

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

THE WALLA WALLA TREATY COUNCIL MAY, 1855

From 1854 - 1856, Washington Territory Governor Isaac Stevens traveled hundreds of miles across the modern states of Washington and parts of Montana, Oregon and Idaho negotiating ten treaties that would open the territory for future, ongoing settlement of the region by non-Native people. The American drive for occupation of Western land led to the creation of a reservation system established through the treaty councils.

One of the goals of the Reservation system according to Hazard Stevens, the son of Washington Territory Governor, Isaac Stevens, was to "concentrate the Indians upon a few reservations, and encourage them to cultivate the soil and adopt settled and civilized habits".

To cede:

A term meaning to yield or grant, typically by treaty.

News of the western treaties had quickly passed to the eastern Washington tribes, along with sad tales from the nation's interior and East concerning the plight of the tribes in those regions. The Indians were aware that lands had been ceded, but fair compensation and services had not been received from the U.S. Government in return for those lands. They were understandably wary of Stevens and the treaty proceedings.

Although the Nez Perce, traditionally friendly to the whites, readily agreed to attend the Walla Walla Council, the Yakama, Walla Walla, and Cayuse bands were initially very reluctant to participate.

ARRIVAL OF THE TRIBES

On May 24, 1855, the Nez Perce Indians rode towards Isaac Stevens and his



treaty-negotiating delegation (a party of about 35 people) in Walla Walla, Washington. According to Hazard Stevens who accompanied his father on this trip at the age of thirteen:

"Hearing of their approach, the commissioners drew up their little party on a knoll commanding a fine view of the unbroken level of the valley. The standard of the Nez Perce, the large American flag given them by the officers engaged in the Cayuse war, was sent forward and planted on a knoll. Soon their cavalcade came in sight, a thousand warriors mounted on fine horses and riding at a gallop, two abreast... They advanced at a gallop still nearer then halted, while the head chief, Lawyer, and two other chiefs rode slowly forward to the knoll, dismounted and shook hands with the commissioners, and then took post in rear of them. The other chiefs, twenty five in number, then rode forward, and went through the same ceremony."

Stevens anxiously awaited the arrival of the Yakama who it was rumored would refuse to accept any gifts or provisions during the council. On May 27th the Yakama arrived along with some Palouse; the later group's presence was unexpected. Stevens and his fellow commissioners braced themselves for

difficult negotiations with all but the Nez Perce who seemed more willing to negotiate.

THE COUNCIL BEGINS

The council officially convened on May 29th with well over 1,800 Indians present. The Indians obviously well outnumbered Stevens' party. First order of business was to name interpreters. Rain required early adjournment until the next day. The next day Governor Stevens and Joel Palmer, Superintendent of Indian Affairs for Oregon Territory, sat on a bench under an arbor erected for the council ceremonies with official reporters stationed behind them to record the events.

The Indians sat in semicircles facing the governor. Palmer introduced the Governor who spoke for several hours about Indian-white relations. At this point in the proceedings, both Stevens and Palmer doubted whether or not a treaty signing would be possible given the reservations of the Cayuse and Yakama. However, at the ceremonial feast, all the principle leaders joined the white commissioners for a meal.

On June 4th the treaty making entered into a phase of aggressive bargaining. Lawyer, one of the Nez Perce leaders, endorsed the general words spoken by the white commissioners. Timothy added to Lawyer's statements by saying:

While we were assembled here yesterday, we heard that lands were staked off and white men were taking our homes. We tell you that this must stop. The country is still ours and our children's.

The Yakama leaders pressed the commissioners for specifics. Stevens proposed two land reservations - one in Nez Perce country that was to be shared by the Nez Perce, Walla Walla, Umatilla and Cayuse. The other to the south would be reserved for the Yakama, Palouse, and

Klickitats. Only the Nez Perce seemed pleased with the proposal, at least at first.

Then, with the dramatic entrance of the Nez Perce leader, Looking Glass (see portrait on right), who had been hunting buffalo for three years added to the tension. Looking Glass reportedly told the assembled crowd:

My people what have you done? While I was gone, you sold my country.



The chiefs at the Walla Walla Council were firm, businesslike negotiators, sure of their strength and confident in their negotiating skills. When faced with the encroaching pressure from white settlers, they sought to gain the best treaty terms possible. Stevens was forced to make compromises, and the Walla Walla Treaty was signed by all the tribes present.

AFTER THE TREATY

Ultimately, the treaties signed at Walla Walla allowed an influx of settlers and miners. It was anticipated that gold recently discovered near Colville around the time of the Walla Walla council would entice 8,000 miners to the area. With the signed Walla Walla treaty en route to Washington D.C. for ratification or approval, Stevens mistakenly thought that the treaty was a way to create lasting peaceful relations between whites and Indians.

Sources:

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Stevens, Hazard. *Life of Isaac Ingalls Stevens, Volume 1*. 2 vols. Boston: Houghton, Mifflin and Company, 1901.