

Tragedy at Waiilatpu: A New Look at Old History

By Robert H. Ruby

This essay was prepared with the assistance of Cary C. Collins.



As a surgeon by training and a historian of American Indian and white relations by avocation, I have witnessed incredible changes over the course of my dual working life. When I took my medical training at Washington University in St. Louis in the early 1940s, I could hardly have imagined the breakthroughs in medications, equipment, and techniques that would be introduced in just the few short decades after my graduation. I have been privileged to observe at close hand the tremendous benefits that these achievements have brought to so many and the unquantifiable and remarkable impacts they have had on our society and nation.

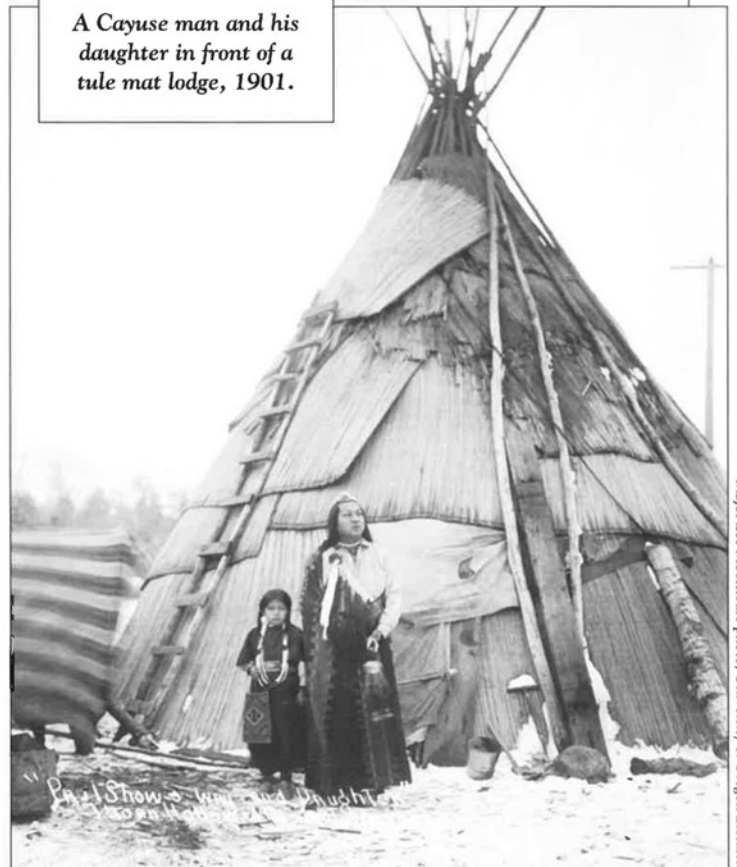
It is my sense that the historical profession has undergone a similar transformation. As a young surgeon in the early 1950s, I spent eighteen months as medical officer in charge of the Pine Ridge Indian Hospital, working among the Oglala Lakota people. While fulfilling my assignment there I developed a keen interest in and sensitivity to the plight of the American Indians and the many challenges and contradictions that confronted them as they responded to and endured the overwhelming stresses that befell them with reservation life. Having grown up on a farm outside Mabton, Washington, I never knew anything in my own upbringing that prepared me for the level of poverty, despair, and downright hopelessness that I encountered in South Dakota.

Drawing on my experiences at Pine Ridge, I eventually relocated to Moses Lake where, with my longtime collaborator, the now-deceased John A. Brown, we began studying and writing about the Indians of the Pacific Northwest. That was in the 1950s, but in those days the stories we told and the ways we told them little resembled what many writers of Indian history are producing today. Back then we dwelt almost exclusively on the people and events that had largely been shaped by European Americans. Today, I am heartened to report, historians are not only incorporating Native American

voices into their narratives, but they are also including Indian understandings, views, and analyses of what took place. Indians and tribes are now retrieving, writing, and publishing their own histories. This, to my way of thinking, is a stunning turnaround.

