

LUMINARIES OF HISTORY

THOCMETONY
SARAH WINNEMUCCA



PAIUTE, ACTIVIST,
INTERPRETER, EDUCATOR,
AND AUTHOR



Drawing of Chief Truckee, Thocmetony's maternal grandfather

SARAH WINNEMUCCA was born around the year 1844, but she wasn't sure of the exact time or date on which she was born. She was born to Chief Winnemucca of the Paiute tribe in what would later become the state of Nevada. She was also the granddaughter of Chief Truckee. Her given Paiute name was *Thocmetony* or *Tocmetoni*, which means shellflower in the Numu language of the Northern Paiute.¹ Her life was marked by a period of great and historical changes in North America and the United States. She fought for the rights of her people, the Northern Paiute, to give them the best opportunities and chances of living an equal life to that of whites. She sought to create an understanding between her people and the whites. In her biography, she recounts the first time she saw a white person.

I was born somewhere near 1844, but am not sure of the precise time. 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. My people were scattered at that time over nearly all the territory now known as Nevada. My grandfather was chief of the entire Piute nation, and was camped near Humboldt Lake, with a small portion of his tribe, when a party travelling eastward from California was seen 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!

Around the time of Sara Winnemucca’s birth, her people’s land was inhabited solely by the Northern Paiutes and the Washos. While Sarah’s Grandfather, Chief Truckee welcomed his “white brother’s” with open arms and assisted General John C. Fremont in the Bear War against Mexican control of California, her father was not as excited about the arrival of the white man. Sarah Winnemucca’s father, Chief Winnemucca, did not trust the white people who had arrived in his home. He warned his people to stay away from them. It has often been wondered if the two extreme difference her grandfather and father held about the whites became pertinent to her work later in life, which was spent primarily seeking to interpret the two cultures and their interactions with each other.² Thocmetony had her first in-person encounter with white people at the age of six. Her grandfather took her with him to California. She recalls being scared at first but discussed her fondness for items such as beds, chairs, and the bright and beautifully patterned dishes. As Sarah grew up and realized that the whites were not leaving, she picked up on various aspects of Anglo-American culture and habits, soon adopting the Christian name Sarah.³

At just thirteen years of age, Thocmetony’s grandfather made arrangements for her and her sister to live with Major Ormsby and his family at Mormon Station, which is now Genoa, Nevada. By the time her fourteenth birthday rolled around, Sarah had learned five languages, three Indian

dialects, as well as both English and Spanish. Although Sarah and her sister were only there for a short time as many wealthy parents complained to the sisters who ran the convent about Indians being in the school with their children.⁴ On both of the occasions she had traveled outside of her home, she had experienced poor treatment from white people, another likely cause of her passion to fight for equal treatment for her people. Winnemucca visited the white people's culture one final time at the age of sixteen. Doing so granted her the ability to fulfill her Grandfather's dying wish that both Sarah and her sister attend a convent school in San Jose, California. Despite never being officially enrolled in the school, Thocmetony's and her sister gained an extensive amount of knowledge and experience from their time at the school.⁵ Sarah grew up alongside the further westward movement of the white's encroachment on Native territory, including the Paiute's territory. With the white man's movement into the Paiute's territory, Paiute's and members of other tribes were forcibly removed from their homes to live on reservations. At the age of twenty-seven, Thocmetony's started working as an interpreter for what is now known as the Bureau of Indian Affairs. In 1859, Thocmetony and her family were forced to abandon their home and their way of life and settle near Pyramid Lake, in turn giving up their nomadic lifestyle. Many of Winnemucca's tribe died of starvation after a horrific and torturous first winter there.⁶ Seeking to help her people, Sarah had only one option, she pled with officers at Camp McDermitt in Nevada to assist her people.⁷ In 1869, Sarah Winnemucca was given a position as an interpreter for the U.S Army at Camp McDermitt. Her quick actions allowed her people to receive wagons full of supplies at the Pyramid Lake

reservation. She later went on to be an assistant teacher at the Malheur Reservation in Oregon where her tribe was eventually relocated in 1872.⁸ Sarah's work as an interpreter allowed the people of the Northern Paiute to receive better treatment. While her position as an interpreter provided her an opportunity to Sarah to provide better treatment for her people, however more often than not she was in an impossible situation. During the 1870s she translated for William V. Rinehart who was described as unlikable. If she translated his words without comment or passed on a concern from the Northern Paiutes, she was likely to be fired and she was. In time, William Rinehart banned her from Malheur.

