

# THE "DREAMERS" OF THE COLUMBIA RIVER VALLEY, IN WASHINGTON TERRITORY

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All of the aboriginal people of this country have theologies based on natural phenomena surrounding them, and all are believers in spirits, potent for good or evil.

The writer was sent by General N. A. Miles, of the army, then commanding the Military "Department of the Columbia," on a tour of inspection among some affiliated bands of Indians living along the Columbia river, with a view to ascertaining their grievances, their advance toward permanent homes, and to assist them in locating land under the Indian Homestead laws of the United States. White settlers were moving into the country very rapidly, owing to the recent completion of the Northern Pacific railroad, the route of which road lay through the Yakima valley, the richest, and most populous of the Indians' lands. In fact, the road was located through Indian fields and orchards, with little respect for individuals' rights. This caused many complaints, and the subject of land division was as eagerly discussed by them as by the disciples of Mr. George. In fact these Indians had quite similar views on the subject. Another class of subjects which caused friction in the Indian's mind, and was even threatening war, was the interference by the Indian officials, at the Simcoe, or "Yakima Agency," with the domestic life of these people.

Many of the Yakimas, who are a congeries of tribes or people nearly allied in language, and quite so in customs and habits (and in religious fancies, as a rule), are quite civilized, and are professed Christians. Many live in neat looking frame houses, have large fields, orchards and gardens, cattle and horses, pigs, goats and sheep. The majority however, do not live in civilized houses; but keep to the old Indian style of architecture, a large framework of posts and poles, covered with a rush matting, which they are skilled in making, although they often have fields, and barns, and excellent orchards.

There are several churches, all I believe Methodist, and several of the natives are ordained ministers of that denomination.

But the great mass of the Indians, are "Dreamers," so called from the "dreams" or trances, through which their prophet, Smohalla, is inspired, or "Drummers" as often called from the ear paralyzing orchestra of seven bass drums, which are a part of all their daily or more frequent services.

Polygamy has always been practiced by them, and the new religion justifies it.

The Indian agent, under his instructions from the Interior Department, at Washington, interfered in all these matters, and sent the Indian police, an armed body of Indian warriors, to arrest and confine those most active in dreamer or polygamous



practices, or who left the reservation to take up lands under the Indian Homestead laws. The situation was alike annoying to whites and Indians, but mostly to the latter, as they were the weaker, and the singular anomaly was presented of the United States Indian agent on the one hand applying for troops to drive the Indians from their homestead settlements to the reservation, a hundred miles away, and on the other the Indians telegraphing to the military authorities to send troops to protect them from the Indian police.

General Miles sent me to look over the situation in all its aspects, and instructed me to exercise the utmost patience with the Indians humoring their desire to explain their view, which I afterward found extended to the discussion of the philosophy of the universe, from the creation to futurity; and they were anxious to impress General Miles, through me, with the purity of their intentions, and the theological authority for their opinions. A number had, as I have intimated, taken homesteads. There were many more who would be glad to do so, fearing they might be late in the race with the incoming whites, but who dreaded the vengeance of their "mother, the earth, from whence all things come, and where all must go."

I was invited to visit every village of Indians, and on my arrival found all the people, from the oldest to the youngest, assembled, and solemnly performing their religious service; the shrill voices of the women making a weird chanting, while the drums beat in unison.

Occasional silences were broken, by men's voices orating, by ringing of hand bells followed by the drums, and again the weird chanting. At Celilo, Tule water, Umatilla, Yakima Gap and other places, I had seen some disciple of this faith lead his home people in their peculiar services which were not always identical in form; but I saw its greatest development at the fountain head, Priest Rapids, on the main Columbia river, the home of Smohalla, the "Prophet" and High Priest of the Dreamer theology. I found that he was the brake and the wheel of progress of his people, as to retain his influence he advised them to resist any of the advances of civilization, as improper for a true Indian, and the violation of the faith of their ancestors.

General Miles, having the peace and permanent benefit of Indians and whites at heart, desired me to hear all objections to the civilizing influences which were extended to Smohalla's people, by laws of the United States, and to win over the leading men to his views, if practicable. So I listened for several days to all that was said to me through any interpreter in whom the Indians had confidence.

In reply, I presented some of General Miles' views, which have since become the recognized policy of President Cleveland, in reference to allotment of land in severalty to Indians.

The Dreamer notion or superstition, seemed to form the principal bar, to any progress in the matter, and I was glad to hear from its prophet or leading priests as full an exposition of its origin, foundation and characteristics as possible. This I



had at Smohalla's village, and salmon fishing at the foot, or lower falls, of Priests Rapids.

I rode fifty miles in a spring wagon, known as a Dougherty, as far as the country was practicable for wheeled vehicles, and was then met by a party of Indians, with a band of saddle and pack ponies, upon which my party and camp necessities were transported over a mountain about three thousand feet high, my escort dexterously guiding me in such course that the crest of the range was attained at a point where in an instant the whole panorama of the "great bend of the Columbia river" was presented to the eye. I was impressed by the grandeur of the scene, but was not, as was, I think, intended, ready to be equally impressed by the greatness of Smohalla's power as a prophet and high priest.