For example, in 2006 an old friend, the late Alvin Josephy Jr., edited nine essays written by Native American authors on their perceptions of the importance—or unimportance—of the Lewis and Clark expedition. Similarly, the Confederated Tribes of the Umatilla Indian Reservation have published a comprehensive tribal history. These occurrences and others like them are not just

A Cayuse man and his daughter in front of a tule mat lodge, 1901.



Major Lee Moorhouse photo: University of Oregon Libraries

breakthroughs but revolutionary treatises that have the potential to reshape the way Indian history is presented to and understood by the general public—just as in medicine the invention of penicillin or, more recently, the introduction of the cholesterol-reducing statin drugs, has alleviated suffering and extended life spans.

With this as a backdrop, I would like to say a few words about an event of which I have been a student for some six decades. It was an audacious act and one as polarizing as any in the annals of Pacific Northwest history. On November 29, 1847, thirteen people, including two children and one woman, met a violent death at Waiilatpu—near present-day Walla Walla—while another fifty or so of their companions were taken prisoner.

To the smattering of settlers then living in Oregon, this constituted a crime of such horrendous proportions that it came to be called the Whitman “massacre,” in reference to Marcus Whitman, who headed the mission where the awful deeds were carried out. Five Cayuse men—known among tribal people today as the “Cayuse Five”—were eventually charged with the murders. Following a four-day trial (only two days of which were spent in hearing testimony) conducted in Oregon City, hundreds of miles from their homes and families, they received the death sentence. Without delay or any real formality, all were hanged and their bodies buried in unmarked graves, the specific whereabouts of which remain unknown.

On its face this would seem to be a cut-and-dried historical incident: People were killed; suspects were arrested, tried, and convicted; and, ultimately, harsh justice was meted out to the fullest extent of the law. This is how the Whitman Massacre has been presented for decades to thousands of students in classrooms and textbooks. Now, early in the 21st century, there is another story that needs to be told—the recounting of what happened on that admittedly grisly day so many years ago as related by the Cayuse, Umatilla, and Walla Walla people in the oral histories and family stories passed down through the generations. The tribes that had invited Marcus and Narcissa Whitman to live among them could not find a way to stop what, from their perspective, had turned into an outright invasion of their homelands and an aggressive and deadly assault on their families, belief systems, and way of life. They concluded, in the end, that they had no alternative but to kill the missionaries.

Optimally, the tribes should, and I hope eventually will, tell this story themselves. With that as a given, I would like to suggest how the newfound open climate that has taken such welcome and solid root in the historical community might cast the circumstances surrounding the Waiilatpu slayings in a somewhat different light.

I first became acquainted with members of the Cayuse, Umatilla, and Walla Walla tribes in the 1960s. Since then I have learned that their perception of the Whitmans and the objectives of their Waiilatpu mission differ fundamentally

from that of the non-Indian perception. To tribal members, for example, the fact that the Whitmans lived there at tribal prerogative and the mission was situated within what the tribes considered to be their ancestral homeland granted them a certain influence or authority over what would be allowed to take place there.

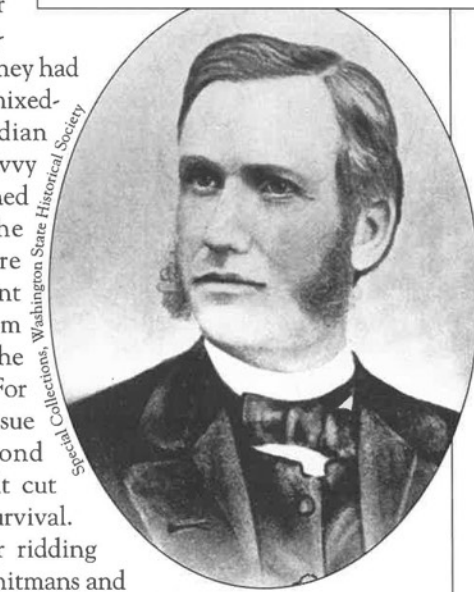
In the weeks and months leading up to the killings, concerned Indians had warned the Whitmans to leave, that to stay at Waiilatpu would be to place their lives in peril. They not only ignored such counsel but continued to engage in conduct that was certain to antagonize tribal sensibilities. Notably, the missionaries were lending substantial aid and comfort to settlers traveling the Oregon Trail—support that served to increase the number of outsiders in the region. The tribes, through their extensive trade contacts and from what they had been told by literate mixed-blood French-Canadian fur trappers, were savvy to what had happened to tribes east of the Mississippi and were determined to prevent the same pattern from repeating itself on the Columbia Plateau. For them this was an issue that extended beyond simple preference—it cut to the core of their survival.