At the start of the Bannock War in 1878, Sarah served in the army as a scout, messenger, interpreter, and an associate of General Oliver Howard. It was in this military camp that the Paiute and Winnemucca finally gained respect.⁹ During the war, she accepted a dangerous mission to lead her father's band from an enemy camp where her people were being held by the Bannocks for three days. Winnemucca rode over extremely rough and rugged terrain that stretched over 230 miles with very little food or rest.¹⁰ She remarks about her time as an interpreter, her work, and her mission to save her father and her people,

This was the hardest work I ever did for the government in all my life. Having been in the saddle night and day; distance, about two hundred and twenty-three miles. Yes, I went for the government when the officer could not get an Indian man or white man to go for love or money. I, only an Indian woman, went and saved my father and his people.

Her heroism put her on the front page of *The New York Times* in June of 1878, however this caused mistrust to develop between her and the local tribes.¹¹ Even with all the work Sarah had done for the military, at the end of the war the Paiutes were sent away and exiled to Yakama Reservation in Yakama, Oregon. The treatment of the Northern Paiute at the Yakama Reservation was horrific and cruel. So many Paiutes died that there was no room in the graveyard and the agent of the reservation ordered bodies to be dumped into the Columbia River.¹² Sarah Winnemucca's education and time spent among whites helped her plead the case for her people. In 1880, she pled for the cause of equal treatment for not just her own people but all Native's in Washington, D.C before Secretary of the Interior and President Rutherford B. Hayes. While she was promised improvements for the Northern Paiute, these promises were soon broken by the government. The broken promises caused her people to lose their trust in her. Despite that, she continued to fight for the equal treatment of her people for the majority of her life, providing more than 400 speeches, mostly on the east coast. Her name was smeared by Reinhart, who called her a drunk, a gambler, and a whore.¹³ Her people lost faith in her and accused her of betraying them for money. Despite her suffering, she stood strong.

Sarah gained recognition with the help of Elizabeth Palmer Peabody and Mary Peabody Mann, two intellectuals who helped publish her work *Life Among the Paiutes* in 1883. With the publication of her work she became the very first Native American Woman to have her work published, the first book by a Native American west of the Rockies and the first book to detail Paiute culture. In 1885, Sarah opened an American Indian School located on her brothers Natches'



SARAH WINNEMUCCA
Sarah Winnemucca Hopkins
1844 - 1891
NEVADA
DEFENDER OF HUMAN RIGHTS
EDUCATOR
AUTHOR OF FIRST BOOK BY A NATIVE WOMAN

ranch located around Lovelock, completely funded by private donations. Her school helped to create a framework for Native American education that was years ahead of the US policy, which primarily focused on erasing Native culture and seeking to “Americanize” and “civilize” Native peoples in a policy often called “education for extinction” by officials. Sarah’s students excelled in their studies, being taught in the traditional Paiute way. However, it closed due to a lack of funding. After the closing of her school, Sarah lived with her sister in Idaho where she passed in 1891 under what has been called mysterious circumstances. Sarah’s bravery has inspired many, tribal elder Marjorie Dupee says Sarah Winnemucca’s life helped Native people’s hold onto their pride.¹⁴ Dupee is not alone in her feelings about Winnemucca. In 2005, a statue of Sarah “Thocmetony” Winnemucca was erected and given to the National Statuary Hall Collection in Washington, D.C by the state of Nevada. Her statue was made by artist Benjamin Victor and is located in the Emancipation Hall of the U.S Capitol Visitors Center. The statue shows Winnemucca as she looked around 35 years old, wearing a native dress that appears to be rustled by the wind. In her right hand is a shellflower, a nod to her name, and in her left hand a book. The plaque attached to the base of the statue says:

SARAH WINNEMUCCA
1844–1891
NEVADA
DEFENDER OF HUMAN RIGHTS
EDUCATOR
AUTHOR OF FIRST BOOK BY A NATIVE WOMAN¹⁵

These words capture who Sarah “Thocmetony” Winnemucca was, a defender of human rights, educator, and author. But she was also a proud Paiute, a daughter, a wife, a sister, a woman, and a trailblazer. To this day she is someone who has and can inspire people of all walks of life, all ethnicities, and cultures, and can ignite the spark that they need to fight for what they believe in.



