Sarah Winnemucca—Native American Activist
1844-1891

By
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She was one of the most notable Native American women of the 19th century. Recognized for her intelligence and fluency in English, she became widely known as an activist on behalf of her tribe. Her talents were also recognized by the U.S. military for which she served as a guide, scout and interpreter. She was known, too, for her hot temper, impetuous nature, and occasional penchant for alcohol and gambling. She enjoyed the company of men, but unhappily the three she chose to marry, all white, turned out to be reckless and irresponsible.

With the gift of oratory inherited from her father, she was an outspoken critic of the U.S. government’s treatment of her people. As her tribe’s eloquent advocate she gave lectures to sold-out white audiences, wrote newspaper articles, and met with government officials, including the nation’s president, all of which earned her both praise and scorn. She later wrote an autobiography, the first book in English published by a Native American woman.

The story of Sarah Winnemucca is about a remarkable woman who courageously championed her people’s cause. Yet her story is just one of many that tell of the heartbreak and suffering that Native Americans endured from the earliest days of our country’s founding. It is a story of Indians losing their tribal lands to white settlers and forced by acts of Congress to live on reservations where they were often ill treated. It is the story of government promises made and broken, of treaties negotiated and not lived up to. Sadly, Sarah did not live to see the government adopt more humane policies. In 1891, at the age of 47, she died suddenly one evening under questionable circumstances.

In spite of many setbacks, Sarah Winnemucca accomplished a great deal in her short lifetime as she negotiated her way through two cultural worlds, one that was Native
American, and one that was dominated by the expansion westward of white settlers. As a spokesperson for her tribe, she held a high position for which she was admired. Yet she was the one they blamed when she had to tell them that the government had reneged on a promise. In addition, her cooperation with the military led some of her people to accuse her of being disloyal. Sarah deeply felt these criticisms.

The response of the white world was also mixed. On the one hand, many white citizens were sympathetic to the Native American cause. Enthusiastic crowds filled auditoriums to hear Sarah’s lectures, always delivered in dramatic style, in which she publicly censured the U.S. government for its efforts to confine Indians to reservations and her scathing criticism of the agents who administered them. On the other hand, prejudice against Indians was widespread and many whites maligned Sarah, especially when she singled out specific reservation agents for criticism. Newspapers had a field day.

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As an advocate for her Piute Indian tribe, Sarah was only in her twenties when she began speaking publicly. Up until this time, however, she had already led a colorful life.

Sarah was born about 1844 in what was known as the Humboldt Sink, or Lake, about 50 miles northeast of present-day Reno, Nevada. The Piutes, made up of numerous bands, numbered only a few thousand and had lived a semi-nomadic life for centuries in the austere arid land centered primarily east of the Sierra Mountains in Nevada, though their wanderings also took them into California, southern Oregon and Idaho. Nearby tribes were the Woshos, Shoshones, and Bannocks.

Sarah’s Piute name was Thocmetony, meaning “Shell Flower.” Her father, Chief Winnemucca, was head of one of the Piute bands. Though she admired her father, Sarah had a closer relationship with her grandfather, Truckee, the tribal leader. In his younger years he had served as guide to several white explorers, including John C. Freemont, and counseled his people to make friends with the white settlers.

Sarah recalled in her autobiography, Life Among the Piutes: Their Wrongs and Claims, that as a child she was afraid of white people and often cried hearing stories of
whites killing and even eating Indians. Indeed, the threat by white settlers was ever present. In one incident, Sarah and one of her sisters were hastily “buried” for a day by their mother to prevent them from being found by whites traveling nearby. White men were often called owls because of their beards.

In 1847, when Sarah was 3, her grandfather Truckee returned from a trip to California proudly displaying his “rag friend,” a letter, possibly from Freemont himself, stating that white settlers should treat Truckee with respect. He also believed that the letter could talk for him. In addition, he brought back a gun that frightened Sarah and other children and made them cry when it was fired.

Sarah’s first extended experience with whites was in 1851 when, at the age of 7, she and a group from her tribe were taken by her grandfather to the Sacramento Valley in California. She remembered the arduous journey over the Sierra Nevada Mountains and encountering whites along the way. They stayed with Truckee’s white friends over the winter. Sarah recalled seeing houses and boats on a river for the first time. She also recalled getting sick and being cared for by a kind white woman, one of her first positive encounters with a white person. In payment for helping the whites in their work, the Piute men were given their first horses, thus becoming “horse Indians.” The most traumatic episode during this trip was the attempted rape of Sarah’s older sister Mary. The group returned to Nevada the following spring.