Their options for ridding themselves of the Whitmans and their cohorts, however, were limited. They could request, cajole, and even threaten them to leave, which they had done. But when those measures failed to produce the desired result, the Whitmans seemingly held the upper hand—a hand that was becoming stronger with each passing season and each train of incoming wagons. The hard truth



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Narcissa and Marcus Whitman came to Waiilatpu in 1836 at the request of the Indian tribes in the area, but within 10 years the missionaries had worn out their welcome.



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is that the Indians had come to view the Whitmans as squatters who sought to subordinate them. Many had also soured on the missionaries' religion and their strong-armed tactics toward children, forms of harsh corporal discipline that to

Indian parents was tantamount to child abuse. Even worse, when the Indian children and adults grew ill and many died from the measles, the tribes concluded that the stern and ill-tempered Dr. Whitman was using his knowledge of medicine to poison them.

By failing to take wise measures to ease pressure on the Whitmans or by engaging in conduct that directly intensified the Whitmans' danger, other non-Indians in the region complicated and aggravated the situation. An example of withheld assistance involved the Catholic missionaries, who were rivals to the Whitmans. As the death toll from measles mounted at

Waiilatpu, priests stopped by to assist, helping to bury the rapidly increasing number of dead. The priests learned of rising sentiments within some tribal factions—harsh feelings that were being fueled by what the mixed-bloods were saying—that Dr. Whitman was poisoning the children. Rather than responding to this allegation, which—according to Catholic church records—the priests knew to be a fiction, they opted instead to say nothing,

thereby allowing emotional wounds to fester and a toxic environment to worsen.

British employees of the Hudson's Bay Company also inflamed the volatile situation. They accurately though, in

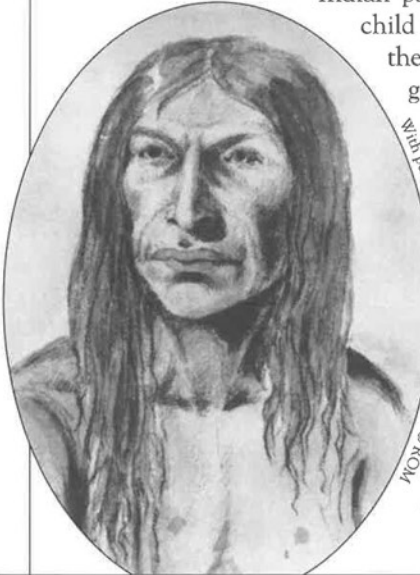
hindsight, recklessly informed the Cayuse that the mission's presence and the Whitmans' willingness to assist settlers on their western journey had become a positive factor for prospective pioneers in deciding whether or not to emigrate. How much longer could the Cayuse countenance the presence of such a double-edged threat agitating against their interests and welfare? In the days and hours before the death option was invoked tribal members must have searched their souls for an answer to that question.

Controversy exists over the identities of the killers. The Cayuse Five—their names were Clokomas, Kiamasumkin, Isiaasheluckas, Tomahas, and Tiloukaikt—paid the ultimate penalty of death, but according to Cayuse sources these men surrendered themselves to the U.S. Army at Fort Dalles and did so for a specific purpose: To protect the Cayuse homeland and people from further harm. But should this in any way be construed as an admission of their guilt? Consider the words of Tiloukaikt, spoken during the trial proceedings in Oregon City: "Did not your missionaries teach us that Christ died to save his people? So die we to save our people."

