

THE CAYUSE INDIAN WAR

by Terence O'Donnell

A very different tone of voice can be applied to a discussion of quasi-military efforts to gain control of white-Indian relations after the Whitmans' deaths. The author is an historian on the staff of the Oregon Historical Society.

S NOW HAD BEGUN to fall; and so the men left off their game of horse-billiards, which was a kind of shuffle-board, and walked back to the small, green-shuttered building by the waterfall that was the place of their assemblage. The time was two o'clock on the afternoon of December 8, 1847. The place was the Methodist meeting house in Oregon City and the men were the elected representatives of the Provisional Government of Oregon, now in session.

Stomping the snow from their feet, the men went into the little building, warmed themselves at the fire, and then sat down to business. It was then, in that muffled silence which snow brings, that they heard the terrible news. Dr. Marcus Whitman; his wife, Narcissa; and twelve of their associates had been murdered by the Cayuse Indians. Fifty-three other persons of the mission community, mainly women and children, were in captivity.

Looking back from the different circumstances of the present, it is difficult to imagine the thoughts and emotions of these men gathered in the little lamp-lit church on that darkening, snow-silent December afternoon. Fear there surely was, sickening fear deep in the gut. The Willamette Valley Indians might be debilitated and few in number; but east of the mountains, where the murders had occurred, there were large tribes of mounted warriors who were not in the least debilitated. This is what struck fear, well-founded fear—that these tribes would confederate and pour down through the mountain passes to flood the valley with the settlers' blood.

Then there was the outrage, almost as difficult for us to comprehend. To the settlers the Indians were an inferior race, to be bettered, or banished or butchered; at any rate, inferior. And thus the outrage, that a barbaric horde should wreak offense on a civilized community.

And here, perhaps, the outrage centered not so much on the murders, over and done with, the victims with their God in heaven, as with the fact that the captive white women were subject to the defilement of the savage redman's lascivious embrace. This was the horror, this the fate that, as the nineteenth century put it, was a fate far worse than death. So the rage and fear as the day darkened into night around the little church.

With morning came a vigorous resolve that took four forms: to rescue the captives; to punish the murderers; to prevent a coalition of the tribes; and finally to seek help from the United States.

The first step was a call for fifty volunteers under the command of the gallant H. A. G. Lee, who were to depart for The Dalles immediately to protect the property of the missionaries and immigrants and to establish a military base there at the gateway of the plateau and the region of the conflict. That afternoon forty-six volunteers showed up at Moss's Main Street Hotel, where Judge James W. Nesmith presented Lee with a flag hastily sewn by the ladies of the town. Then all proceeded in the rain to the riverbank, where the little force boarded a bateau, stuck the flag in the bow, and cast off to the cheers of the assembled. Thus the curtain rises on the first act of that five-part tragedy called the Indian wars of Oregon.

Lee and his stalwarts on their way, the next act of the provisional legislature was to make a formal call for a major volunteer force of 500 men to serve for ten months. The prospects were poor. Those first forty-six volunteers were mainly single men, newly arrived, game for the lark of battle. Further recruitment, however, would depend mainly on the willingness of settled farmers to leave their families and their fields. The second problem



Joel Palmer, from History of the Pacific Northwest.

was how to equip such a force, assuming it could be raised, since the treasury of the Provisional Government of Oregon contained at this time \$43.72. In other words, those two basic requirements for any war, men and money, might well be hard to come by.

Nonetheless, by hook and by crook, a little army of 240 men was finally assembled under the command of Colonel Cornelius Gilliam—a veteran of the Black Hawk War, famed tracker of runaway slaves, hardshell Baptist preacher, and a man of whom it has been said that he preferred the smoke of gunpowder to that of the peace pipe. Also, the Provisional Government of Oregon had finally been obliged to go to the detested British at the Hudson's Bay Company's Fort Vancouver and there, dining on a very large platter of crow, beg for money that in an unofficial manner the British gave them.

