

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

SPOKAN GARRY 1811-1892



Portrait of Spokan Garry created by Gustav Sohon. The signature on the bottom of the painting is by Garry himself. COURTESY WASHINGTON STATE HISTORICAL SOCIETY.

Spokan Garry, whose original name has been lost in time, was born in 1811. His

father, Illim-Spokanee, was the head of Sma-hoo-men-a-ish. Early traders mistook Illim-Spokanee's name for the name of the tribe, and the Sma-hoo-men-a-ish became known as the Middle Spokanes. Garry grew up around the white traders who built their post near his tribe, so he never feared nor was in awe of either the "King George" men (the British) or the "Bostons" (the Americans). (Portrait of Spokan Garry by Gustav Sohon)

Spokan Garry Goes to School

At the age of fourteen, Garry was selected as one of two boys from the surrounding tribes to be sent to the Red River School at Fort Garry, sponsored by the Hudson's Bay Company and run by the Church Missionary Society of the Church of England. He received the name of Spokan Garry there due to a school custom that renamed boys for their tribe and a well-known and respected person. The students, who numbered an average of sixteen at any one time, were taught English and farming.

Return to the Tribe

After the death of his father in the winter of 1828, Garry made the 1800-mile trip

back to the Spokane River. With the encroachment of the white population on the tribes of the Northwest, the traditional religious beliefs of the tribes had begun to weaken. The tribe readily accepted the Christian teachings brought back by Garry's upon his return, a hybrid form of Christianity that well suited the needs of the native population. The books from the missionaries became known as the "white man's book of heaven" which urged peace between the tribes and the whites.

The Coming of the American Missionaries

When missionaries arrived in the area, the focus shifted from Spokan Garry's teachings to those offered by the religious professionals who, rather than building on the foundation of faith already instilled by Garry, began attacking his interpretation of Christianity.

Unable to compete with the missionaries, Garry gave up his school and public preaching, along with his practice of wearing white man's clothing. He gradually returned to traditional dress and activities, many of which did not meet missionary approval.

Washington Becomes a Territory

Chief Garry, turning 40 in 1851, was a wealthy man, owning a large number of horses and farming a considerable area of land.

On October 17, 1853, Garry was summoned to a meeting with newly-appointed Governor of Washington Territory, Isaac Stevens, who was making his way east to Olympia, the new territorial capital. They carried on a lengthy conversation that evening, in both English and French, and Garry

surprised Stevens with his fluency in both languages. Garry was uncertain of Stevens' intent with regard to the Indians, so remained as noncommittal as possible on the issues. Stevens was somewhat annoyed by his caginess, and wrote in his diary that Garry "is not frank, and I do not understand him."

Stevens and the Treaties

When in May of 1855, the Stevens treaty-making team arrived in the eastern Territory, Garry was invited to attend the council at Walla Walla as an observer. He watched as the chiefs of the Walla Walla, Nez Perce, Cayuse and Yakama Indians reluctantly signed treaties, the implications of which were undoubtedly misunderstood. Spoken Garry's words to the Governor at the Walla Walla Treaty council:

Governor, see the difference there is between these Indians and you. See how everybody is red and you are white. The Indians think they are not poor. What do you think? Do you think they are poor when you look at them that way?

When you look at those red men, you think you have more heart, more sense than those poor Indians. I think the difference between us and you Americans is in the clothing. The blood and body are the same.

Do you think because your mother was white and theirs black that you are higher or better? We are black, yet if we cut ourselves, the blood will be red. So with the whites it is the same.

Now you take those Indians here for Chiefs. Do you think it? If you believe what they say, it is all right. If you take those Indians for men, treat them so now. The Indians are proud, they are not poor. If you talk truth to the Indians, the Indians will do the same to you.

The Later Years

In the years and wars that followed, Garry consistently and steadfastly came out on the side of peace with the whites. His unwillingness to make war often placed him in direct opposition to younger factions within the tribe.

As the white settlers poured into the region in the years following the Civil War, Garry's principal ambition in his later years was to protect himself and his followers from the pressure of white settlement by continually seeking to secure a treaty with the Government and preserve a portion of his country for his tribe. This, he felt, had been promised by Governor Stevens, but from 1859 forward his attempts were rebuffed. In 1887, Garry finally got his treaty, but no reservation.

The following year, while Garry and his family were at a temporary fishing camp, trespassers took possession of his own farm, which he had fenced and cultivated for many years. Endeavoring to regain possession peacefully, Garry maneuvered his way through the legal system. Shortly before his death, a final judgment was made against his claim of ownership and Spoken Garry's home, valued at \$25,000, passed into the hands of another man with no compensation made to Garry or his family.

On January 14, 1892, Spokane Garry died—homeless and penniless, his burial expenses paid out of the Spokane County pauper fund.

Sources:

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