According to Antone Minthorn, a tribal elder and leader who lives on the Umatilla Indian Reservation in northeastern Oregon, the Cayuse people interpret this statement to mean that the Cayuse Five martyred themselves to ensure the survival of their families, relations, and fellow tribal members. In the words of Minthorn, "There was no proof that those particular five Cayuse men were the ones who killed Marcus Whitman and his people." He believes the Cayuse Five were patriots acting on behalf of a sovereign people. Considered from this perspective, Minthorn asks, "Should these five men have been tried as individuals or detained as prisoners of war?" To put it another way, whether or not the Cayuse Five were the actual murderers, the acts were committed in the name of national self-defense.

None of this was even a consideration in the drama played out in Oregon City, a trial that, from an Indian standpoint, should never have taken place because the Whitman affair occurred in the heart of Indian country over which the settlers held no legal jurisdiction. By tribal rights, the dictates and principles of Cayuse law should have guided the outcome.

A little known (outside of Indian country, that is) but prevalent cultural practice hints at just what such a judgment would have been. Known as "tewatat" or "medicine doctor tradition," healers or shamans who failed to cure were subject to the reprisal of death at the hands of the deceased's relatives. Marcus Whitman was a doctor, and there is ample evidence to indicate that the Cayuse people viewed and interacted with him as such. The measles epidemic that was then raging through the region undoubtedly exacerbated the situation. Whitman attempted to treat many of the sick, but in the end some two-fifths—as many as 197 of the 500-to-700-member Cayuse tribe—perished.