Thus then with this little army, and a bit of money for supplies, did the government hope to accomplish the first two of its objectives: to rescue the captives and punish the murderers. Next on the agenda was the prevention of a coalition of the tribes. With this in mind, two peace commissioners were appointed to travel with the army—Joel Palmer and Robert Newell, both estimable men, neither of them scalawags like a number of their associates. Finally, the colorfully persuasive Joe Meek

was chosen to go to Washington and plead for help from his shirttail relative President James K. Polk.

There were, however, problems with all of this. Meek could not depart because it was the middle of winter. So far as the army was concerned there were cross purposes, to say the least, for Gilliam wanted war whereas Palmer and Newell wanted peace. Also, there was question whether sufficient supplies could be obtained, and if so, the horrendous problem of transport up the Columbia to the battlefield. Finally, no one was very certain how long the soldiers would stay in the field and not desert.

MEANWHILE, WHAT HAD happened to the captives and what were the Cayuse themselves about? On the morning of December 20 their chiefs assembled at the house of Bishop A. M. A. Blanchet on the Umatilla and there drew up a petition that the bishop promised to dispatch to Governor George Abernethy. The petition began with a statement of the chiefs' conviction that the Whitmans intended to exterminate the Cayuse so that the whole of their lands might fall to the whites. Thus the massacre. Next the chiefs proposed that the Americans forgive the murders as they, the Cayuse, had forgiven the Americans the murder of certain Indians; then that peace commissioners be sent, into whose hands they would commit the captives unharmed; and finally that Americans no longer travel in their country, since their young braves might do them harm.

Three days later that tough little Hudson's Bay trader Peter Skene Ogden arrived among the Cayuse. Calling their chiefs a set of hermaphrodites for not having controlled their young men, he demanded the release of the captives and pledged a ransom in return. The Cayuse agreed. On the morning of January 10, 1848, the cannon mounted on Portland's waterfront fired a salvo into the winter air. It was a salute to the passing flotilla of huddled figures and the little man who stood in the bow of the lead boat—Peter Skene Ogden and the survivors of the Whitman massacre. Cannon were discharged again at Oregon City, where the survivors disembarked and fell into the arms of the waiting citizens. What all had

feared was found to be true; the women had been ravished. The reaction to this can be gauged from an editorial that appeared in the *Oregon City Oregon Spectator*.

Let the Cayuse be pursued with unrelenting hatred and hostility, until their life blood has atoned for their infamous deeds; let them be hunted as beasts of prey; let their name and race be blotted from the face of the earth, and the places that once knew them, know them no more forever.¹

In the eyes of the settlers, however, the Cayuse were not the only enemy. The Hudson's Bay Company too was thought to have had a hand in the massacre, if not directly then by not warning the Whitmans of the Indians' hostility—a charge quite without foundation. Nonetheless, the feeling against the British was so intense that at one point hot-blooded Colonel Gilliam threatened, with much support, to capture the fort and relieve the Company of its powder and shot.

Far more vicious was the conviction that Bishop Blanchet and his priests had directly encouraged the Cayuse to murder the Whitmans. Henry Spalding, arriving in Oregon City with the survivors, was not at pains to discourage the notion. In view of the intense hostility that existed between Protestant and Catholic in this period and place, when—as Frances Fuller Victor put it—"the average Christian was pledged in his own conscience to be a bigot,"² the simple presence of the priests in the Walla Walla country at the time of the massacre was ample evidence to most Protestants of the priests' complicity. Thus when Gilliam's volunteers finally started up the river, some were heard to say that their first shot would be for the bishop and his priests. And by early January the army *was* finally on the move—prepared to blot the Cayuse from the face of the earth, as the *Spectator* had put it.