Sarah was 13 when she and her younger sister Elma went to live for a year with the family of Major William Ormsby, who lived in the settlement of Genoa, located in the Carson Valley. (Freemont, who had explored this area in 1843, named the valley after his guide, Christopher “Kit” Carson.) Sarah described her year with the Ormsbys as a happy time, recalling that she and her sister were treated well and that she learned to speak and write English. Also, they had the companionship of the Ormsby’s nine-year-old daughter Lizzie.

At that time, Sarah’s people were living near Pyramid Lake in Nevada and were getting along peaceably with white settlers. Members of the Piute tribe were also
frequently employed by white settlers in nearby towns and were known to be hardworking and dependable.

The death of her grandfather, Truckee, was one of the most painful events of Sarah’s life. In her autobiography she described being with him in his last hours.

“I crept up to him. I could hardly believe he would never speak to me again. I knelt beside him and took his dear old face in my hands, and looked at him quite a while. I could not speak. I felt the world growing cold. Everything seemed dark…I was a simple child, yet I knew what a great man he was.”

Sarah had been her grandfather’s favorite and one of his last wishes was that she be sent to school when she was old enough. In 1860, at the age of 16, she and her sister Elma were taken to San Jose, California, where they were enrolled in a convent school. Their stay was short, however. After just three weeks they were asked to leave because parents of the other children objected to the presence of the Indian girls. The sisters, along with their brother Natches, continued to live in Santa Cruz for several months until returning to Nevada.

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It was also in the year 1860 that the so-called Pyramid Lake War occurred, the first major outbreak of hostilities between the Piutes and white settlers in Sarah’s lifetime. This was a three-month encounter that began following the kidnapping of two Piute girls which resulted in the killing of the white perpetrators when they were caught. Militias were sent from California to help protect the settlers. During one of he skirmishes, Sarah’s former benefactor, Major Ormsby, who had turned against the Piutes, was killed. Many Piutes avoided bloodshed by withdrawing into the mountains, which led the white settlers to claim victory even though over one hundred of them had been killed.

Beginning in adolescence and continuing into her adult life, Sarah didn’t live in one place very long. With her knowledge of English and extroverted personality, she was

1 Sarah Winnemucca Hopkins, *Life Among the Piutes: Their Wrongs and Claims, 1883 and 1994.*, p. 69
drawn away from her tribe by her curiosity of the white settlers’ world, plus her increasingly important role as her tribe’s advocate. For a while she would stay with her family wherever they were encamped, or she might live with her brother Natches in a nearby settlement. She was becoming well known for translating public speeches her father made, urging peaceful co-existence between his tribe and white settlers. Also, she joined her father, family members and other Piutes in putting on dramatic performances that were popular in nearby towns. In spite of periodic flare-ups, the white settlers were fascinated with the Indians. The Piutes even took their act to San Francisco, but with little success.

In 1862, the Piutes welcomed the new Territorial Governor, James Nye, in an elaborate ceremony. Sarah mentions in her autobiography that Nye was popular with the Piutes because he was known for protecting their rights. (Nevada became a state in 1864.) Now 18, Sarah was not as pretty as her older sister Mary or tall like her father. Nevertheless, though short and stocky with broad features like most Piutes, she commanded attention with her engaging personality, flowing long black hair and dressed in colorful native costume. During the ceremony many gifts were bestowed, including the offer of Sarah as the governor’s wife. He graciously declined. It was around this time that newspapers began calling Sarah the Piute Princess.

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By 1865 Sarah was living at the recently-established Pyramid Lake Reservation. She was 21 and beginning to speak publicly about the government’s treatment of the Piutes.