The scene embraced an area of several thousand square miles, to the further mountain chains or high hills which bounded the horizon in every direction. Through the basin the silver stream of the great river flowed, being broken and glittering at several points, where ledges of rocks tore the current into angry foaming rapids.

Near the lower one, with the help of a field glass, I discerned a number of houses stretched along the margin of the river, and from several poles flags fluttered in the wind. They were distant about five miles, but the route to them was so devious and so precipitous, over broken basalt, that quite two hours elapsed before we reached the plain, and were met by a procession headed by Smohalla in person, all attired in gorgeous array and mounted on their best chargers. We wended our way through sage brush and sand dunes to the village street, not a soul being visible; but from the mat-roofed and walled salmon houses there came forth the most indescribable sound of bell-ringing, drum-beating, and cat-surpassing screeches. I noticed that the street was neatly swept and well sprinkled, an unusual thing in any Indian village. This, Smohalla said, was in my honor, and to show that his people had cleanly tastes. Our procession passed on beyond the village to a new canvass tent which had a brush shade to keep off the sun, and was lined and carpeted with new and very pretty matting. This, Smohalla said, had been prepared especially for me and was to be my house as long as I should stay with him. To cap the climax, he had constructed a bench for me, having sent to Ainsworth on the Northern Pacific railroad, more than ninety miles distant for the nails.

Fresh salmon, caught in a peculiar trap among the rocks and broiled on a plank, were regularly furnished my party, and with hard-tack and coffee of our own supplying, we got enough to eat and drink. Our own blankets furnished sleeping conveniences. The river was within two yards of our tent door, and was an ample lavatory.

At daybreak the next morning the sound of drums was again heard, and for days it continued. I do not remember that there was any intermission, except for a few minutes at a time.

I was invited to be present, and took great interest in the ceremonies, which I shall endeavor to describe.



There was a small open space to the north of the larger house, which was Smohalla's residence and the village assembly-room as well. The space was inclosed by a light fence, made of boards which had drifted down the river from far to the north,--British Columbia, possibly. The fence was whitewashed, because military posts often have white-washed fences. In the center space was a flagstaff bearing a rectangular flag, suggesting a target. In the center was a round, red patch; the field was yellow, representing grass (which is of a yellow hue in that region), and a green border indicated the boundary of the world (the hills being moist and green near their tops); at the top of the flag was a small extension of blue color, with a white star in the center.

Smohalla explained:

"This is my flag and it represents the world. God told me to look after my people--all are my people. There are four ways in the world--north and south and east and west. I have been all those ways. This is the center, I live here; the red spot is my heart; everybody can see it. The yellow grass grows everywhere around this place. The green mountains are far away all around the world! There is only water beyond, salt water. The blue (referring to the blue cloth strip) is the sky, and the star is the north star. That star never changes; it is always in the same place. I keep my heart on that star; I never change."

There are frequent services, a sort of processional around the outside of the fence, the prophet, and a small boy with a bell, entering the inclosure, where, after hoisting the flag, he pronounces a sort of lecture or sermon. Captains or class leaders give instructions to the people, who are arranged in the order of their stature, the men and women in different classes marching in single file to the sound of drums. There seems to be a regular system or signals, at command of the prophet, by the boy with the bell, upon which the people chant loud or low, quick or slow, or remain silent. These out-door services occurred several times each day.

Smohalla invited me to participate in what he considered a grand ceremonial service within the larger house. Singing and drumming had been going on for some time when I arrived; the air was resonant with the voices of some hundreds of Indians, male and female, and the banging of drums. The room was about seventy-five feet long by twenty-five feet wide, and was somber in color and light. Smoke curled from a fire on the floor at the back end of the room, and the ceiling of the rear part was hung with hundreds of salmon, split and drying in the smoke. Some smoke pervaded the atmosphere generally. The scene was a strange one. On either side of the room was a row of twelve women, erect, arms crossed, hands extended, with tips of fingers at the shoulders. They kept time to the drums and their own voices, by balancing on the balls of their feet, tapping with their heels on the floor, while they chanted with varying pitch and time.

Those on the right hand were dressed in garments of a red color with an attempt at uniformity. Those on the left wore costumes of white buckskin, with red and blue trimmings. All wore such finery as silver plates, the size of blacking-box lids,



or such other form of glittering ornaments as they possessed. A canvass covered the floor, and on it knelt, in lines of seven, the men and boys. Each seven had similar colored shirts as a rule, and the largest were in front, the mass descending to the distant rear.

Children and ancient hags, filled in any spare space. In front on a mattress knelt Smohalla his left hand covering his heart, and at his right was the boy bell-ringer, in similar posture. Smohalla wore a white garment, which he was pleased to call a priest's gown, but it was simply a shirt.

I with my two assistants, were seated on a mattress about ten feet in front of the prophet; which fortunately placed us near the door, and incidentally near fresh air.

There were two other witnesses, two Indians from distant villages, who sat at one side, with Smohalla's son looking on.