Who were these Cayuse? Their homeland was the Walla Walla and Grande Ronde valleys. They held their annual summer fairs,

on the banks of the latter's looping river, where they gambled and wrestled, danced and raced—on foot or on their little piebald ponies, fleet as hares. Almost all white commentaries, beginning with Alexander Ross in 1811, found the Cayuse striking in appearance: a beautifully proportioned people, sometimes standing six feet or more. They were vain of their hair, wearing it in great poufs to either side of the head or down the back almost to the ground, and they loved to sparkle it with bits of mirror or of glass. In some instances the septum of the nose was pierced and from it hung a wolf's tooth.

They were vain of their clothes as well, shirts of fringed hide, sashed low on the hips, fringed leggings, moccasins, all "richly garnished," as Ross said. The women, who practiced head flattening, wore ankle-length garments of ornamented skin and little caps of willow twigs and had, according to John Townsend (writing in the 1830's), "a peculiarly sleepy and languishing appearance... as if naturally inclined to lasciviousness";³ he added that in fact they were not promiscuous.

Another object of adornment was their horses. The Cayuse were above all a horse people, the herds of chiefs often in the thousands. In particular, they valued white horses; to them they would attach feathered headpieces, streak their withers with dyes of different hues, and braid their tails with colored ribbons. What a sight, these six-foot bedizened warriors on their equally bedizened mounts.

As for their character, again almost all commentators agree that they did not steal and disdained trade, that in manner they were aloof, impatient of insult, above all proud. The meaning of Cayuse in their own language meant "a superior people." They were.

SO, OFF TO war with them; Colonel Gilliam our commander. Up the north bank of the Columbia to portage the supplies at the Cascades, then along the south bank to The Dalles. It had been a cold trip, mid-January in the Columbia Gorge breasting currents, wind, and ice. They found poor Lee with only thirteen men left; the rest had deserted.

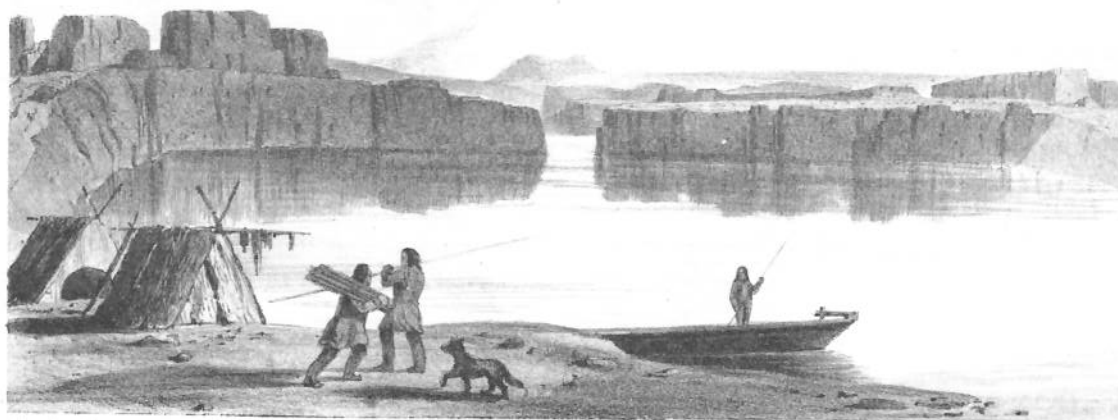
¹*Oregon Spectator*, January 20, 1848.

²Frances Fuller Victor, *The Early Indian Wars of Oregon...* (Salem, 1894), 160.

³John K. Townsend, "Narrative of a Journey across the Rocky Mountains, to the Columbia River," in Reuben Gold Thwaites, *Early Western Travels*, 32 vols. (Cleveland: Arthur H. Clark Co., 1905), 21:350.

U.S. GEOLOGICAL SURVEY OF THE TERRITORY

GEOLOGICAL SURVEY OF THE TERRITORY



G. H. R. S. S. S.

J. H. R. S. S. S.

DALLIES

It was now, their first night at The Dalles, that the first casualty of the Cayuse War took place. I will leave its description to Colonel Gilliam in a letter to his wife.

