



Sluskin: Yakima Guide to Mount Rainier

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THE SCENE STARTLED THEM. In the late summer of 1915 two federal rangers, Leonard Rosso and Arthur White, had hiked into Yakima Park on Mount Rainier and found about 30 Indians occupying an alpine meadow. According to Rosso and White, the band was "ek[e]ing out an existence in the manner of their kind before the coming of the white man." In other words, hunting. The Indians were members of the Yakima tribe, and they called the meadow *Me~yah~ah Pah*, Place of the Chief. The Yakimas had met there for generations to race horses, hunt, gather food and conduct ceremonies. *Me~yah~ah Pah* was a native summer encampment similar to southern camps on *Klickitat* or *Pah To* (Mount Adams).

Above this alpine meadow Mount Rainier rose nearly another 10,000 feet to dominate the Puget Sound country skyline. Indians west and east of the Cascade range had given the mountain different names, but the most common one was *Tahoma*, or *White Mountain* - a Yakima word. The tribe's winter villages were located southeast of the peak. With the onset of summer and the melting of snow in the high meadows, the Yakimas, *Klickitats* and other Columbia Plateau tribes would return to *Me~yah~ah Pah*. Their hunters approached the montane parks through an ancient forest in the *Ohanapecosh* valley. At 4,500 feet the conifers began to thin and a lush green carpet appeared. If an Indian walked past *Me~yah~ah Pah* toward Mount Rainier, he would cross *Burroughs Mountain* to *St. Elmo's Pass*, a divide between the *Winthrop Glacier* to the west and *Emmons Glacier* to the east. In this spectacular mountain scene Len Rosso and Art White had discovered the hunters. The two rangers informed the Indians about federal regulations forbidding the killing of game. Using a Yakima woman interpreter, Rosso and White discussed the situation with the Indian leader, an elderly chief named *Sluskin*. *Sluskin* showed the two officials a copy of the *Walla Walla Treaty* that his nation had signed in 1855, 60 years earlier and 45 years before *Rainier* became a national park. *Sluskin* insisted that although his people had surrendered much of their home land by signing the treaty, they still reserved access to traditional hunting, fishing, and gathering areas such as *Yakima Park*, *Me~yah~ah Pah*. Uncertain how to respond, the rangers left the meadow, content to merely report their encounter.

Indians Defy Park Hunting Regulations," exclaimed an article in the *Tacoma Ledger* on September 10, 1915. The report described a "recent incident" on the eastern flank of Mount Rainier involving *Sluskin*, the guide for *Stevens* and *Van Trump's* 1870 first ascent of the mountain. The Indian guide of that famous climb, the paper reported, had been hunting illegally in a national park. The news provoked considerable interest. On September 19 the *Ledger* printed another story. "He's *Sluskin*, The Old Chief Who Guided *Stevens* and *Van Trump* in Historic Climb." This account was written by two Yakima residents, *A. J. Splawn*, former mayor of North Yakima, and *Lucullus V. McWhorter*, rancher and writer. Following this, on the front page of the Sunday October 24 edition, another headline read "*Sluskin Tells Own Story of the First Ascent.*" The articles

in the 1915 Ledger were not the first to appear concerning climbs of Rainier. Since August Kautz's "Ascent of Mount Rainier" appeared in the *Overland Monthly* (1876) and Hazard Stevens' "The Ascent of Takhoma" was published in the *Atlantic Monthly* (1876), a number of articles about climbing on the mountain had captured public interest. In 1885 J. Warner Fobes wrote of his 1884 climb "To the Summit of Tacoma" in the *West Shore*. George Bayley in the *Overland Monthly* (1886) added to the mountain's literature with "Ascent of Mount Tacoma," recounting his party's climb in October 1870. In 1890 Fay Fuller, journalist, social activist and mountaineer, became the first woman to climb Mount Rainier. Fuller wrote of her success in 1890 and later claimed that she refused assistance from men at difficult spots because "if she could not achieve the goal without their help she would not deserve to reach it."

Often overlooked in this and subsequent literature on Mount Rainier was the important part Indians had performed for early climbs and expeditions. Almost all early explorations were led by native guides. Although mentioned in many of these early reports, the Indian importance to these expeditions was often belittled. To neglect Indian guides in Northwest mountaineering history is equivalent to ignoring Sherpas in the history of Himalayan climbing.

