.


Sarah presented to U. S. Congress; returned to Pyramid Lake.

Sarah lecturing in San Francisco.

Sarah's private school for Indians, Lovelock, Nevada.

Children from Sarah's school taken by Bureau of Indian Affairs to school in Grand Junction, Colorado.

Sarah died at home of sister at Henry's Lake, Idaho.

**REFERENCES**

Lowie, R. H.


Stewart, O. C.


Reviewed by WILLIAM R. HILDEBRANDT
Dept. of Anthropology
San Jose State Univ.
San Jose, CA 95192

This paper is a revised version of Polly McW. Bickel's 1976 Ph.D. dissertation. The goal of the research is to resolve a major interpretive conflict that has developed in the study of central California prehistory. The conflict is between a model of "Parallel Change" forwarded by Lillard, Heizer, and Fenenga (1939) and Beardsley (1954), and a model of "Convergent Change" forwarded by Gerow (Gerow with Force 1968; Gerow 1974). More specifically, the parallel change model argues that the central California cultural horizon concept, developed largely on the basis of data from the lower Sacramento Valley, is applicable to a wide range of places including the San Francisco Bay area. Furthermore, the Bay area is considered, at least early on, to be culturally marginal and backward relative to the Central Valley and that changes initiated in the Valley were followed by inhabitants of the Bay in parallel fashion.

Bay area excavations at the University Village site (SMA-77) and the West Berkeley Shellmound (ALA-307), indicate to Gerow that the shell artifact typology utilized by the horizon concept, when used outside the Delta area, predicts time and not type of complex. Rather, he argues that during Early Horizon times, the Bay area was occupied by a different cultural tradition than what was present in the Central Valley. Based on his observations that Bay and Valley assemblages become more similar through time, he proposes the model of convergence.

In order to deal with the above differences, Bickel analyzes materials from three Bay sites: ALA-328, ALA-12, and ALA-13. The materials were generated through excavations by various Bay area institutions. Due to this fact, there are several areas of confusion...