One of the guard shot a squaw in the thy (sic) thinking that she was an Indian man. It appears that she was a-crawling along on the ground for an appointment between her and some of our young men, which I'm sorry to say such things frequently occur at this place.⁴

The first real battle of the war occurred a few days later at a place called Stagg Hollow, twenty miles up the east bank of the Deschutes. Deschutes Indians had made off with some of the army's cattle, so Gilliam with 220 men had set off in pursuit—to get, as he wrote his wife, “as many horses and cattle as I can; likewise scalps.”⁵ On the arrival of the troops the Indians skedaddled, the volunteers after them with shots and yells, lots of yells, curses, taunts, for in this war both sides were

fortunately short of powder and so often resorted to what might be called verbal explosives.

At any rate, and finally, the Deschutes, as Gilliam wrote, “fled like wolves and scattered among the hills and canyon.” Four whites were killed, and twenty to thirty Indians, a Deschutes village destroyed, some of the stolen cattle reclaimed, and what Gilliam called “a quantity of peas.”⁶ With regard to the Indians killed it is difficult to know how accurate that figure is. It can be gathered from reading the documents of the Oregon Indian wars that the Indians were often the better marksmen.

⁴Colonel Gilliam to Mrs. Gilliam, January 25, 1848, MSS 2205, Oregon Historical Society, Portland.

⁵*Ibid.*

⁶Colonel Gilliam to Adjutant Lovejoy, February 7, 1848, MSS 2205, Oregon Historical Society; J. Henry Brown, *Brown's Political History of Oregon* (Portland: Wiley B. Allen, 1892), 357.

So the troops returned to The Dalles and to tragedy and problems. A late-arriving volunteer, up to high jinks, pretended to be an Indian to tease the guard who shot him dead. Now, already, they were seriously short of supplies—wheat in particular but also powder, shot, bridles, saddles, boots, sugar, tea, tobacco, nails, shirts, trousers, cloth for bandages, and finally paper on which to write out requests for all the articles just named. The other problem was Colonel Gilliam, as was so often to be the case. He was anxious to be off for scalps. His instructions were to wait for the peace commissioners, and since they had not arrived he was ready to leave without them.

Indeed, where were Palmer and Newell? The answer is simple; they were trying with the utmost difficulty to gather and transport supplies, for Palmer had been appointed quartermaster general as well as peace commissioner.⁷ However, by February 3 Palmer and Newell were finally on their way, Palmer finding that the wheat they were bringing with them had been badly adulterated—the old game of profiteering side by side as always with the game of war. At the Cascades they were furious to find that Colonel Gilliam and his troops had left the cannon, all 1,500 pounds of it, for them to portage. Somehow they did it, arriving at The Dalles on February 11.

The meeting between the peace commissioners and Colonel Gilliam was an uneasy one indeed, disagreeing as they did on aims, but finally Palmer and Newell convinced Gilliam that the commissioners should proceed ahead into the upper country with flags of peace and only a small escort, the body of the army to stay behind. The following day, however, the colonel withdrew his agreement and ordered the army to march en masse, a show of force that would hardly convince the Indians of the peaceful intentions of the whites. After all, the official policy at this time was not really war

but simply to prevent a coalition of the tribes and to take the murderers themselves into custody. But Gilliam was determined to march and get his scalps, although his troops were hardly in condition to do so.

For one thing, discipline had quite broken down—not that there was much in the beginning. Captain L. N. English shot an Indian, just for diversion it appeared, “a shameful thing” said Robert Newell.⁸ Also, the men were breaking into the belongings the immigrants had stored at The Dalles until they could get them in the spring. Gilliam could not control them: after all, these men had not come to Oregon to be ordered about by anyone. One volunteer threw in the sponge and demoted himself from sergeant to private because as sergeant he got nothing but abuse.

Then, too, almost none of the men were trained. Most, it is true, had probably served in their local militias back in the States. But those militia meetings once or twice a year soon gave up drill for wrestling, getting drunk, playing pranks, competing in violent games.

