



YELLOW SERPENT

From an oil painting by Paul Kane made in 1846 and now in the Royal Ontario Museum of Archaeology, Toronto, Canada. Reproduced by permission.

Walla Walla Indian Expeditions to the Sacramento Valley

By ROBERT FLEMING HEIZER

A LITTLE KNOWN series of incidents, most often relegated to a footnote in Oregon and California history books, is that of the several incursions of Walla Walla Indians into California from 1844 to 1847. These Indian expeditions enter into the picture of two important events of the times in each state. In no small part the Whitman massacre of Oregon was attributable to factors arising from these expeditions; and on the other end of the line, the Walla Walla Indians played their role in the Bear Flag revolt and the Frémont episode of California history. In addition, the incidents have particular ethnological significance, which will be indicated later. The story, as nearly as it can be reconstructed from the varied records, runs as follows:

In the late summer or fall of 1844 a party of about forty Nez Percé, Cayuse, and Walla Walla Indians¹ under the leadership of Piopiomoxmox (Yellow Serpent) proceeded by horseback from their Columbia River home into the Sacramento Valley to secure there, by exchange of furs and horses, a herd of cows. These tribes were under strong influence of Catholic and Methodist missionaries and, induced by their example and teachings, were desirous of securing some livestock to start home herds. In part they had already substituted white men's ways of producing food and had considerable areas of land under cultivation. Horses, introduced into Oregon from across the Rockies, were very abundant. Their use created a newly found mobility, and the Plateau Indians were not slow to seize the opportunity to travel. The Columbia River (Plateau) peoples seem to have visited California intermittently since 1800 for the purpose of securing horses and for trade.² To resume, the party of natives under the leadership of Yellow Serpent was well received at Sutter's Fort (New Helvetia), and a trading agreement was entered into, the Indians to give furs and horses for Sutter's cattle.³ The Columbia River Indians, while hunting in the broad Sacramento Valley, recovered from a band of thieves some twenty-two stolen horses. These were claimed by the Walla Walla, who were unwilling to give them up, saying that in their own country the horses would belong to those who recaptured them from a common enemy at the risk of life. However, the California rule at that time was that a branded animal belonged to the owner of the brand until a transfer mark was applied. Negotiations were opened at Sutter's Fort for ransoming the horses for some ten or fifteen cows, but an

altercation broke out between Yellow Serpent's son, Elijah Hedding, and one of the men of the Fort, Grove Cook, in which Elijah was shot and killed.⁴ The Indian party broke off negotiations and hastily returned to Oregon with the horses, eluding the pursuit dispatched by Sutter.⁵ Yellow Serpent felt great rage and grief, and swore to exact vengeance for the murder of his son. The Indians arrived home in the spring of 1845. When the story spread on the Columbia, the Walla Walla and the neighboring friendly tribes became incensed over the murder of Elijah, and the Indians determined to take some concerted retaliative action. It was proposed either to raise an Indian expeditionary force of about 2,000 men from the Cayuse, Walla Walla, Nez Percé, Spokane, Pend d'Oreille, and Shoshone tribes, to invade California and exact retribution, or to hold the Oregon whites, as countrymen of the Californians, responsible for the murder. The situation threatened, for a time, to develop into a serious Indian outbreak against the Oregon settlers, but by careful manipulation this was avoided. Dr. John McLoughlin, factor of the Hudson's Bay Company at Fort Vancouver, met with Yellow Serpent, advised strongly against an Indian campaign and refused to give him arms and ammunition which would have been needed to attack the settlers. McLoughlin recommended a settlement, and Yellow Serpent sent Ellis (a powerful Nez Percé chief) to treat with Dr. Elijah White, the Oregon sub-agent for Indian affairs, at Oregon City.⁶ Ellis' story carried with it an implicit ultimatum, but happily Dr. White was able to pacify Ellis, and the Nez Percé chief returned to influence the Walla Walla and Cayuse chiefs into a peaceful settlement which averted the threatened local outbreak.⁷

