

■ Trouble on the Paiute Reservation

Date: 1888

Author: Sarah Winnemucca

Genre: memoir

Summary Overview

On March 14, 1865, elements of the First Nevada Volunteer Cavalry Battalion, under the command of Captain Almond B. Wells, descended on a Paiute encampment on Mud Lake in the territory's northwestern region while searching for suspected cattle thieves. Although it is unclear who fired the first shot, the action resulted in the death of twenty-nine Natives, most of them women and children. The incident was just one in a long chain of abuses suffered by the Paiute on their Nevada reservation. Corrupt Indian Agents, lack of support and infrastructure, hostile settlers, and an unsympathetic government eager to annex Native lands, made life on the Paiute reservation, and life across all reservations, miserable. The horrid conditions faced by Native peoples in the reservation system was the direct result of government policy, and despite the efforts of reformers and Native advocates, little changed for the better. Terrible conditions persisted throughout the nineteenth and twentieth centuries and, for many Native peoples, continue until this day.

Defining Moment

In the mid-nineteenth century, as settlers raced to conquer the vast continental interior, driven on by a belief in Manifest Destiny, the singular belief that God himself had bequeathed the West to Americans, they invariably came into contact with the Native peoples who already occupied the land. When clashes occurred, as they inevitably did, the US government could then justify sending in the Army to pacify Native peoples, whom they deemed savages, harassing innocent settlers. In this way, the US government could annex large swaths of territory, displacing Native inhabitants, without any obvious criminal or moral consequence. However, the big question was, what to do with Native peoples once they were moved off their lands?

The answer came in the form of reservations, a name derived ironically from the recognition that Na-

tive peoples were independent of US rule. Beginning in 1851, the first reservations were established in what is modern day Oklahoma, in the hopes of containing Native peoples and limiting the violence in the region. However, by the late 1860s, with the Indian Wars raging, inflamed by continued settler encroachment on Native lands, President Ulysses S. Grant established the "Peace Policy." Under this order, the Indian Bureau was reorganized, and new reservations were established, often on land deemed unsuitable for cultivation and usually far from tribal ancestral land. Tribes were ordered to relocate under threat of force and, once on the reservations, subject to reeducation and conversion at the hands of Christian missionaries.

Grant's policy was a complete disaster. Conditions on the reservations were horrible, and widespread corruption among the religious administrators reached epic proportions. Many tribes resisted relocation orders, leading to some of the bloodiest confrontations of the Indian Wars, including the Battle of Little Bighorn. Native American advocates, along with eastern reformers, pushed hard for a reorganization of the Indian Bureau, and in 1887, Congress passed the Dawes Act, which brought Indian affairs back under the supervision of government administrators and reallocated lands to individuals instead of whole tribes. The intent was to dismantle tribal affiliation, thereby speeding the process of "civilizing" Native peoples. The result was a further fragmentation of Native tribes and a further reduction in Native landholdings, sometimes by a significant amount. Life continued to be difficult on reservations for decades to come, and despite attempts at reform in the twentieth century, most Native peoples continue to live in some of the worst conditions in the country.

Author Biography

Sarah Winnemucca was born in what is Nevada in 1844. Shoshone by birth and Paiute by marriage, she

was raised among her people but educated settlers. Fluent in English, she traveled extensively and even performed on the stage. After the massacre at Mud Lake, Sarah worked with both the Indian Bureau and the US Army, promoting cooperation and reform, this work then translated into a life of activism. By the 1880s, Winnemucca was travelling widely across the nation, lecturing and speaking on behalf of Native affairs. In

1883, she published the highly regarded book *Life Among the Paiutes*, which not only documented some aspects of tribal culture, but also addressed many of the injustices suffered by her people and shed light on the terrible conditions suffered by Native Americans on reservations. In her later years, Winnemucca returned to the reservation, where she opened a private Indian school. She died from tuberculosis in 1891.

HISTORICAL DOCUMENT

RESERVATION OF PYRAMID AND MUDDY LAKES.

This reservation, given in 1860, was at first sixty miles long and fifteen wide. The line is where the railroad now crosses the river, and it takes in two beautiful lakes, one called Pyramid Lake, and the one on the eastern side, Muddy Lake. No white people lived there at the time it was given us. We Piutes have always lived on the river, because out of those two lakes we caught beautiful mountain trout, weighing from two to twenty-five pounds each, which would give us a good income if we had it all, as at first. Since the railroad ran through in 1867, the white people have taken all the best part of the reservation from us, and one of the lakes also.