Finally, and to complicate everything, the volunteers, as soldiers seem to do, found some booze: one part alcohol, three parts water, and then for color and flavor a little tobacco or tea, a bit of red pepper, some ginger and black molasses and who knows what else. It was the water in the booze that caused the real trouble. It was bad, so the tipplers came down with dysentery. What a mess; this undersupplied, untrained, disorderly, drunken, sick army that could not seem to decide whether it wanted war or peace. And in the midst of all this, word came that the tribes of the upper Columbia had gone to join the Cayuse.

THEY STARTED OUT, following the immigrant trail from The Dalles: first Five Mile Creek, then the Deschutes, then the John Day. At Willow Creek, where they camped about fifteen miles south of present-day Heppner Junction, it looked as if Gilliam had mutiny on his hands. One of his men's complaints was the dearth of Indians. Whatever the official policy might have been, the volunteers had come for some sport. They were to have the following day at a place called Sand Hollow.

⁷There is a wonderful letter in the Oregon State Archives at Salem that gives a notion of their problems. It is from a Salem cooper—apparently Salem's one and only—refusing to make another barrel unless he is paid in *cash*, not in scrip. And there was no cash, or at any rate not enough of it, with which to pay him.

⁸Robert Newell, *Robert Newell's Memoranda*, Dorothy O. Johansen, editor ([Portland]: Champoe Press, 1959), 100.

Sand Hollow is ten miles south of modern Interstate 84, near present-day Alpine. It is a place of rugged cuts and washes, hills several hundred feet high bordering it on the east. This was the territory of the Cayuse chief called Five Crows, an interesting and appealing figure. It must have been a curious sight, the (by now) 400 mounted men, some wagons "borrowed" from the immigrants, the cannon, and, riding ahead of all, the peace commissioners with their white flags. An army riding out to war, led by men carrying the white flags of peace.

Suddenly they saw the Indians, streaming down the hills to the east. Palmer and Newell galloped toward them, raising their white flags high, but the Indians motioned them back. Peace had failed as it so often does, and the battle began.

The sides were roughly equal except that about 100 of the Indians were women into whose hands the volunteers prayed they would not fall. The whites quickly formed a circle, *Cayuse and Umatilla Indians performed at Meacham, Oregon, July 4, 1923. ISHS 356-E.*



cattle and supplies in the middle. The Cayuse in turn formed a circle around the whites, taunting them. They would kill them all, they cried, and then go to the Willamette and take their women and their land, and to show their contempt for the whites they first shot a dog. Then Five Crows and Grey Eagle, assured by a medicine man that they were inviolate, rode right up to Tom and Charles McKay. Tom killed Grey Eagle outright, Charles shattered Five Crows' arm. Now, too, the cannon was finally fired. It hit nothing, but its noise scared the daylights out of everyone. Finally, after three hours of battle, the Cayuse retired to the hills, leaving perhaps six volunteers wounded, eight Indians killed. It is difficult to determine the accuracy of these figures.

It is not difficult, however, to determine that this was the pivotal battle of the Cayuse War for the neutrals. The Nez Perce, the Walla Walla, portions of the Cayuse, and others were waiting to see who would win or, in other words, which side to join. That night two half-breed Cayuse, the Findley brothers, defected and came in to talk of peace.

The next day the army marched on, camping the night on the Umatilla, of whose waters the Cayuse had vowed the whites would never drink. The day after, they arrived at the devastated mission to be stunned by the scene it presented: the unearthed bodies, chewed by the wolves, strewn in pieces everywhere; Narcissa's head, a tomahawk buried in it. They cut off a lock of her hair for Joe Meek to take to Polk, for now in March the weather was beginning to turn and Meek was ready to depart.