Although the affair seemed patched up and smoothed over, there continued an undercurrent of resentment among the Indians. Dr. White had written to Sutter, to the government in Washington, and to Thomas O. Larkin, the United States consul at Monterey. Other reports, reaching California from Oregon missionaries and emigrants, insisted that the Walla Wallas were still bent on vengeance. These alarming rumors, together with the memory of Yellow Serpent's vow to avenge his son's death as he left Sutter's Fort in 1845, all contributed to cause great alarm when it became known, in September 1846, that Yellow Serpent and a large contingent of his people were again in the Sacramento Valley.⁸ The alarm was brought to Sutter's Fort by Daniel Sill, a settler on the northern frontier. Messengers were immediately dispatched to Monterey and Sonoma, and many troops were sent out to guard important positions. Commodore Stockton, on board the United States warship *Congress*, arrived at Monterey and heard a report "leading to the apprehension that Sutter's settlement on the Sacramento was threatened with an attack of a body of one thousand Wah-lah Wah-lah Indians." Stockton arrived at San Francisco, and learned there "that the reports in regard to the Wah-lah Wah-lah Indians had been greatly exag-

gerated. They were not so numerous as had been represented, nor had they any hostile intentions.”⁹

But instead of the expected thousand bent upon murder and pillage, there appeared only a much smaller group of Walla Wallas who came to “talk,” announcing their peaceable intentions and requesting that amicable trade relations be instituted once more.¹⁰ Joseph Warren Revere, an American in command of the volunteers at New Helvetia, met with Yellow Serpent and talked with him. The Indian’s speech to Revere is reproduced here:

I have come from the forests of Oregon with no hostile intentions. You can see that I speak the truth, because I have brought with me only forty warriors, with their women and little children, and because I am here with few followers, and without arms. We have come to hunt the beasts of the field, and also to trade our horses for cattle; for my people require cattle, which are not so abundant in Oregon as in California. I have come, too, according to the custom of our tribes, to visit the grave of my poor son, Elijah,¹¹ who was murdered by a white man. But I have not travelled thus far only to mourn. I demand justice! The blood of my slaughtered son calls for vengeance! I have told you what brought me here; and when these objects are accomplished, I shall be satisfied, and shall return peaceably to my own country. When I came to California, I did not know that the Boston men [Americans] had taken the country from the Spaniards. I am glad to hear it; for I have always been friendly to the Boston men, and have been kind to those who have passed through my territories. It must be plain to you that we did not set out on a hostile expedition against your countrymen.¹²

The scare soon subsided, and the cheering news went out that fears over a Walla Walla invasion were unfounded. Certain biographers of Frémont¹³ have attempted to credit him with persuading the Walla Wallas to forego their warlike intentions and thus preventing a serious Indian uprising. The truth is, however, that the excitement had quieted down before Frémont’s arrival. Ten young Walla Walla warriors joined Frémont’s California Battalion and participated in the successful fighting which resulted in the annexation of California by the United States. In the battle at Natividad Rancho a party of American scouts and Walla Wallas under command of George Foster was surrounded by General Castro’s troops. In the skirmish Foster was killed and the outlook seemed hopeless, but the Walla Wallas fought their way through the enemy lines to reach San Juan, where Captains Burroughs and Thompson were encamped with a small force. These returned for the rescue. Upon Frémont’s order the Walla Wallas were paid for their campaign services in government horses.¹⁴

On May 26, 1847 (eight months after their 1846 entry), the record kept at New Helvetia mentions that “the Walla Walla Chief and a good many of his people” made a friendly visit.¹⁵ Very shortly after this the Walla Walla visitors returned to the Columbia River, since Paul Kane, who was among the Walla Walla villages in late July 1847, noted the return of the party at that time.¹⁶ Kane’s painting of Yellow Serpent is reproduced here through the courtesy of the Royal Ontario Museum of Archaeology, where it is housed. Kane states that the party had originally left for California about

eighteen months before, i. e., early in 1846. It must have been after March 1846, since Joel Palmer talked with Yellow Serpent at that time on the Columbia.