The Bureau of Indian Affairs believed that the cheapest way to control Native Americans was to confine them to reservations, where they could be “civilized” and in some cases Christianized. Some whites believed that Indians should simply be exterminated. Agents of the bureau were put in charge of administration, but being poorly paid, many were unscrupulous and withheld from the Indians food, clothing and other provisions to which they were officially entitled. Additionally, some agents took for themselves profits the Indians earned from farming.
Sarah’s father, Chief Winnemucca, had refused to live on the reservation at Pyramid Lake and led a band of Piutes into the mountains. One of Sarah’s uncles, however, had become a successful farmer on the reservation, but he was killed by a settler who wanted his land. Hearing of the news, Chief Winnemucca returned and threatened war. Though hostilities were averted, with Sarah’s help, resentment among the Piutes smoldered long afterward.

In the following year, Sarah and a small band of Piutes left the reservation and were living next to a military unit at Camp McDermit near the Oregon border. She was soon hired by the commanding officer to serve as translator in the on-going effort to keep hostilities from breaking out. This was Sarah’s first paid position. In this capacity she was instrumental in convincing other Piutes, including her father who was back living in the mountains, to come to Camp McDermit where they could be protected and given food and clothing. With few exceptions, the military generally treated the Piutes and other Native Americans far better than the Bureau of Indian Affairs through its reservation agents.

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It was in 1870 that Sarah, now 26, wrote her first letter on behalf of the Piutes. Published in several newspapers and reprinted in Harper’s magazine, it brought widespread attention. According to Sarah’s biographer, Sally Zanjani, the letter “won recognition as a classic statement of the Indian plight.”

Written from Camp McDermit and dated April 4, 1870, the letter is addressed to Major H. Douglas, U.S. Army (the regional administrator), who had inquired about the conditions of the Piutes at the Pyramid Lake Reservation. Sarah begins by stating that her people didn’t want to return to the reservation because they would starve.

“I think that if they had received what they were entitled to from the agent, they would never have left…We were confined to the reserve, and had to live on what fish we might be able to catch in the river. If this is the kind of civilization awaiting us on he reserves,

2 Sally Zanjani, Sarah Winnemucca, 2001, p. 102
God grant that we may never be compelled to go on one, as it is much preferable to live in the mountains and drag out an existence in our native manner...If the Indians have any guarantee that they can secure a permanent home on their own native soil, and that our white neighbors can be kept from encroaching on our rights, after having a reasonable share of ground allotted to us as our own, and giving us the required advantages of learning, I warrant that the savage (as he is called today) will be a thrifty and law-abiding member of the community fifteen or twenty years hence.”

Major Douglas found Sarah’s criticisms justified and wrote to the Bureau of Indian Affairs in Washington, D.C., but nothing came of it.

The following year Sarah went to San Francisco where she met with the military commander of the Pacific Region. Again she had harsh words about the reservation agents and how the P:iates were given inadequate provisions and clothing. Again the military’s response was sympathetic, but the Bureau of Indian Affairs’ response was not.

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One of the most prominent white activists on behalf of Native Americans during this time was Helen Hunt Jackson. Though her life paralleled that of Sarah’s, they apparently never met. Jackson took up the Indian cause in 1879 after attending a lecture in Boston by the Ponca Indian Chief Standing Bear. Her book, *A Century of Dishonor*, published in 1881 (two years before Sarah’s autobiography), based primarily on official documents, traces the history of the U.S. government’s ill treatment of Native Americans beginning in the late 1700s. It describes a history of broken promises, treaties not lived up to and gross neglect, all of which echoes the same complaints expressed by Sarah and her people.

Jackson writes that according to the Annual Report of the Indian Commission in 1872, there were living in the U.S. between 250,000 and 300,000 Indians, comprising about 300

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4 Born in 1830 in Amherst, Massachusetts, Jackson was a classmate and life-long friend of Emily Dickinson. She was already well known as a writer and poet prior to her activism. She died in San Francisco in 1885.
tribes. The report details the number of Indians living on and off reservations who were supported in varying degrees by the government. In addition, it was estimated that about 55,000 lived independently with no government support; they subsisted on fishing, hunting, root gathering, begging and stealing.

Jackson also writes that in 1869, President Grant, like several of his predecessors, appointed a commission of nine men to “examine all matters appertaining to Indian affairs.” The report includes the following:

“The history of the Government connections with the Indians is a shameful record of broken treaties and unfulfilled promises. The history of the white man’s connection with the Indians is a sickening record of murder, outrage, robbery, and wrongs committed by the former, as the rule, and occasional savage outbreaks and unspeakably barbarous deeds of retaliation by the latter, as the exception.

