

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

PEOPEOMOXMOX (YELLOW BIRD OR YELLOW SERPENT) C. 1800—1855



PeoPeoMoxMox was the head chief of the Walla Wallas. This drawing of him by Gustav Sohon was painted on June 7, 1855. Courtesy Washington State Historical Society.

PeoPeoMoxMox was an important chief of the Walla Wallas at a critical period in Northwest history.

The defining moment of PeoPeoMoxMox's life and leadership was undoubtedly the murder of his son. His son had received the Christian name Elijah Hedding while studying English at the Willamette Valley mission.

A Sad Journey

In 1844, in the summer of Elijah's eighteenth year, a group of about fifty men of the Walla Wallas, Nez Perces, Cayuses, and Spokans decided to make a business trip to the California settlements to buy cattle. A misunderstanding with California settlers over whether cattle offered for sale by the Indians were stolen led to the death of PeoPeoMoxMox's son, Elijah. The violence alarmed the settlers, who branded the Northwest Indians troublemakers, forcing them to leave hastily and without the cattle they had legally purchased.

Calls for a War of Revenge

Arriving back at Fort Walla Walla in the fall, The chiefs sent word to all the villages about the death of Elijah Hedding. The tragedy fueled Indian resentment toward settlers.

The chiefs from many tribes called for a war of vengeance, and a council was held among the Walla Walla, Cayuse,

Spokane, Nez Perce, Pend d'Oreille, and Shoshoni tribes. PeoPeoMoxMox wanted to wipe out the settlers in the Willamette Valley in addition to those in Sacramento. He felt they were responsible for the attitudes that made Elijah's murder possible.

It was the wrong season for such a long journey, though. The mountain passes would be filled with snow. So as they waited for the weather to clear, the Indians decided to work the problem out through legal or diplomatic channels.

Although U.S. Government Indian legal representatives called for justice on behalf of Elijah: no one was punished for the crime. The government promised compensation for losses sustained by the Indians as a result of the incident, but none was received.

Thus, long before Isaac Stevens was appointed Governor of Washington Territory, long before the treaty councils, the Cayuse War, or the Yakima War, PeoPeoMoxMox, Spokane Garry, and the people of the neighboring tribes had learned a hard, bitter lesson—no justice could be expected from the white man.

The Walla Walla Treaty Council of 1855

Late in 1854, PeoPeoMoxMox met Governor Stevens, who was out on a surveying expedition. Stevens described the Walla Walla chief as being "of dignified manner, and well qualified to manage men". In the months that preceded the Walla Walla Treaty Council, PeoPeoMoxMox, received several visits from a representative of the Stevens government, Secretary James Doty. By the end of March 1855, the chief appeared to be convinced that it would be better to receive a fair price for his lands than to be constantly fighting with

soldiers and settlers and risk being left with nothing.

PeoPeoMoxMox arrived at the Walla Walla Treaty Council insisting that he, Young Chief, Lawyer, and Kamiakin do all the talking for the tribal participants. He also demanded more than one interpreter, so that "they might know they translated truly." Stevens readily agreed to this demand.

The Council began with speeches by Washington Territory Governor Stevens and Joel Palmer, Oregon Superintendent of Indian Affairs, after which the Indians requested a day to talk amongst themselves. During the next day's council session, PeoPeoMoxMox delivered an angry speech:

I do not know what is straight. I do not see the offer you have made the Indians. I never saw these things which are offered by the Great Father. My heart cried when you first spoke to me. I felt like I was blown away like a feather... Stop the whites from coming here until we can have another talk: let them not bring their oxen with them. The whites may travel in all directions through our country: we will have nothing to say to them, provided they do not build houses on our lands. Now I wish to speak about Lawyer. I think he has given his lands, that is what I think by his words. I request another meeting; it is not in one meeting only that we can come to a decision. If you come again with a friendly message from our Great Father, I shall see you again at this place. Tomorrow I shall see you again and tomorrow evening I shall go home. That is all I have to say.



This map shows three places important in the life of PeoPeoMoxMox- Walla Walla (1), the Willamette Valley (2) and Sacramento (3). Courtesy Washington State Historical Society.

The council continued on for several more days in this vein, with Kamiakin, Young Chief, and PeoPeoMoxMox standing firm in their opposition to the treaty. Something must have changed their minds, however, as all three signed a treaty with Stevens before leaving the council grounds. Stevens called it "a most satisfactory council".

The Yakima War

The *Oregon Weekly Times*, just twelve days after the Walla Walla treaties were signed, ran an inexcusable article that read, in part:

By an express provision of the treaty, the country embraced in these cessions and not included in the reservation is open to settlement, excepting that the Indians are secured in the possession of their buildings and implements till removal to the reservation.

White settlers and miners began pouring into eastern Washington lands guaranteed by treaty to be reserved for Indians. Violence escalated between Indians and whites. Although PeoPeoMoxMox approached the militia forces under the white flag of surrender and peace during this conflict, he was taken hostage and killed.

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