NOTES/SOURCES

- 1 Ford, Victoria. “Menu.” Accessed January 29, 2021. <https://www.nevadawomen.org/research-center/biographies-alphabetical/sarah-winnemucca/>.
- 2 Ford, Victoria. “Menu.” Accessed January 29, 2021. <https://www.nevadawomen.org/research-center/biographies-alphabetical/sarah-winnemucca/>.
- 3 Eves, Rosalyn, and Zocalo Public Square. “Sarah Winnemucca Devoted Her Life to Protecting Native Americans in the Face of an Expanding United States.” Smithsonian.com. Smithsonian Institution, July 27, 2016. <https://www.smithsonianmag.com/history/>

sarah-winnemucca-devoted-life-protecting-lives-native-americans-face-expanding-united-states-180959930/.

- 4 Eves, Rosalyn, and Zocalo Public Square. "Sarah Winnemucca Devoted Her Life to Protecting Native Americans in the Face of an Expanding United States." Smithsonian.com. Smithsonian Institution, July 27, 2016. <https://www.smithsonianmag.com/history/sarah-winnemucca-devoted-life-protecting-lives-native-americans-face-expanding-united-states-180959930/>.
- 5 National Women's Hall of Fame. "Winnemucca, Sarah." National Women's Hall of Fame. National Women's Hall of Fame. Accessed January 29, 2021. <https://www.womenofthehall.org/inductee/sarah-winnemucca/>.
- 6 Eves, Rosalyn, and Zocalo Public Square. "Sarah Winnemucca Devoted Her Life to Protecting Native Americans in the Face of an Expanding United States." Smithsonian.com. Smithsonian Institution, July 27, 2016. <https://www.smithsonianmag.com/history/sarah-winnemucca-devoted-life-protecting-lives-native-americans-face-expanding-united-states-180959930/>.
- 7 Eves, Rosalyn, and Zocalo Public Square. "Sarah Winnemucca Devoted Her Life to Protecting Native Americans in the Face of an Expanding United States." Smithsonian.com. Smithsonian Institution, July 27, 2016. <https://www.smithsonianmag.com/history/sarah-winnemucca-devoted-life-protecting-lives-native-americans-face-expanding-united-states-180959930/>.

- 8 Springmeyer Zanjani, Sally. "Sarah Winnemucca." Online Nevada Encyclopedia, January 18, 2011. <https://www.onlinenevada.org/articles/sarah-winnemucca>.
- 9 Eves, Rosalyn, and Zocalo Public Square. "Sarah Winnemucca Devoted Her Life to Protecting Native Americans in the Face of an Expanding United States." Smithsonian.com. Smithsonian Institution, July 27, 2016. <https://www.smithsonianmag.com/history/sarah-winnemucca-devoted-life-protecting-lives-native-americans-face-expanding-united-states-180959930/>.
- 10 AOC Staff. "Sarah Winnemucca." Architect of the Capitol. Accessed January 29, 2021. <https://www.aoc.gov/explore-capitol-campus/art/sarah-winnemucca>.
- 11 Eves, Rosalyn, and Zocalo Public Square. "Sarah Winnemucca Devoted Her Life to Protecting Native Americans in the Face of an Expanding United States." Smithsonian.com. Smithsonian Institution, July 27, 2016. <https://www.smithsonianmag.com/history/sarah-winnemucca-devoted-life-protecting-lives-native-americans-face-expanding-united-states-180959930/>.
- 12 Springmeyer Zanjani, Sally. "Sarah Winnemucca." Online Nevada Encyclopedia, January 18, 2011. <https://www.onlinenevada.org/articles/sarah-winnemucca>.
- 13 Springmeyer Zanjani, Sally. "Sarah Winnemucca." Online Nevada Encyclopedia, January 18, 2011. <https://www.onlinenevada.org/articles/sarah-winnemucca>.

- 14 Springmeyer Zanjani, Sally. "Sarah Winnemucca." Online Nevada Encyclopedia, January 18, 2011. <https://www.onlinenevada.org/articles/sarah-winnemucca>.
- 15 AOC Staff. "Sarah Winnemucca." Architect of the Capitol. Accessed January 29, 2021. <https://www.aoc.gov/explore-capitol-campus/art/sarah-winnemucca>.

opposite: Sarah Winnemucca dressed
for one of her speeches





Museum of Native American History exterior



MUSEUM *of* NATIVE AMERICAN HISTORY

Free admission. Donations Appreciated.

HOURS Monday–Saturday
9AM–5PM
closed New Year's Day, Thanksgiving, Christmas

CONTACT 479-273-2456
info@monah.us
www.monah.us

202 SW O Street,
Bentonville, AR 71712

TAKE A 14,000 YEAR JOURNEY!