The first work that my people did on the reservation was to dig a ditch, to put up a grist-mill and saw-mill. Commencing where the railroad now crosses at Wadsworth, they dug about a mile; but the saw-mill and grist-mill were never seen or heard of by my people, though the printed report in the United States statutes, which my husband found lately in the Boston Athenæum, says twenty-five thousand dollars was appropriated to build them. Where did it go? The report says these mills were sold for the benefit of the Indians who were to be paid in lumber for houses, but no stick of lumber have they ever received. My people do not own any timber land now. The white people are using the ditch which my people made to irrigate their land. This is the way we are treated by our white brothers. Is it that the government is cheated by its own agents who make these reports?

In 1864–5 there was a governor by the name of Nye. There were no whites living on the reservation at that time, and there was not any agent as yet. My people were living there and fishing, as they had always done. Some

white men came down from Virginia City to fish. My people went up to Carson City to tell Governor Nye that some white men were fishing on their reservation. He sent down some soldiers to drive them away. Mr. Nye is the only governor who ever helped my people,—I mean that protected them when they called on him in this way. In 1865 we had another trouble with our white brothers. It was early in the spring, and we were then living at Dayton, Nevada, when a company of soldiers came through the place and stopped and spoke to some of my people, and said, “You have been stealing cattle from the white people at Harney Lake.” They said also that they would kill everything that came in their way, men, women, and children. The captain’s name was Wells. The place where they were going to is about three hundred miles away. The days after they left were very sad hours, indeed. Oh, dear readers, these soldiers had gone only sixty miles away to Muddy Lake, where my people were then living and fishing, and doing nothing to any one. The soldiers rode up to their encampment and fired into it, and killed almost all the people that were there. Oh, it is a fearful thing to tell, but it must be told. Yes, it must be told by me. It was all old men, women and children that were killed; for my father had all the young men with him, at the sink of Carson on a hunting excursion, or they would have been killed too. After the soldiers had killed all but some little children and babies still tied up in their baskets, the soldiers took them also, and set the camp on fire and threw them into the flames to see them burn alive. I had one baby brother killed there. My sister jumped on father’s best horse and ran away. As she ran, the soldiers ran after her; but, thanks be to the Good Father in the Spirit-land, my dear sister got away. This almost killed my poor papa. Yet my people kept peaceful.

That same summer another of my men was killed on the reservation. His name was Truckee John. He was an uncle of mine, and was killed by a man named Flammens, who claimed to have had a brother killed in the war of 1860, but of course that had nothing to do with my uncle. About two weeks after this, two white men were killed over at Walker Lake by some of my people, and of course soldiers were sent for from California, and a great many companies came. They went after my people all over Nevada. Reports were made everywhere throughout the whole country by the white settlers, that the red devils were killing their cattle, and by this lying of the white settlers the trail began which is marked by the blood of my people from hill to hill and from valley to valley. The soldiers followed after my people in this way for one year, and the Queen's River Piutes were brought into Fort Churchill, Nevada, and in that campaign poor General McDermitt was killed. These reports were only made by those white settlers so that they could sell their grain, which they could not get rid of in any other way. The only way the cattle-men and farmers get to make money is to start an Indian war, so that the troops may come and buy their beef, cattle, horses, and grain. The settlers get fat by it....

Now, dear readers, this is the way all the Indian agents get rich. The first thing they do is to start a store; the next thing is to take in cattle men, and cattle men pay the agent one dollar a head. In this way they get rich very soon, so that they can have their gold-headed canes, with their names engraved on them. The one I am now speaking of is only a sub-agent. He told me the head agent was living in Carson City, and he paid him fifteen hundred dollars a year for the use of the reservation. Yet, he has fine horses and cattle and sheep, and is very rich. The sub-agent was a minister; his name was Balcom. He did not stay very long, because a man named Batemann

hired some Indians to go and scare him away from the reservation, that he might take his place. The leader of these Indians was named Dave. He was interpreter at the Pyramid Lake Reservation. So Batemann got the minister away, and then he got rich in the same way....

Dear reader, I must tell a little more about my poor people, and what we suffer at the hands of our white brothers. Since the war of 1860 there have been one hundred and three (103) of my people murdered, and our reservations taken from us; and yet we, who are called blood-seeking savages, are keeping our promises to the government. Oh, my dear good Christian people, how long are you going to stand by and see us suffer at your hands? Oh, dear friends, you are wrong when you say it will take two or three generations to civilize my people. No! I say it will not take that long if you will only take interest in teaching us; and, on the other hand, we shall never be civilized in the way you wish us to be if you keep on sending us such agents as have been sent to us year after year, who do nothing but fill their pockets, and the pockets of their wives and sisters, who are always put in as teachers, and paid from fifty to sixty dollars per month, and yet they do not teach. The farmer is generally his cousin, his pay is nine hundred dollars (\$900) a year, and his brother is a clerk. I do not know his name. The blacksmith and carpenter have from five hundred to eleven hundred dollars per year. I got this from their own statements. I saw a discharged agent while I was on my way here, who told me all the agents had to pay so much to the Secretary of the Interior, who had to make up what he paid to the agents. This I know to be a true confession, or the Secretary of the Interior and all the government officers would see into the doings of these Christian agents. Year after year they have been told of their wrong-doings by different tribes of Indians. Yet it goes on, just the same as if they did not know it.