Yellow Serpent's expedition returned from California, and with it came the measles,¹⁷ a disease to which the Indian had little constitutional resistance. The measles spread rapidly among the Walla Walla and Cayuse tribes and aroused the natives (particularly the Cayuse) to blame the white men. Discontent over the great 1845 and 1846 emigrations to Oregon, and over the constant interference of the missionaries,¹⁸ all combined to create a dangerous restlessness and mounting suspicion of the whites. The measles epidemic was the spark which lit the fuse. The Cayuse rose in open, armed rebellion, of which the tragic Whitman massacre (November 29, 1847) at Waiilatpu was but a part. This measles epidemic, as an important contributing factor to the Whitman massacre, has been minimized by historians searching for the cause of the outrage.

I have spoken of the ethnological significance of these Indian expeditions. In the early historic period when aboriginal groups were still numerically great and were living in large part their old ways of life and using their native tools, dress, etc., contacts of this sort would have stimulated the interchange of aboriginal customs and implements (i. e., material culture forms) between two communicating Indian groups. Thus, great cultural changes are known to have occurred in early historic times among, for example, the Plains Indians who got horses in very early times. The Columbia River groups which we have mentioned above assumed a veneer of traits and customs of the buffalo hunting Great Plains tribes after the middle of the seventeenth century.

An ethnologist finding the hopper-mortar among the Nez Percé Indians¹⁹ might be greatly puzzled, for this grinding instrument is characteristically a Californian type. But, knowledge that Nez Percé or neighboring peoples had indulged in early and extensive contacts with Californian tribes would lead to the inevitable deduction that the isolated Nez Percé occurrence and use of the hopper-mortar dated from the time of these contacts. Instances of this description are very common,²⁰ yet ethnologists usually tend to neglect the arduous inquiry necessary to uncover the incidents leading to such introductions, and are thereby misled into assuming that the introduced object or custom is ancient.

Although the hopper-mortar is indicated as introduced under these special circumstances,²¹ I know of no certain Walla Walla, Cayuse, Spokane, or Nez Percé customs or objects adopted by the Californian Indians. But this is not to say that they will not be found, since J. G. Swan, who describes the Walla Walla expedition, states that a woman he knew "recalled going with her mother and a party of her tribe to the south for a number of months; that they were three months going and three months returning;

that they took horses with them, and Indian trinkets, which they exchanged for vermilion and Mexican blankets; and that on their return her mother died, and was buried where the city of Sacramento now stands."²² These "Indian trinkets" which undoubtedly were traded to California Indians may be divulged by archaeologists some day.²³ If they are, it will not be necessary to postulate prehistoric trade relations between tribes of the Sacramento Valley and the Columbia River. We might reasonably expect to find less material evidences of these visits, although of these there seems to have been no inquiry or suggestions. Such non-material evidences might theoretically include the adoption by California Indians of native language terms, ceremonial behavior traits, etc., from their Columbia River visitors. Such evidences are more easily recognized when the possibility of their existence is offered, since they may otherwise appear to be indigenous features.

NOTES

1. The Walla Walla, Cayuse, Klikitat, Nez Percé, and Umatilla are Sahaptian speaking. For further information on these and other tribes mentioned, see Leslie Spier, "Tribal Distribution in Washington," *General Series in Anthropology*, No. 3 (Menasha, Wisconsin: Leslie Spier, 1936), and Joel V. Berreman, "Tribal Distribution in Oregon," *Memoir No. 47, American Anthropological Association* (1937).

2. Franchère tells of a Spokane woman who had visited California before 1814. Gabriel Franchère, *Narrative of a Voyage to the Northwest Coast of America in the Years 1811, 1812, 1813, and 1814*, in Reuben Gold Thwaites, ed., *Early Western Travels* (Cleveland, Ohio, 1904), VI, pp. 341-42. Yellow Serpent began his California horse raids as a small boy, when he went with his father and a band of warriors, according to A. J. Splawn, *Ka-mi-akin, the Last Hero of the Yakimas* (Portland, 1917), p. 364. This may have been as early as 1800. Wilkes said in 1841, at Fort Walla Walla, "The chief of the Wallawallas, who is called Puipui-Marmax (Yellow Bird) and the Nez Perce chief Touwatui (or Young Chief) seemed intelligent and friendly, but the white residents consider them great rogues. They were going to the Shaste country to trade for blankets, together with trinkets and beads, in exchange for their horses and beaver-skins." Charles Wilkes, *Narrative of the United States Exploring Expedition During the Years 1838, 1839, 1840, 1841, 1842* (Philadelphia, 1844), IV, 397.