All but one of the pre-1870 attempts on Mount Rainier were led by Indians. Paul Schullery gathered these early accounts in *Island in the Sky: Pioneering Accounts of Mt. Rainier, 1833-1894* (1987). Dr. William Fraser Tolmie, in 1833 the first European to attempt an ascent of the mountain, started from his Hudson's Bay Company post with four Nisqually Indians: Lachalet, his nephew Lashima, Quilniash, and an unnamed relative whom Tolmie called "a very active strong fellow." Nuckalkut, a Puyallup Indian Tolmie believed to be a native of the Mount Rainier area, was also along. The guides and Tolmie followed the Mowich River into the present park and climbed Mount Pleasant, a 6,400-foot ridge northwest of the mountain.

The next known attempt took place in 1852 and involved Robert Bailey, Sidney Ford, John Edgar, and perhaps Benjamin Shaw. This expedition began on the Nisqually River lowlands and ended unsuccessfully at approximately 14,000 feet. The Bailey group's ascent was the only early recorded Rainier climb to make no mention of Indian guides. Five years later Lieutenant August v. Kautz, an American army officer stationed at Fort Steilacoom, again reached the 14,000-foot level. Chief Leschi, the Nisqually leader awaiting execution in the stockade at Fort Steilacoom, had volunteered to help. When denied, Leschi recommended that Kautz use the Nisqually River route and employ Wah-pow-e-ty as a guide. Thirteen years later, Hazard Stevens and P. B. Van Trump made what came to be considered the first successful summit ascent of Mount Rainier.

The 1870 Stevens expedition was led to the snow line by a Yakima Indian named Sluskin who told the whites that his Yakima grandfather had once climbed high on the mountain but turned back due to danger. In October of the same year, following the Stevens and Van Trump climb, pioneer settler James Longmire led Samuel Evans and A. D. Wilson on a successful ascent of the mountain. No Indians joined this climb. There was no other party on the summit until 1883. Longmire returned to the mountain with George Bayley, P. B. Van Trump, W. C. Ewing, and a Klickitat known as Indian Henry. Sotolick, or Indian Henry, traveled part way with the group before returning home. He led the climbers on a shorter route to the moraine of the Nisqually Glacier. During this expedition Indian Henry engineered a trail leading to Paradise Valley, once again shortening the approach to the mountain. In the same period Allison Brown and a group of Yakima Indians nearly climbed the peak. Noting in his account a large Yakima hunting party, Brown's story reveals Yakima familiarity with the eastern slopes of the mountain and surrounding foothills.

In 1915 came the *Ledger* story, complete with Asahel Curtis photographs. The reporter, Soester Anthon, quoted Sluskin as saying he had been the guide for the "Stevens Boy and Boston Man [American]." The article described the route to the glacier and the summit. Anthon quoted McWhorter's claim that Sluskin had guided Stevens and Van Trump to the "White Mountain" many years ago. Some doubted that the elderly man caught hunting in 1915 was the same Sluskin who had guided Hazard Stevens. An editorial in the

Tacoma Daily News, October 25, 1915, cited an earlier article in the *Yakima Republic*. The Tacoma editor compared Sluskin's recent story with Stevens and Van Trump's account, pointed out several inconsistencies, and implied that Sluskin had lied. In 1915 Sluskin recalled leading two white men to the mountain amid abundant game and excellent hunting. His supposed route had followed the Tieton Valley, then went up the Bumping River and across the Cascade crest to the White River drainage. Sluskin claimed he had led the climbers around to the south slopes of Rainier. Having no luck with that route, he returned north to ascend Emmons Glacier via the Winthrop.

Stevens' and Van Trump's accounts differ strikingly from this. They include four men, not two, in their party when they met the Indian guide. Lack of game became a serious problem, with Sluskin killing only a grouse and four marmots for food. The Stevens account comes nowhere near the Tieton Basin, the Bumping River, or the White River, but instead approaches Rainier from the west, up the Nisqually. They then left the river to cross the Tatoosh range and reached the base of the peak above Paradise Valley.