“The testimony of some of the highest military officers of the United States is on record to the effect that, in our Indian wars, almost without exception, the first aggressions have been made by the white man; and the assertion is supported by every civilian of reputation who has studied the subject.”

Though Jackson does not mention Sarah in her book, she must have known about her since she includes Sarah’s letter of 1870 in the book’s appendix, as noted above.

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As Sarah increasingly became a public figure, her personal life was under constant scrutiny. While newspapers lauded her for her impassioned speeches, they also called attention to her proclivity for occasional drinking, gambling and rough-neck behavior. She sometimes carried a knife to protect her against unwanted male attention, and once was arrested for slashing a man’s face. She was defended in court by a savvy and sympathetic lawyer and the case was dropped. The aggressor, a white man, was never charged.

5 Quoted by Helen Hunt Jackson, ibid. p. 339
Widespread criticisms came when Sarah, at the age of 27, eloped to marry Edward Bartlett, who the year before resigned from the military after having been almost court martialed. Sarah’s family and other Piutes had been against the marriage, which turned out to be short-lived due to Bartlett’s drinking. Soon after Sarah divorced Edwards five years later, she married Joseph Saterwaller, about whom almost nothing is known. She does not mention him in her autobiography. She also had liaisons with several other men, Indian and white.

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By 1875, Sarah and 700 Piutes were living on the Malheur Reservation in southeastern Oregon. In the beginning her life there went well. The agent, Samuel Parrish treated the Piutes with respect and let them keep whatever profits they made from farming. He also hired Sarah as a translator, for which he paid her $40 a month. In addition, he enlisted her to teach at the newly-established school. She recalled that it was a happy time.

However, Parrish was fired by the Bureau of Indian Affairs because he was not a Christian and because whites complained that he treated the Indians too well. Sarah’s worst fears came true when the new agent, William Rinehart, proved to be a harsh and dishonest administrator. He soon fired Sarah as his translator after she confronted him with her people’s complaints. He eventually forced Sarah to leave the reservation after she wrote critical letters to Washington.

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The three-month-long Bannock War of 1878 was the last Indian uprising in the Pacific Northwest. The confrontation was begun by a band of Bannock Indians who, like the Piutes, were suffering from starvation at their own reservation. Hostilities were also sparked by the rape of a Bannock girl and the death of the Bannock leader, Buffalo Horn. Sarah and others tried to talk peace but were unsuccessful.

The U.S. military detachment was headed by General Oliver Howard, who had a reputation of treating Native Americans humanely. He hired Sarah as a scout and interpreter and relied on her to help his detachment track down the rebellious Indians.
With permission from General Howard, Sarah and two Piutes, including her sister-in-law Mattie, set off to convince her people not to join the Bannocks and instead seek protection of the military. After an arduous ride, Sarah found Chief Winnemucca and a small band being held as prisoners by the Bannocks. A daring rescue took place at night. Then Sarah and Mattie rode on ahead and returned to camp. In total, their ride covered more than two hundred miles in three days over treacherous mountain terrain. It was an astonishing feat of bravery, horsemanship and stamina. General Howard and his men were immensely impressed. The ride and rescue brought Sarah much acclaim.

After a number of small battles, the Bannock War ended with no clear victory on either side. In addition to Bannocks, some of the Piutes who joined the uprising were also taken prisoner. Many of the warriors escaped into the mountain forests.

Serving as a scout, Sarah was a close observer of the hostilities and gives a fascinating account in her autobiography. She also describes a poignant incident in which she found a Bannock baby in the forest, carefully wrapped in a blanket, who had fallen off its parents’ horse. Miraculously, Sarah was able to re-unite the infant with its family three months later.

In her autobiography, Sarah also includes several letters written in 1878 by military commanders commending her contribution. One officer commented on her having been “entirely trustworthy and reliable…and deserving of great credit…for enduring hardships that strong men succumbed under.” Another officer wrote: “You have displayed an unusual intelligence and fearlessness and loyalty…as scout, interpreter, and influential member of the Piute tribe.”

General Howard, in appreciation of Sarah’s efforts, wrote in one of his letters: “She did our government a great service, and if I could tell you a tenth part of all she willingly did to help the white settlers and her own people to live peaceably together, I am sure you

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6Quoted by Sarah Winnemucca Hopkins, ibid., p. 261
would think, as I do, that the name of Thocmetone should have a place beside the name of Pocahontas in the history of our country.”  