3. Captain John A. Sutter, in a letter to Thomas O. Larkin, dated July 21, 1845, says there were about thirty-six men, with their women and children, in the party, and the chiefs were Piopiopio (Walla Walla), Young Chief (Skyuse, or Cayuse), Capcapelic (Nez Percé) and Latazi (Nez Percé?). Larkin Documents, III, 227 (MS in Bancroft Library, University of California, Berkeley), printed in Charles L. Camp, ed., "James Clyman, His Diaries and Reminiscences," in this *QUARTERLY*, V (March 1926), 77. Yellow Serpent (Piopiomoxmox) was a strong leader, as head chief of the powerful Walla Wallas, and was often instrumental in smoothing over Indian-white difficulties. He died in the Indian wars of 1855, while a hostage in the hands of the whites. For circumstances of his death see "Indian Affairs on the Pacific," 34th Cong., 3d sess., H. R. Ex. Doc. No. 76 (1857), pp. 202-6, and George Hunter, *Reminiscences of an Old Timer* (Portland, 1889), pp. 121, 136. J. F. Santee, Charles Wilkes, and Revere all state that the name Piopiomoxmox meant "Yellow Bird." J. F. Santee, "Pio-Pio-Mox-Mox," in *Oregon Historical Quarterly*, XXXIV (June 1933), 167; Charles Wilkes, *op. cit.*, and Joseph Warren Revere, *A Tour of Duty in California* (New York, 1849), p. 156.

4. Yellow Serpent had sent this boy to the Willamette Mission for six years, where he was educated by the Methodists. He was christened Elijah Hedding for the bishop of the church.

5. A. J. Splawn says that a thousand horses were brought back by the Indian expedition. Splawn, *op. cit.*, p. 363.

6. Ellis was a Nez Percé, the son of Bloody Chief. He had been educated by the Hudson's Bay Company and was sympathetic to the whites. He died of measles in 1848 while in the mountains on a hunting expedition.

7. Details of the episode are from the following: William Henry Gray, *A History of Oregon, 1792-1849* (Portland, 1870), pp. 399-404, 507-15; Charles L. Camp, ed., "James Clyman, His Diaries and Reminiscences," in this QUARTERLY, V (March 1926), 76-80; Hubert Howe Bancroft, *History of Oregon* (San Francisco, 1886), I, 285-89; *idem*, *History of California*, V (San Francisco, 1886), 300-1; Splawn, *op. cit.*, pp. 363-64; Gustavus Hines, *Wild Life in Oregon* (New York, 1881), Chap. IX; J. F. Santee, "Pio-Pio-Mox-Mox," in *Oregon Historical Quarterly*, XXXIV (June 1933), 164-76; Frances Fuller Victor, *The Early Indian Wars of Oregon* (Salem, 1894), pp. 77-83; Revere, *op. cit.*, pp. 147-63.

8. Bancroft says there were forty in the party. Bancroft, *History of California*, V, 301. Paul Kane places their number at about two hundred. Kane, *Wanderings of an Artist Among the Indians of North America* (Toronto: The Radisson Society of Canada, 1925), p. 196. It is at this point that the article, "California Preparations to Meet the Walla Walla Invasion, 1846," by John A. Hussey and George W. Ames, Jr., which follows immediately, begins.

9. John Bigelow, *Memoir of the Life and Public Services of John Charles Fremont* (New York, 1856), p. 171.

10. There is more than a suspicion that Yellow Serpent had, at least when he left the Columbia in 1846, warlike intentions, since this fact is specifically stated by Paul Kane. *Op. cit.*, pp. 196-97. Joel Palmer, who visited with Yellow Serpent in March 1846, states that they "conversed on various subjects, among which the death of his son was mentioned, and he expressed his determination to go to California this (i. e. 1846) season." Joel Palmer, *Journal of Travels over the Rocky Mountains, to the Mouth of the Columbia River; Made During the Years 1845 and 1846*, in Thwaites, *Early Western Travels*, Vol. XXX (1906). The preparations for their reception may have induced Yellow Serpent to abandon hope of blood vengeance. Had not the Californians been ready and on the alert, a fierce Indian war might have developed in which the California Indians almost certainly would have joined as allies of the Walla Walla and Cayuse.