Once on the summit, Stevens could observe how circuitous his route had been and how much easier a return all the way down the Nisqually drainage would be. His Indian guide's reasons for the deception seemed obvious to Stevens: "As long as they keep within the limits already known and explored, they are faithful and indefatigable guides, but they invariably interpose every obstacle their ingenuity can suggest to deter the adventurous mountaineer from exposing the few last hidden recesses that remain unexplored." The Yakimas, one might conclude, had learned from bitter experience. This controversy in 1915 brought forth David Longmire, son of James Longmire, a member of the Stevens party. David Longmire wrote to the Tacoma paper that he knew three different Sluskins: The 1870 guide who had drowned at the turn of the century; a Sluskin apprehended by rangers in the park; and a third Sluskin, hanged in 1878 for involvement in the 1878 murders of Lorenzo Perkins and his wife at Rattlesnake Springs, Yakima County. Longmire's theory of three Sluskins spurred L. V. McWhorter in Yakima to further investigation. Using two different interpreters, he conducted a series of four interviews with Sluskin the hunter in Sahaptian, the Yakima native tongue. McWhorter hoped to set the record straight and uncover the true story of Rainier's first ascent. The results were surprising.

"I am thinking of my people," Sluskin now told McWhorter, "the old people who are no more" and of this country which once belonged to us. I was raised here since the sun was created, and I do not want to speak a lie. You white people, you big men, I know what you are thinking, but you ought to listen to me. You were lucky to come here, but I am sorry for the way you have treated us. You now have all but a little of our land. I wanted everything straight. Governor Stevens was to settle all the troubles, and for this, he called the big Indians to Walla Walla in council. I was there as a boy to care for the horses of Chief Owhi. After the treaty Governor Stevens finished the work [arrangements] and in about four years we were to go on the reservation.

"One or two years after this," the chief continued, "two 'King George Men' [Britons] came into Yakima's country. They wanted to know who could go to Tahoma, the 'White Mountain.' [They said,] 'We are Stevens' boys. We came up the river from Walla Walla, and are looking for reservation line made at treaty.'"

By the time McWhorter's "Chief Sluskin's True Narrative" had appeared in newspapers and in the *Washington Historical Quarterly* (1917), the public had little interest in the hunting incident. That Sluskin might have led the first successful climbers to the base of the Winthrop Glacier in 1857 failed to excite the Puget Sound community.

Lucullus McWhorter, however, did not lose interest in the chief or the Yakima role in Rainier history. He continued to meet with Sluskin, becoming a close friend of the hunter, mountain guide, orator, and leader of Indian people. For two years prior to Sluskin's death in December 1917, McWhorter collected the chief's

speeches and enough information to write a biography. He also attended Sluskin's funeral and recorded the traditional ceremony.

Until his own death McWhorter spoke out on behalf of the Yakimas, especially for their water rights. He disagreed with the park service over place names, including that of the mountain. When this emotional issue surfaced in Seattle and Tacoma, McWhorter petitioned for the Indian name "Tahoma" to replace Rainier.

In the 1930s, as the park service commercially developed Yakima Park for the motoring public, the possibility of renaming the area arose. Booster forces from Puget Sound, including the influential Asahel Curtis, lobbied for "Sunrise." The Yakima Chamber of Commerce and eastern Washington insisted on retaining the customary name, "Yakima Park." McWhorter pushed for an Indian name, either *Me-yah-ah Pah* or "Owhi's Meadow" in honor of the Yakima chief murdered during the Indian War. (Sluskin claimed that the grizzly bear claw he wore around his neck was taken from Owhi's body at the time of the warrior's brutal death at the hands of one of Colonel George Wright's soldiers.)

McWhorter's argument for an Indian name, based on historical evidence and the use of Blackfeet place names in Glacier National Park, fell on deaf ears, as did his argument that Sluskin had guided Rainier's first ascent in the 1850s. In an attempt to please both western and eastern Washington, the park service called the tourist development Sunrise while retaining Yakima Park on its maps. These disputes over Rainier's place names and first ascent, though interesting, remain of minor public concern. The crucial matter today is that in 1915 Sluskin possessed a copy of the 1855 Walla Walla treaty while hunting in a national park. Sluskin knew that for Yakima Indians the 1855 treaty reserved "the privilege of hunting, gathering roots and berries and pasturing their horses and cattle upon open and unclaimed land."

Sixty-six years after Sluskin met two rangers while hunting in Yakima Park, a similar incident occurred 100 miles to the west. In March 1982 two Quinault Indians were arrested for poaching elk in Olympic National Park. Gregory Hicks and Steven Shale carried no treaty with them at the time of their arrest, but they would use the 1855 Quinault treaty in their defense. It contained the same language as the Yakima treaty concerning hunting and gathering rights on open and un- claimed lands. Although Judge Walter McGovern eventually reversed his initial decision in favor of the Quinaults, many northwest Indians today contend that the issue remains unsettled.

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