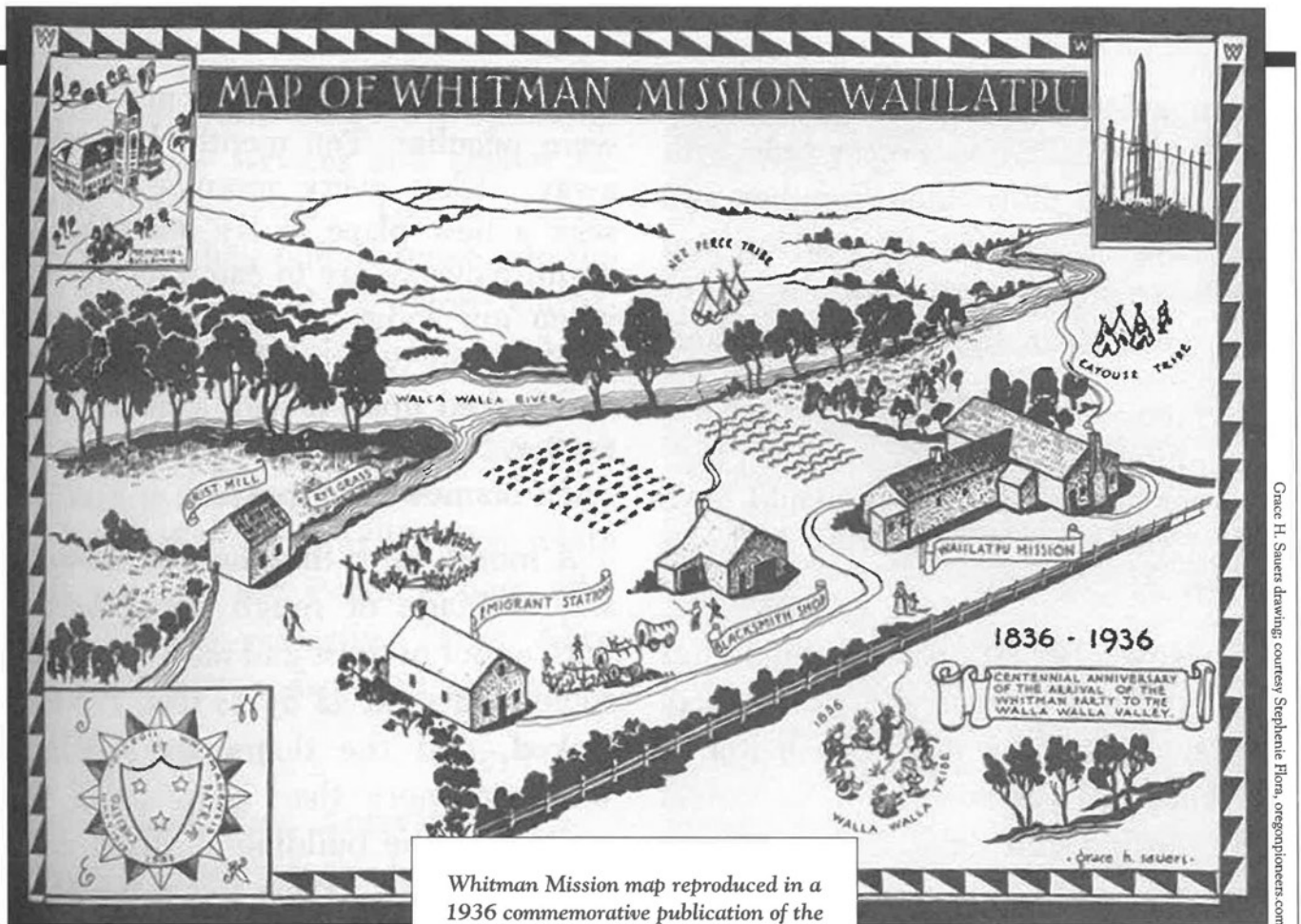


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Tomahas, or Tu-muk-sun (above), and Tiloukaikt, or Til-a-kite (below), were two of the five Cayuse Indians convicted and hanged for murdering the Whitmans and 11 others.



Courtesy Stark Foundation, Orange, Texas



Whitman Mission map reproduced in a 1936 commemorative publication of the Walla Walla Chamber of Commerce.

Grace H. Savers drawing; courtesy Stephanie Flora, oregonpioneers.com

This is a startling statistic under any circumstance but a devastating number considering the small population of the tribe.

From the Indian point of view Whitman had a hand in those deaths, and in this context his own death was a justified safeguard; one intended to remove an ineffectual shaman who, if left unchecked, might have jeopardized the lives of many more Cayuse people. Hence, what seemed from an American standpoint an incomprehensible act of criminal brutality was, from an Indian viewpoint, an acceptable and understandable solution—a necessary cultural expedient imposed to ensure the tribe's survival.

These comments only begin to address the many complicated and complex aspects of the Whitman case, which is a subject ripe for fresh exploration and interpretation. It is crucial that such discussions and arguments begin and continue, not only to provide a deeper and more nuanced historical account but to construct a deeper, more accurate understanding of the Cayuse people—then and now. To some extent, we are all hostages of the past. Our view of historical events shapes our impressions of historical actors and their descendants up to the present.

History, I have learned, is a battleground of competing ideas and interpretations. Those who are able to limit rival versions

of the past possess the power to control a good deal of what is going on in the present. In other words, the past has brought us to where we are and the past will guide us into the future. In our national memory American Indians have been marginalized and in some ways their sense of identity has been reduced to a reflection of how others have perceived and portrayed them. For the Cayuse people, the broader tragedy of the Whitman Massacre was that it failed to free them from the domination of outsiders. Instead, it perpetuated the influence of non-Indians, particularly in their ability to define and control public understanding of Cayuse history over the past 160 years. This is a disadvantage that the tribes are now working to overcome and correct.

In no way do I propose to speak for the tribes or the families involved. I do suggest, however, that at Wailatpu on that turbulent afternoon in November 1847 one people, shoved over and over, again and again, with their backs to the wall and seeing nowhere else to turn, took up arms and finally began to push back.

Robert H. Ruby is coauthor with John A. Brown (1914–2004) of numerous works on Native American history. Ruby is a retired physician, a former member of the Washington State Historical Society's board of trustees, and 1999 recipient of the James B. Castles Heritage Award for his work related to the history of the Columbia River Basin.

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