In person, Smohalla is peculiar. Short, thick-set, bald-headed and almost hunch-backed, he is not prepossessing at first sight; but he had an almost Websterian head, with a deep brow, over bright intelligent eyes.

He is a finished orator; his manner mostly of the bland, insinuating, persuasive style, but when aroused, he is full of fire, and seems to handle invectives, effectively. The whole of his audience to a man (or woman) seemed spell-bound under his magic manner, and it never lost interest to me, though in a language comprehended by few white men and translated to me at second or third hand.

His immediate followers are his abject slaves; in villages quite distant the people believe in his inspiration; and this inventor of a new faith (or rather remodeller of several old ones) has upturned the religious convictions of tribes of Indians quite remote, and even of such intelligence as the Nez Perces. Much of this influence is due to knowledge gained from white men, but mainly to his native intelligence and qualities as a orator and natural leader of men.

When a boy, he lived at the Coeur d'Alene Indian mission, where he was familiar with the Catholic service, and learned a little French. He was engaged in several wars, and was growing in influence and popularity, unusual for an Indian of his "social class," when chief Moses attacked and nearly killed him.

Indeed he was left for dead, but managed to crawl away and commenced a long journey which carried him among many tribes, to many cities, even into Mexico, whence he worked his way north through Utah and Idaho. At the end of several years, owing to the removal of Moses to a distance, he returned to his own people, announcing that he had been dead and in heaven, and had now returned by God's command to guide his people. He admitted to me that he had been in Utah and had seen Mormon priests in trances, getting commands direct from heaven.

This plausible, tongued orator blended what he could remember



of the forms of military parade, the Catholic mass and processions, with many of the Mormon practices such as revelations and tithings, and since then, his influence has been assured. It was fully believed that he had been resurrected.

The fact that he had prophesied eclipses to his people, by the aid of a medical almanac, and the explanation of some land surveyors was proof of celestial authority also.

At this meeting or service I was asked to explain the Indian Homestead law, and how white men divided land. This I did, illustrating with a checker board, saying, that the black squares in all the surrounding country belonged to the railroad, and that the white squares, except the school sections, were available for homesteads by either white, or black or red-men. That the vertical lines were run toward the north star, and that cross lines were run from the direction of sunrise to that of the sunset, and thus divided the land into square pieces, so that each man could find his own, and thereby prevent all disputes. I urged them to apply for land, to settle upon it, and so avoid trouble with the white settlers who were seeking homes for their families.

Smohalla replied saying he knew all this, and much more, and he did not like this new law; it was against nature. I will tell you about it. Once the world was all water, and God lived alone; he was lonesome, he had no place to put his foot; so he scratched the sand up from the bottom, and made the land and he made rocks, and he made trees, and he made a man, and the man was winged and could go anywhere. The man was lonesome, and God made a woman. They ate fish from the water, and God made the deer and other animals, and he sent the man to hunt, and told the woman to cook the meat and to dress the skins. Many more men and women grew up, and they lived on the banks of the great river whose waters were full of salmon. The mountains contained much game, and there were buffalo on the plains. There were so many people that the stronger ones sometimes oppressed the weak and drove them from the best fisheries, which they claimed as their own. They fought, and nearly all were killed, and their bones are to be seen in the sand hills yet. God was very angry at this, and he took away their wings and commanded that the lands and fisheries should be common to all who lived upon them. That they were never to be marked off or divided, but that the people should enjoy the fruits that God planted in the land and the animals that lived upon it, and the fishes in the water. God said he was the father, and the earth was the mother of mankind; that nature was the law; that the animals and fish and plants obeyed nature, and that man only was sinful. This is the old law.

I know all kinds of men. First there were my people (the Indians) God made them first. Then he made a Frenchman (referring to the Canadian Voyageurs of the Hudson Bay Company), and then he made a priest (priests were with these expeditions of the Hudson Bay Company). A long time after that came "Boston man" (Americans came in 1796 into the river in the ship Columbia from Boston). And then "King George men" (English soldiers). Bye and bye came "black man" (negroes), and last he made a Chinaman with a tail. He is of no account, and he has to work all the time.

All these are new people; only the Indians are of the old



stock. After awhile, when God is ready, he will drive away all the people except the people who have obeyed his laws.

Those who cut up the lands or sign papers for lands will be defrauded of their rights, and will be punished by God's anger.

Moses was bad. God did not love him. He sold his people's houses and the graves of their dead. It is a bad word that comes from Washington. It is not a good law that would take my people away from me to make them sin against the laws of God. You ask me to plough the ground! Shall I take a knife and tear my mother's bosom? Then when I die she will not take me to her bosom to rest.

You ask me to dig for stone! Shall I dig under her skin for her bones? Then when I die I can not enter her body to be born again.

You ask me to cut grass and make hay and sell it, and be rich like white men, but how dare I cut off my mother's hair?

It is a bad law and my people can not obey it. I want my people to stay with me here. All the dead men will come to life again; their spirits will come to their bodies again. We must wait here, in the homes of our father, and be ready to meet them in the bosom of our mother.

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