Document Analysis

Sarah Winnemucca begins by detailing life on the reservation before the encroachment of white settlers. By her account life was very good. In fact, it should be noted that Winnemucca is not against the reservation system. On the contrary, she is a proponent of it, but the actions of settlers, Indian agents, and the US Army make things on the reservation less than idyllic.

Tension grows quickly in Winnemucca's account.

Corruption and theft quickly escalate into violence. Winnemucca recalls with obvious pain the events at Mud Lake in 1865, where a group of American soldiers massacred twenty-nine of her people, mainly women and children. She paints a horrific scene, in which those who weren't shot were thrown alive into bonfires. After the massacre, there is more violence against Native peoples. In all, over 100 are killed. The Paiute were relocated and put under the military supervision. Harsh

treatment followed. Her account is typical of the experience of most Native peoples during the latter half of the nineteenth century. Dispossessed, constantly harassed by the Army and settlers driven both by racism and greed, Native peoples had to walk a fine line. To resist often meant violence and massacre, but to submit often meant an invitation for abuse and exploitation.

Winnemucca spends a good amount of time cataloging the corruption of the Indian agents that administered the reservation. Money trades hands. Ranchers pay Indian agents to use reservation land for grazing. Farmers pay Indian agents money to use reservation land for cultivation. Deals are struck. The needs of Native people are ignored. It is interesting to consider what may occur when cattle grazing on reservation land stray too far or simply wander off. Would the Paiute then be accused of theft? If so, the Army would be called in to pacify the troublemakers, and if things escalated, the misunderstanding would likely become violent. Were these the circumstances that led to the massacre at Mud Lake?

Winnemucca is most skilled in the tact she uses to bring the abuses against her people to the attention of her white audience. She does not condemn the American people, the government, not even the Army or the reservation system, but instead focuses all her attention on just a handful of corrupt individuals. She tells her reader, who she addresses as “good Christian people,” that only a few scheming, immoral officials are at fault. By framing her argument in this way, she is able to call for reform and stir sympathy, while also assuaging the guilt of her audience, thus eliminating the possibility of resentment. Furthermore, she appeals to Victorian notions of white superiority, by arguing that the real tragedy of the corruption that abounds in the Indian reservation system is not necessarily the violence and suffering, but the lack of civilizing progress. We could be like you, Winnemucca pleads, if you were just to teach us.

Essential Themes

The development and administration of the reservation system was a failure on the part of the United States government and a tragedy for Native peoples. The result of an unofficial policy of land acquisition and annexation, reservations were little more than holding pens for cultures deemed too savage to continue. Settlers, driving further west were often encouraged, even by the very officials who were tasked with protecting

Native interests, to encroach on reservation lands and help fuel the violence that would inevitably erupt. As a result, reformers and activists like Sarah Winnemucca had to walk a fine line, to openly advocate for their people, speaking out against the abuse of Native Americans, while also avoid assigning guilt on the system and society that made it happen. Specifically by appealing to notions of Social Darwinism, arguing that only through the gentle guidance of white civilization could Native peoples ever escape savagery, she and others pushed for sweeping changes to the reservations and the government agencies tasked with their administration. The immediate result of such efforts was the Dawes Act, which, although it did help eliminate some corruption by putting administrative control back in government hands, it also hastened the further destruction of Native cultures. By identifying tribal group affiliation as the primary hurdle in “civilizing” Native peoples, and encouraging greater individual autonomy through land redistribution and incentives toward assimilation into mainstream society, the Dawes Act had the effect of greatly diminishing Native landholdings and further reducing tribal populations. In 1934, as part of Franklin D. Roosevelt’s New Deal, an attempt was made to address some of the largest issues in the reservation system. Millions of dollars in public aid were funneled into construction of schools, healthcare facilities, and infrastructure improvements on Native lands. However, this reform effort was short lived, and within a decade, policy shifted back to old attitudes, resulting in a new effort to eliminate tribal groups once and for all. Although some Native peoples are doing better today, thanks in large part to the legalization of gambling on reservation land, most Native Americans still suffer. In fact, rates of poverty, malnutrition, substance abuse, and infant mortality, are among the highest in the nation, not dissimilar to those in the developing world.

—KP Dawes, MA

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