

The Treaty Trail: U. S. - Indian Treaty Councils in the Northwest

JOEL PALMER SUPERINTENDENT OF INDIAN AFFAIRS, OREGON OCTOBER 4, 1810 - JUNE 9, 1881



This portrait of Joel Palmer was done by an unknown artist.

Joel Palmer was born in 1810 in Ontario, Canada to Quaker parents. When the War of 1812 began, the family hastily

moved to northern New York, to an unsettled area where Palmer experienced the conditions of frontier life.

Life in Servitude

At the age of twelve, Palmer, the eldest of nine children, was "bound out" for four years—a form of indentured servitude—to a family by the name of Haworth who lived in the Catskill Mountains. During his service, he received three months of schooling—the only education he ever had.

What is an indentured servant?

An **indentured servant** is the term used for a person (often an immigrant to America) who was placed under contract to work for another over a period of time, usually seven years.

Career

In 1836, Palmer moved to the Whitewater Valley in Indiana, where he was given the contract to oversee a long stretch of construction of the Whitewater Canal. Three years later, the project was stopped by the state, leaving Palmer with

"a large force of men and materials" and no means by which to pay the men, nor any use for the materials. The record does not show how Palmer handled the crisis, except that he "took to farming." He later served in the Indiana legislature.

Overland to Oregon

During the spring of 1845, Palmer started overland to Oregon to investigate the possibilities of this new Territory. Like many men making the journey, he left his family behind. He kept a diary of his experiences, which was published in 1847 as *Journal of Travels over the Rocky Mountains*. This became a guidebook to many immigrants for information on equipment and route details, and was instrumental in opening the Barlow Road, an important section of the Oregon Trail located in Oregon Territory.

On March 6th, 1846, he set out on an essentially uneventful crossing to retrieve his family. After a year of preparation following his return he and his family departed Indiana for good, arriving in Oregon in autumn of 1847 to build new lives.

Cayuse War

The native Cayuse population by this time had been decimated to half its original size by measles. The Cayuse were enraged and desperate, and believed the disease had been intentionally spread by the missionary Marcus Whitman, who had settled in Walla Walla.

In retaliation, on November 29, 1847, they attacked the mission, killing Whitman, his wife Narcissa, and eleven associates. They then abducted fifty-three other people, largely women and children. The Whitman Massacre sparked the Cayuse War, and Palmer served as

commissary-general of the volunteer forces. He also served as a peace emissary to persuade neighboring tribes not to join the Cayuse Indians.

Superintendent of Indian Affairs

In 1853, Palmer was appointed Superintendent of Indian affairs for the Oregon Territory. Serving with distinction, Palmer had the difficult task of securing Oregon lands from warring Indian tribes while preventing the outbreak of hostilities. During his tenure, he negotiated numerous treaties.



The painting "Chiefs at Dinner, Walla Walla Council, 1855" shows Gustav Sohon's rendition of a banquet for the native leaders attended by both Palmer and Stevens. He shows both men serving the other leaders on tin plates. Although the chiefs were given provisions each day, this was the only such occasion on which the commissioners were present.

His famous words about the inevitability of settlement:

Three hundred and sixty years shows us that the white man and the red man cannot live happily together.... If there were no other whites coming into the country we might get along in peace; You may ask, why do they come? Can you stop the water of the Columbia river from flowing on its course? Can you prevent the wind from blowing? Can you prevent the rain from falling? Can you prevent the whites from coming? You are answered No! Like the grasshoppers on the plains; some years there will be more come than others, you cannot stop them. Our chief

cannot stop them, we cannot stop them... this land was not made for you alone, the air that we breath, the waters that we drink, was made for all. The fish that come up the rivers, and the beasts that roam through the forests and the plains, and the fowls of the air, were alike made for the white man and the red man... Who can say that this is mine and that is yours.

Palmer expressed genuine concern for the welfare of Indians. He became unpopular with the settlers and townspeople who thought he was overly lenient with the Indians. A segment of the white population wished to wage a war of extermination, and these voices were raised in criticism of his policies. On August 15, 1857, Joel Palmer was removed from the office of Superintendent of Indian Affairs. His last letter in that capacity included words characteristic of that for which he had worked:

I leave the office with a desire to see such measures adopted as may tend to maintain peace and advance these Indians in civilization.

Palmer spent the remaining two decades of his life in business and politics. He served as speaker of the Oregon House of Representatives in 1862 and as a state senator, 1864-1868. In 1870, Palmer was defeated as the Republican candidate for governor.

He died June 9, 1881 in Dayton, Oregon.

Sources:

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