

An Indian agent's Experience in the War of 1886

by Henry C. Coe

The last Indian uprising in the Pacific Northwest known as the Cayuse war of 1886 was not a great affair; a few Whites and some Indians were killed and some property destroyed. It was a pitiful failure--the last feeble effort of a dying race to retain their homes, their tribal habits and their independence bequeathed to them by their ancestors of unknown ages past a protest against the encroachment and domination of the white man.

The trouble was precipitated by the government using force of arms to effect the removal, to the various reservations, the numerous camps and villages of Indians scattered along the banks of the Columbia and Snake Rivers. For years past the reservation agents and special commissioners had utterly exhausted their stock of blandishments, promises and threats in order to effect a peaceable removal of the obdurate savages. But patience finally ceased to be a virtue and the soldiers came.

The trouble first originated in the tribe of Chief Moses of the Grand Coulee Reservation in Northeastern Washington.

A noted medicine man, Sem O Holla, commonly known as Smoholly, having possessed himself of a tamanowas (spirit) began to dream dreams and see visions. Sem O Holla then was a middle aged man of more than ordinary intelligence. He had a fine face always wreathed in smiles, but with a fearfully deformed body being a hunchback and the second that I have ever known amongst the Indians. He was reputed to have had a wonderful mesmeric forces and to have dealt largely in occult mysteries. His seances were always accompanied by the beating of tom toms, dancing and singing of war songs and continued until the whole camp was in an uproar and

resulted in the brutal murder of a family near Snipe's Mountain in Yakima county, Eastern Washington by three young bucks who were on their way southward from Mose's camp to incite other tribes along the Columbia river to revolt.

Old Chief Moses was later compelled to give up the murderers who were afterward taken to Walla Walla and hanged. The dream habit seemed contagious and spread to neighboring tribes.

An old scallawag named Colwahs, a rump chief of a renegade band that made its headquarters on the north bank of the Columbia River at the Grand Dalles, the same thieving outfit that caused the early emigrants on their way to the Willamette valley so much trouble and annoyance, got the fever and dreams and dancing continued.

The character of these performances soon reached the ears of the agent of the Yakima reservation at Fort Simcoe who had jurisdiction over all the Indians north of the Columbia River and east of the

Cascade mountains. At this time the Rev. J.H. Wilbur was the temporal as well as the spiritual head of that institution and a man who would not stand for any performances of that kind at the particular time. A message was sent notifying Colwahs to cease his "dreaming" and close up his dance house instantly. No attention was paid to the order and dreams and dancing continued. Two Indian policemen were sent from the reservation to arrest the offender and bring him to the agency. On their arrival at the camp members of the band crowded so thickly in and around the dance house that the policemen were unable to make the arrest and returned to the agency and reported the facts in the case.

Father Wilbur, who had just finished his dinner, listened quietly to their report; then turning to an attendant ordered a team to be hitched to his two-seated covered hack ready for an immediate start to the Dalles. To Mrs. Wilbur he said:

"Mother, a little lunch for our suppers." And inside of an hour with his two trusted policemen was on his way to the scene of the disturbances. Father Wilbur was a remarkable man of powerful physique, an indomitable will and as utterly ~~fearful~~ fearless as it was possible for a man to be, of a genial kind-hearted generous nature, he was as sternly just and firm as a New England Puritan.

Late that night he reached the block house in the Klickitat Valley, fifty miles from the agency and thirty from his destination and there rested until morning. With a fresh team he reached Colwash's camp before noon and found the dance in full blast and tom-toms beating time to their singing of war songs which made a din that would have made a heart less stout than his hesitate at the task ahead. Springing from his hack he walked to the door of the dance hall, where nearly the entire band of savages had collected as soon as they saw him make his appearance. The Indians at once attempted to block his way, as they had the Indian policemen previously. And then trouble began.

His long muscular arms began to revolve like the fans of a great windmill. The "siwash" obstructors were pitched over each other in their attempt to escape those terrible flails. The road cleared he seized the rascally old dreamer by the nape of the neck and literally yanked him out of the house headforemost, handcuffed him, picking him up bodily and then pitched ^{him} ~~him~~ into his hack, taking a seat by his side. No jeers or laughter followed him as he turned on his way back to the agency, as it had his discomfited policemen a few days previously. Those who were not rubbing their sore sports were simply wondering what was coming next. There are but few men who would have dared to have undertaken such a task alone. Unarmed he drove fifty miles over a lonely ~~road by the~~ road by the very spot where a former agent, A.J. Bolan

was brutally murdered in cold blood by a band of his own Indians and to a camp of renegades collected from the various tribes throughout the country and numbering between two hundred and two hundred men and single-handed forcibly takes his man from their midst, handcuffs him and drives away. The act was characteristic of the man. He feared God only.

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