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What followed after the war was disastrous for the Piutes. Sarah was shocked to learn that all Piutes, whether they fought in the Bannock War or not, would be sent along with other Indians to the Yakima Reservation north of the Columbia River. She felt betrayed by General Howard and the military, who had initially promised that the Piutes would return to the Malheur Reservation. However, they were overruled by the Bureau of Indian Affairs. As a result, Sarah was blamed by her tribe for the outcome. She also had been criticized and accused of disloyalty by some of her people for her cooperation with the military during the war which had resulted in Piute deaths.

The timing of this exodus to Washington State could not have been worse. The winter of 1878-79 was brutal and there were many casualties among the 550 bedraggled and hungry Indians who made the 350-mile march, much of it in heavy snow.

Yakima turned out to be a nightmare as well. The reservation agent, James Wilbur, a Methodist who saw himself a missionary, had a reputation for “religious intolerance and bigotry.” Sarah got along with him at first, becoming a Methodist herself, translating his sermons, and teaching at the reservation school. But it was not long before the Piutes were complaining of his harsh treatment and depriving them of sufficient clothing and food. In addition, they were harassed by the Yakima Indians who resented their presence.

In November of 1879, Sarah left the reservation and embarked on a series of lectures in San Francisco that brought her widespread attention. She was now 35. On stage she was a striking figure in her native costume and long black hair. Though scathing in her criticism of the government’s Indian policies and the Yakima agent (“I will expose all the rascals.”), she enthralled audiences with her eloquent speeches which she delivered without notes. Here is an excerpt as reported in a newspaper.

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7 Quoted by Sally Zanjani, ibid., p. 182.
“Ah, for shame! You who are educated by a Christian government in the art of war…Yes, you who call yourselves the great civilization…I am crying out to you for justice—yes, pleading for the far-off plains of the West.

“You take the nations of the earth to your bosom but the poor Indian…who has lived for generations on the land which the good God has given them, and you say he must be exterminated…Where can we poor Indians go if the government will not help us?”

As a result of the negative publicity the Bureau of Indian Affairs was receiving, plus a letter Sarah wrote to Secretary of the Interior, Carl Schurz, he invited her to meet with him. Accompanied by her brother Natchez and a small contingent, the delegation arrived in Washington in January, 1880. Schurz promised to improve living conditions at Yakima, plus he gave permission for the Piutes to return to their homeland. (Sarah also met briefly with President Rutherford Hayes.) All that was promised never came to fruition. Sarah was quoted as saying, “Promises which like the wind were heard no more.”

Upon her return to Yakima, Sarah was again in conflict with agent Wilbur, who claimed he had never received a letter from Schurz verifying what Sarah reported. And he tried to bribe her to not say anything to her tribe. With conflict increasing between them, Wilbur forced Sarah to leave the reservation. For a time she lived at Fort Vancouver where General Howard appointed her as an interpreter and assigned her to teach at the reservation school.

Eventually a new agent agreed to let the Piutes leave Yakima and return in small groups to the Malheur Reservation. But disease and pathetic living conditions had reduced their population from 510 when they arrived in 1879 to 440 two years later and only 264 in 1884, by which time all had left.

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8Quoted by Sally Zanjani, ibid., p. 199-200
9Quoted by Sally Zanjani, ibid., p. 218
On December 5, 1881, Sarah married Lewis Hopkins, a former soldier who she may have met during the Bannock War. Prior to his discharge he had been demoted from sergeant to private; his record included the notation “no character.” The wedding took place in San Francisco. She was 37, he was 31. It is not clear whether Sarah was aware in the beginning of Hopkins’s addiction to gambling, a problem that would later lead to disastrous consequences.

Sarah’s biographer suggests that Sarah’s decision to marry white men reflected the fact that she was far more acculturated to the white world than any Piute male, and that Sarah saw having a white husband as an asset in the white culture. Also, her choice of Hopkins, clearly her inferior, put him in a subservient position of an aid when it came to her public appearances.

It is impossible to know what is in another person’s heart when choosing a partner. There certainly was the element of attraction. But at some level Sarah may well have felt that a stronger man, closer to her in age and with more character, would have undermined her self-confidence and her sense of independence.

