

SARAH WINNEMUCCA, AMERICAN INDIAN LEADER

Sarah Winnemucca



There are two branches of the Paiute people: the Southern Paiutes in Utah, Arizona, and Nevada and the Northern Paiutes in Nevada, California, and Oregon. Though these two groups have different governmental structures, the members of these various tribes share a similar language and culture. Sarah Winnemucca was a Northern Paiute leader, teacher, and writer in the second half of the nineteenth century. She faced trials and tribulations that brought her a degree of controversy. Ultimately, though, she was a remarkable person. We should remember her as a leader who argued for the rights of her people and Native Americans more generally.

Winnemucca was born in what is now western Nevada. She was daughter of Chief Winnemucca, an important American Indian leader at the time of white settlement. When she was a young child, her grandfather sent her to be educated, first in Mormon Station, Nevada, and then San Jose, California. She learned to read and write in English. She also spoke three Indian dialects and Spanish. As an adult, she used these skills to enter a conversation with the United States government to bring peace between the Northern Paiutes and Americans who were settling on Paiute lands.

During the Bannock War of 1878, Winnemucca acted as a translator between the United States and the Paiutes. Since she was fluent in Paiute and English, she tried to have her father and fellow Paiutes freed from United States custo-

dy. While trying to free the prisoners, she helped the U.S. military scout Bannock Indian territory. Although her intent was to seek peace, her work as a translator is controversial because she aided the U.S. military.

Later in life, Winnemucca wrote an autobiographical account titled *Life Among the Piutes: Their Wrongs and Claims*, the first copyrighted book by an American Indian woman writer. *Life Among the Paiutes* explained the Paiute community's historic struggle with the United States as non-Indians expanded into what is now Utah, Nevada, Oregon, and California. This book brought Sarah Winnemucca and the Paiutes a degree of national attention. Later, she toured throughout the United States lecturing on the rights of Native American people. Then she returned to Nevada to build a school where Paiute children could learn their culture and language.

Sarah Winnemucca's lifetime commitment to American Indian sovereignty and to the Northern Paiute way of life is a shining example of political activism and leadership. Her struggle is even more amazing because she lived in the nineteenth century, when American culture dictated that women should not assume leadership positions. She serves as an example of Native American leadership and as a pioneer for women as political leaders in America. Today, Southern Paiute women like Lora Tom, Karman Grayman, and Shannon Martineau are following in Sarah Winnemucca's footsteps and working for the betterment of their people.

Lora Tom



Shanana Martineau