

Sarah Winnemucca

c. 1841–1891



WHY SHE MADE HISTORY Sarah Winnemucca was an interpreter and the first American Indian to have her writing published in the English language.



As you read the biography below, think about the determination Sarah Winnemucca must have had to accomplish all that she did.

Sarah Winnemucca was born sometime in the early 1840s, a time when history began to change for her people. Winnemucca was a Paiute Indian who spent her life trying to establish a balance between the American Indians and the white settlers, and create understanding between both cultures.

Sarah's father was Chief Winnemucca, who was weary of the white people and their influence on the Paiutes. Her grandfather Chief Truckee, however, welcomed the white men. He had even helped the United States gain control of California from Mexico during the Bear Flag Revolt.

At birth, Sarah Winnemucca was given the name Thocmetony, which means "shell flower." She spent the early part of her childhood in California, learning Spanish and English. At the time, Winnemucca was one of only two Paiutes who were able to read, write, and speak English **fluently**. By 14, Winnemucca had learned three different Native American dialects, and a total of five languages.

Winnemucca used her education and intelligence to become a translator for her people. She volunteered to help the U.S. Army as an interpreter. When another Native American tribe had captured Winnemucca's father and several other Paiutes, her



VOCABULARY

fluently able to speak well

fluency in American Indian languages helped her save her father's life and free the other captives.

Throughout her life, Winnemucca spoke out on behalf of her people. She described the plight of Native Americans and criticized the U.S. government for its treatment of the Indians. Her eloquence made her a recognizable figure both in white American and Native American communities. Her reputation earned her an opportunity to speak with President Rutherford B. Hayes in 1880.

In 1883, Winnemucca published *Life Among the Paiutes: Their Wrongs and Claims*. Due to her work, Congress passed legislation to return Paiute lands to the tribe, but the legislation was never enacted.

By the time that she died in 1891, Winnemucca had traveled the country and had delivered more than 400 speeches to gain support for the American Indians' cause.

WHAT DID YOU LEARN?

1. What was one of Sarah Winnemucca's accomplishments?

2. **Make Inferences** Why do you think it was important for Winnemucca to become an interpreter?

ACTIVITY

3. Do some research on your area, and find out what Native American tribes lived in your city or state. Using an encyclopedia or online reference, write a short summary about that Native American tribe.