This scene at the mission did not prompt pacific feelings in the breast of Colonel Gilliam. Palmer and Newell, on the other hand, were heartened by the fact that more and more Nez Perce and Cayuse had come in seeking peace. A council was called, but Gilliam stomped out. He had come to fight and fight he would. Shortly after this, however, William Craig—married to a Nez Perce—arrived to say that 250 Nez Perce and Cayuse were coming in to parley for peace. With such numbers Gilliam had no alternative but to listen. Very soon thereafter the Indians rode in with much pomp

and circumstance, rearing and whirling their horses, both braves and horses gorgeously attired, and the volunteers cheered and saluted them.

And so the peace council began. The participants were Yellow Serpent of the Walla Walla, eleven Nez Perce chiefs, and one Cayuse, Camaspelo. They were given Governor Abernethy's message, which demanded that they give up the murderers and return all stolen goods. Abernethy's message is in general a document of gentleness, even tenderness, and ends with this moving question: "Will you let us be brothers or will you throw us away?"⁹ Newell, too, spoke to the chiefs with gentleness. "My friends," he said, "I am not angry. I am sorry."¹⁰ Palmer, on the other hand, was stern in manner though moderate and fair in what he had to say.

In reply, the Cayuse chief stated that he had not consented to the murder of the Whitmans and would not protect the murderers. Joseph, speaking for the Nez Perce, pledged that they would not affiliate with those Cayuse who were still disaffected.

By and large, the peace commissioners were pleased with the council, for it had achieved their principal purpose: to prevent a coalition of the tribes of the Columbia plateau. That night the assembled Indians entertained the peace commissioners with a war dance. It was, according to Palmer, first rate. A few days later Palmer and Newell returned to Oregon City.

However, the murderers had still not been handed over. Gilliam continued the war against those Cayuse still disaffected and pursued them to Starbuck, where the Tucannon joins the Snake. Here he found that they had already fled across the Snake to safety. Making the best of a bad job, the volunteers rounded up what they thought were Cayuse cattle left behind. In fact, the cattle belonged to the Palouse—who, enraged, drove the volunteers all the way back to the Touchet River, regaining their cattle, inflicting serious casualties.

Whipped and very, very short of food, the troops returned to the mission, where it was decided that Gilliam and half the force should go to The Dalles for the desperately needed supplies. On route back, the morning of March 20, camping on the Umatilla, Colonel Gilliam, removing his gun from the back of a wagon, shot himself dead. That really was the end of the Cayuse Indian war. Of course, summer now was on its way and soon the wheat would head and the corn would silk and these farmer-soldiers wanted their fields and their women. The war continued in only the most sporadic and half-hearted way, with no appreciable results in the field.

It did, however, have its sad epilogue. Despite the peace commissioners' promise to the Cayuse that the whites wanted not their land but only the murderers, their land was in fact confiscated and opened to white settlement only a few months after the promise was given. It is a tragedy almost Greek in its nature and dimensions. Frances Fuller Victor put it well: "The very thing was about to happen which the Cayuse had killed the Whitmans to prevent, namely, the settlement of their lands by whites."¹¹ And so the terrible malediction of the *Oregon Spectator* had come to pass. Let the places that once knew them, know them no more forever.

There is a final tragic note. In the spring of 1850, two years following the war, the alleged five murderers of the Whitmans were hung at Oregon City; but to this day no one is certain if they in fact were the guilty ones or if instead these five Cayuse had sacrificed themselves so that their tribe might finally find peace.

This is an account rather than an interpretation of this first act in the tragedy of the Oregon Indian wars. Even to give a simple account of what happened is hard enough; to hazard an interpretation is trickier yet. Still, four assertions can be made regarding the significance of the Cayuse War—the first three fairly certain, the fourth indubitably so. Indian-white relations, British-American relations, Protestant-Catholic relations—all were poisoned even more. And finally, in this war as in all others there was only one victor, and that was death. ■

⁹Brown, *Political History*, 391.

¹⁰*Ibid.*, p. 394.

¹¹Victor, *Indian Wars*, 217.