11. Revere, *op. cit.*, p. 158, says the grave of Elijah Hedding was near Sutter's Fort.

12. Revere, *op. cit.*, p. 157.

13. Bigelow, *op. cit.*, pp. 172-73. Charles Wentworth Upham, *Life, Explorations, and Public Services of John Charles Fremont* (Boston, 1856), p. 242.

14. Edwin Bryant, *What I Saw in California* (Santa Ana: The Fine Arts Press, 1936), pp. 341-43. Splawn, *op. cit.*, p. 364.

15. John A. Sutter et al., *New Helvetia Diary, a Record of Events Kept . . . at New Helvetia, California, from September 9, 1845, to May 25, 1848* (San Francisco: The Grabhorn Press, 1939), p. 46. The "Skyuse" are also mentioned, on p. 54. They are identifiable with the Cayuse who accompanied the Walla Wallas. The Cayuse leader was Young Chief.

16. Kane, *op. cit.*, pp. 196-97. Splawn, *op. cit.*, p. 364, states that they also brought two thousand horses and many Mexican saddles. *New Helvetia Diary*, on June 17, 1847, records that "Piopio Maxmax the Wallawalla chief has been paid of here for his private

demands, and presentet with a good Many things. they left contented and started home-ward." *Op. cit.*, p. 51. These "private demands" were undoubtedly reparations for the death of Elijah Hedding. Yellow Serpent thus finally seems to have succeeded in exacting vengeance in the form of weregild from Sutter, whom he held partly accountable for his son's death.

17. Kane, *op. cit.*, p. 222.

18. The Catholic and Methodist missionaries were bitter rivals, and, in their efforts to gain control of the Indians, it was the Indian who was the pawn. Constant struggles of this sort finally resulted in a general suspicion on the part of the Indians of the good intentions of the missionaries. For the background and consequences of these conditions, see Hazard Stevens, *The Life of Isaac Ingalls Stevens* (2 vols., Boston, 1900), II, 20 ff.

19. The hopper-mortar is a flat slab with a basketry hopper attached to the surface. The Nez Percé example is described and illustrated by Herbert Joseph Spinden, "The Nez Perce Indians," *Memoirs of the American Anthropological Association*, Vol. II, Part 3 (1908), pp. 187, 189.

20. See, for example, Robert F. Heizer, "Introduction of Monterey Shells to the Indians of the Northwest Coast," in *Pacific Northwest Quarterly*, XXXI (September 1940), 399-402; *idem.*, "An Inquiry into the Status of the Santa Barbara Spearthrower," *American Antiquity*, IV (October 1938), 137-41; *idem.*, "The Direct Historical Approach in California Archaeology," *American Antiquity*, VII (October 1941), 98-122.

21. The circumstances being either through southern trade contacts, or perhaps through introduction of alien traits through slaves imported from California. Brevet Major Benjamin Alvord reported that the Cayuse had fifty Shasta slaves in 1856. "Report . . . Concerning the Indians of Oregon and Washington," 34th Cong., 3d sess., H. R. Doc. No. 76 (1856-57), p. 11.

22. James G. Swan, *Northwest Coast; or, Three Years' Residence in Washington Territory* (New York, 1857), p. 313.

23. Captain Sutter says that the trade articles left by the Walla Wallas at New Helvetia included "Leather pantalons, Buffalo Robes, Rifle and Some Curiosity's, etc." Sutter to Larkin (letter cited in Note 3), in this *QUARTERLY*, V, 78.

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Dr. Heizer, who has been on the faculty of the University of Oregon and with the Department of Anthropology at the University of California, will be remembered for his articles in Vol. XX of this *QUARTERLY*: "Alexander S. Taylor's Map of California Indian Tribes, 1864," in the June 1941 issue, and "Archaeological Evidence of Sebastian Rodríguez Cermeño's California Visit in 1595," in the December number.