

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

STUDENT READING: BIOGRAPHY OF "CHIEF LAWYER" OR HALLALHOTSOOT



Portrait of "Chief Lawyer" or Hallalhotsoot, portrayed as the Nez Perce leader of the Walla Walla Council by artist Gustav Sohon. Lawyer is pictured here wearing a silk top hat, decorated with ostrich plumes held in place by colored bands.
Courtesy of the Washington State Historical Society.

Hallalhotsoot was the son of a Salish-speaking Flathead woman and Twisted Hair, the Nez Perce man who welcomed and befriended Lewis and Clark in the fall of 1805. His father's positive experiences with the white explorers greatly influenced the boy. He firmly believed that the best prospect for the future of the Nez Perce was through friendship with non-native peoples.

"Lawyer" was a nickname given to Hallalhotsoot by the mountain men of the early 1830s. He was known as "the talker," and his speaking abilities and wisdom enabled him to influence both native and non-native peoples.

The Nez Perce and Christianity

In 1831, six Nez Perce embarked on a journey through the Rocky Mountains to invite Christian teachers to come to the tribes. Two of the party turned back at the mountains, but four proceeded on to St. Louis. The story was reprinted widely

in American newspapers, and set off a frenetic missionary movement to the West, one that changed the course not only of the Nez Perce people, but of the entire Northwest.

What is a missionary?

A **missionary** is a person sent out on a mission; specifically, a person sent out by his or her church to preach, teach and convert, especially those who practice a different religion.

One of these missionaries, Marcus Whitman, hired Lawyer to live at his mission and teach him the Salish and Nez Perce languages. Whitman provided food and clothing to Lawyer's family in return. It was here that Lawyer, once a buffalo hunter, began to adapt to the culture and religion of the white man. Lawyer emerged as a leader of the Nez Perce following the Whitman tragedy on November 29, 1847. He traveled to Salem to meet Joseph Lane, Governor of the Oregon Territory, and requested aid in the capture of the Whitmans' murderers.

The Walla Walla Treaty Council of 1855

Lawyer's friendly attitude toward white culture led Isaac Stevens to select him as the designated leader of the Nez Perce at the Walla Walla Treaty Council of 1855. Lawyer was one of the first chiefs to be sketched by the artist Gustav Sohon at that council, an indication of his importance among non-Native observers. Sohon's inscription describes Lawyer as Head Chief of the Nez Perce Tribe, but some observers believe he only became

the main spokesman after being selected by Isaac Stevens.

"My people, while I was gone, you have sold my country. I have come home, and there is not left me a place on which to pitch my lodge."

- Looking Glass, Nez Perce chief

After the Council

In the years that followed the Walla Walla Council, Lawyer was widely ridiculed by anti-treaty groups within the Nez Perce tribe after the terms of the treaties failed to be honored by the U.S. government. When the promised payments began arriving in the early 1860s, cynical observers would note that they seemed timed to coincide with the government's desire for more land from the Nez Perce. The second treaty, signed by Lawyer in 1863, reduced the area of the tribe's reservation by 90 percent, transferring away the homelands of many Nez Perce bands. This was done without their consent.

Lawyer defended his actions by arguing that resisting white encroachment was useless and that the wise and practical course was to simply adapt to changing circumstances.

Despite his trust that Governor Stevens and the American government had good intentions, Lawyer experienced great disappointment when promises made in the treaties were not honored. In a speech delivered in the goldrush boomtown of Lewiston, Idaho, in 1864, Lawyer spoke eloquently to the failure of the government to live up to its promises:

If [Stevens] had told us that the reservation was to be flooded with white settlers, or that the saw mill was to be used for the exclusive benefit of the Whites, we would never have consented to the treaty. That flour mill and saw mill were pledged to me and my people. All the stipulations of that treaty were pledged to us for our benefit. Nine years

have passed and those stipulations are unfulfilled. [W]e have no church as promised; no schoolhouse as promised; no doctor as promised; no gunsmith as promised; no blacksmith as promised.

Lawyer devoted his life to making peace with the white population and following the terms of the treaties he signed. Nevertheless, in 1870—after holding his post for twenty-five years—he voluntarily stepped down from the leadership of the Nez Perce. His descendants tell the tale of his death on January 3, 1876, in this manner:



On the back of this photograph, possibly taken in 1864, was handwritten the following inscription: "This picture of Lawyer was taken at Walla Walla by Castleman, I think. [signed] E. Evans."

Courtesy of the Washington State Historical Society.

It was Lawyer's custom to fly his American flag from a pole in front of his lodge or house. On the day that he died, knowing that his end was near, he instructed some member to gradually pull

down the flag. The flag would be lowered a bit and then Lawyer, after a time would say: "Pull it down a little more." So the flag

was lowered a little more. This was repeated several times and when the flag touched the ground, Lawyer died.

Sources:

Drury, Clifford M. *Chief Lawyer of the Nez Perce Indians*. Glendale, CA: The Arthur H. Clark Company, 1979.
Josephy, Alvin M. *The Nez Perce Indians and the Opening of the Northwest*. New York: Houghton Mifflin Company, 1997.
Nicandri, David L. *Northwest Chiefs: Gustav Sohon's View of the 1855 Stevens Treaty Councils*. Tacoma: Washington State Historical Society, 1986.