It is not known whether Sarah bore no children out of choice or because of a medical problem.

Sarah was not present when her father, Chief Winnemucca, died the following year. No doubt her absence was because she and Lewis were living at some distance. In contrast to her poignant account of her grandfather, Truckee’s death, she does not mention her father’s death.

In the spring of 1883, Sarah and Lewis set out for Boston, Massachusetts, ushering in what would become the final chapter of her public life.

The couple’s hosts in Boston were two elderly sisters, Elizabeth Peabody and Mary Peabody Mann, widow of Horace Mann, the noted educator. The sisters were socially well connected and advocated on behalf of social causes. Both took a keen interest in Sarah, introducing her to Boston intellectuals, scheduling lectures, and encouraging her to write her autobiography.
Since she wrote from memory, some facts are inaccurate, but it is nevertheless an absorbing account of her life and the Piute culture. The effort required considerable editorial help from Elizabeth Peabody, given the fact that Sarah was far less fluent in writing than in speaking. Her book was published in 1883 and, with promotional help from Mary Peabody Mann, sold well.

Over the following year Sarah gave more than 300 lectures in Boston, New York, Philadelphia and Washington to enthusiastic audiences. Elizabeth Peabody herself heard Sarah talk at least thirty times. Lewis often participated by introducing her. As always, she spoke without notes and rarely repeated herself. With her dramatic delivery and colorful native dress, she charmed her listeners and attracted many admirers with stories of her early life and pleas for just treatment of her people.

There were many critics as well. Beginning in Boston, Sarah irked the Methodists in the audience by chastising the Yakima agent James Wilbur. He and others like him tried hard to discredit Sarah with accusations about her immoral private life, but in general the public remained supportive. Religious groups also didn’t like Sarah’s plea that Native Americans be allowed to preserve e their own culture and not be forced to be Christianized.

By April of 1884, Sarah and Lewis were in Washington, D.C., where they found the administration of President Chester A. Arthur less than sympathetic. Sarah then turned to Congress and testified on April 22 before the House Sub-Committee for Indian Affairs. Among other issues, she appealed for a permanent home for the Piutes.

Sarah’s testimony may well have influenced legislation called the “Lands in Severalty Act,” also known as the Dawes Act. It was named after its sponsor Senator Henry Dawes of Massachusetts, whom Sarah had met with in Boston. The objective of the legislation was to encourage assimilation of Indians into American society by granting ownership (in severalty) through land allotments, eventually abolishing the reservation system. This
legislation eventually passed in 1887, but the grant of land for the Piutes at Malheur Reservation never came to pass because by then white settlers had taken over.\textsuperscript{10}

It was not until 1934, with the passage of the Indian Reorganization Act under President Roosevelt, that the allotment system was ended and in its place created a “New Deal” for Native Americans by renewing their rights to reorganize by re-establishing their sovereignty, thus providing for self-government and economic self-sufficiency. \textsuperscript{11}

Still in Washington, Sarah was shocked to discover that Lewis had suddenly left town, having stolen money from her and her supporters in order to pay his gambling debts. One can well imagine how she was feeling when she returned to Nevada alone.

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Sarah arrived at Pyramid Lake in the summer of 1884. It was her hope to find a teaching job or start her own school. In the meantime she returned to lecturing to supplement her modest income from the sale of her book and donations from her eastern supporters. Over the next several months she spoke in a number of Nevada cities plus San Francisco, where in February of 1885 she gave what turned out to be her last public lecture. By this time both her popularity and financial support were in decline.

Yet, after numerous setbacks, Sarah was finally able to open a school located on her brother Natches’s ranch in the summer of 1885. In contrast to government policy, she wanted her students to preserve their native culture and not be separated from their families. Her school was popular with the Piutes and far more families applied for their children than could be accommodated. With donations dwindling from the East, Sarah was fortunate to receive a modest legacy from Mary Peabody Mann, who had died in February of 1887. Still, it was financially difficult to keep the school open.

Then Lewis Hopkins unexpectedly reappeared, dying of tuberculosis. His final egregious act was to steal the profits from Natches’s ranch and took off for San Francisco. He soon returned, however, and died in October of 1887. Both Sarah and Natches had few resources left. Her school finally closed in the summer of 1889.  

Sarah’s biographer points out that another factor that contributed to the demise of Sarah’s school was the emergence of a new Piute leader by the name of Wovoka, also known as Jack Wilson. Both firebrand and shaman, he preached against teaching English to Piute children and predicted that dead Indian warriors would rise up and kill all the whites and Indians who spoke English.

Tension remained high in the region by the news that 200 Sioux Indians had been killed by U.S. cavalry on December 29, 1890 at Wounded Knee, South Dakota.

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It was during these tense times that Sarah and her sister Elma were reunited. Elma had returned to Nevada to spend the winter of 1889 following the death of her white husband, John Smith; they had been living at Henry’s Lake in what is now Idaho since 1880. Sarah and Elma spent the next summer at Henry’s Lake and then returned again to Nevada for the winter.

Sarah came back with Elma to Henry’s Lake in the spring of 1891. It was there that she died on October 16. She was 47 years old. Some say she died of tuberculosis. However, her biographer writes that Sarah died soon after suffering severe stomach pains following a meal accompanied by chokecherry wine. There was the suspicion that she may have been poisoned by Elma because of rivalry over a man. Without further information, the cause of her death remains uncertain.

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12 The U.S. government didn’t open a school for Piute children until 1907, and it was not until 1909 that Piutes were allowed to attend public schools.

13 Henry’s Lake, now part of a state park, is in southeastern Idaho, close to the border with Montana and 15 miles west of Yellowstone National Park.
In remembering Sarah Winnemucca today, what has endured most over the years have been her efforts in seeking just treatment for her people by the U.S. government, her advocating for Native American self-governance, her strong belief in education, her struggle to preserve her native culture, and her insistence on resolving disagreements peaceably. She remains a fascinating figure.

Sarah’s life and writing have brought the attention of scholars in recent decades. In 1976, for example, she was included in an anthology compiled by the American Ethnological Society of 17 noted Native Americans. Significantly, Sarah was one of only two women represented. It is noted that her autobiography is especially significant in containing rich ethnographical material as found in her descriptions of Piute tribal customs. In contrast to the other individuals included in the anthology, Sarah clearly was the most politically active. The article concludes:

Sarah was “firmly convinced that with education, agricultural land freedom from outside intervention, he Piutes could and should manage their own lives….She was a fighter, quick to learn, and an astute observer of the customs of the whites as well as those of her own people.”

Sarah’s life and work is also discussed in a 1993 anthology of Native American literature. Sarah’s autobiography is seen as an important contribution because most writing about women and the American frontier have been by whites. A major theme in the article is the role of women in Indian and white culture, with emphasis on Sarah being seen both as a woman tribal warrior and as a woman of political influence. She doesn’t fit the stereotype of “true womanhood” in terms of piety, submissiveness and domesticity, yet she is seen as sensitive by her frequent show of emotion. As a public personality she desperately wanted to be seen as respectable in the eyes of her people and the white world, and chafed under the personal attacks by her critics.

“Sarah presents an image of a complex personality who draws her strength from a cultural encounter, whose negative impact, in the form of white control of Native American lives, is at the center of her story…It is her gender which, in the eyes of both

14 Catherine S. Fowler, ibid., p. 41.
her supporters and attackers, singles her out. She was most vulnerable and alone when she had to find her own voice as a woman between two worlds.” 15

Sarah still remains controversial. According to her biographer, in 1994 public disagreement developed over a proposal to name an elementary school in Reno after Sarah. Though supported by the Inter-Tribal Council of Nevada and the Nevada Indian Commission, many Piutes initially objected. They were eventually won over by others at the hearing who testified to Sarah’s many accomplishments on behalf of her tribe.

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The message that Sarah Winnemucca might well want us to remember most was expressed in her autobiography.

“My people are ignorant of worldly knowledge, but they know what love means and what truth means. They have seen their dear ones perish around them because their white brothers have given them neither love nor truth…They are innocent and simple, but they are brave and will not be imposed upon.” 16

In 2005, the state of Nevada honored Sarah Winnemucca by installing her statue in the National Statuary Hall Collection at the U.S. Capitol in Washington, D.C. Indeed, her legacy is very much alive today.

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Amherst, Massachusetts

August, 2012

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16 Sarah Winnemucca Hopkins, ibid., p. 259.
Bibliography


