

THE PLACE OF THE SUNFLOWERS

The Walla Walla Valley is known by the Cayuse and Walla Walla people of this land as *Pásxapa*. This translates in the native language to 'the place of the balsam root sunflower'. *Pásxapa* was a place where the Walla Walla River and its smaller streams ran wild and horses grazed freely in a warmer climate than in the surrounding environs. The name reflects the convention for naming places in the native languages after the natural resource found there. At this time of year in particular, the arrowleaf balsamroot sunflower, called *pásxa*, is visible in abundance throughout the land.

Before, Marcus Whitman encountered the Cayuse village that came to be known as Waiilatpu, before Fort Nez Perce and later Fort Walla Walla and the ensuing fur trade were established at Wallula Junction, before the mixed marriage community of trappers, traders and women and children of Walla Walla descent arose as Frenchtown, before the Treaty Council of 1855 was convened and signed in the Walla Walla Valley and the heart-wrenching Battle of Walla Walla took place just six months later, this Ice Age flood-shaped land was home to family bands and villages tied to this area for millennia.

During the earliest encounters with non-Indians, from the Columbia River to the eastern reaches of the Walla Walla Valley, Indians of this valley negotiated with non-Indians in the region. Prominent tribal leaders such as



Piupiumaksmaks, painted in 1847 by Paul Kane (from Stern 1993)

Tamatapam, Hiyuuntipin, and Peopeomoxmox (or Piupiumaksmaks), and many others assisted these new people, following in the footsteps of "Yellept," who encountered Lewis and Clark, welcoming them inbound and assisting them outbound. Tamatapam, was instrumental in establishing a fur trade for his people. When movement of the Hudson Bay Fort across the Columbia River to what is now Washington State was proposed, it was not permitted by the headmen of that time. Hiyuuntipin was the headman of the people of *Weyúlet*, and it was with his permission that the Whitman Party created their mission there. It was agreed that in exchange for the right to establish the mission on Cayuse soil, the missionary promised that annual presents would be made to Hiyuuntipin's band. However, these gifts were not forthcoming, according to the Indian people.

In his journal of the 1855 Treaty Council, Colonel (then Lieutenant) Lawrence Kipp gave figures for the Indians present, estimating a total of 5,000 Indians gathered, Cayuse and Walla Walla among them. In contrast, at that time, there were fewer than a dozen Americans as yet dwelling in the Walla Walla Valley. Peopeomoxmox, Walla Walla headman and son of Tamatapam, was at the Treaty of 1855. Yet, soon after, these newfound rights within the Walla Walla Valley were challenged and the Battle of Walla Walla ensued. Peopeomoxmox began a truce process to end the bloodshed but was captured and brutally slain while a prisoner of war.

Farming at Waiilatpu (source, *Chiefs and Chief Traders*, Stern 1993)

A stable farming community of Cayuses sprang up neighboring the mission. They came, not only because of the advantages of the soil, but because from nearby Waiilatpu, the missionaries could watch their ripening crops while they were away, lest fellow-tribesmen steal them. Evidently, crops in the ground at that time had not yet clearly acquired the status of property. Since the Cayuse had fitted their planting and harvesting into their native rounds, and were gone during the intervening months, congregations at services peaked during spring planting and at harvest time in late summer.

By 1843, Cayuses were farming some sixty tracts; they had fenced their fields, probably with poles and rails, in areas ranging from a quarter of an acre to three acres, planted wheat, corn, peas, and potatoes. They acquired above all, cattle, but also hogs and hens, and some sheep as well. In 1842, several went down to the Willamette to trade horses for cattle. Two years later, Narcissa Whitman reported that some were going out eastward along the Oregon Trail as far as Fort Hall, to trade their "cayuses" (Cayuse horses) for emigrant cattle.



The Walla Walla Valley looking towards the Blue Mountain foothills

Marcus Whitman recognized that the Cayuse were already predisposed in their *Waašat* (seven drum religion) observances to a ritual in which the tribal religious leader served as principal officiant. The role that Whitman took in Christian services displaced that native role and ultimately, the Cayuse chiefs found themselves overshadowed.

Of particular weight in the Cayuses assessment of Marcus Whitman was his practice of medicine, a curer to be sure, but also a potential sorcerer. Such fears emerged in the first year of the mission and they were to dog him through the remaining years. Indian suspicions were kept alive by such practices as setting out poisoned meat for wolves and injecting emetics (which induce vomiting) into melons to deter thieves.

It might be said that the eventual attack upon Waiilatpu (Whitman Mission) was predetermined, as there were multiple aggravations. Yet the final desperate stroke came after a decade of accommodation. It was driven by the overwhelming sense of hopelessness in the face of the crushing flow of overland migrations, capped by an epidemic disease and the interpretation that linked Marcus Whitman as agent to both.



Pásxa (balsamroot sunflower) in bloom near Waliúla

The Walla Walla Valley - the Heart of the Country

The Walla Walla people sheltered along the Columbia River in winter and moved, along with the Cayuse people, up streams that flowed from the Blue Mountains for spring root digging. In late summer, they returned to the permanent village of *Waliúla* 'Wallula' to receive bands of Nez Perce,

This photo shows the mouth of the Walla Walla River at Wallula Junction prior to the construction of McNary Dam.



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who joined them for intertribal gatherings. The northwest corner of the Blue Mountains gives rise to a series of streams that eventually join to form the Walla Walla River. One of these streams, the Touchet River, comes from the native name, *Túushi*, and refers to the baking of salmon on sticks over coals or fire, yet the name has been largely misunderstood as derived from the French.

As tribal place name information clarifies, the name is a rendering of the Walla Walla or Northeast Sahaptin phrase, *tuushi* 'of baking salmon'. This name does not refer to a place where Indian people baked salmon, but to the Myth Time story of Coyote destroying the Swallow Sisters' dam. In this story, Coyote breaks up the dam, creating Celilo Falls and releasing the salmon trapped below, so they may feed the people upstream. Coyote then travels upriver with the returning salmon, catching a few and roasting them, but he is enchanted by Fox and Wolf before he can enjoy his repast. While Coyote sleeps, Fox and Wolf eat the salmon, then smear Coyote's muzzle with salmon oil so that when he awakes, he thinks he must have eaten all the fish, despite the rumblings in his empty stomach. This place commemorates the mythic event and helps track Coyote on his travels.

Among the many, here are a few more native place names in the valley: *Walawála* 'many small streams'. The Walla Walla River and its tributaries, such as Mill Creek in Walla Walla, Washington. The name refers to the Walla Walla Valley, which is bisected by numerous streams. The village situated in this valley was called *Pásxapa*, 'place of the balsamroot sunflower'. The name was pronounced *Waliúla* in Northeast Sahaptin.

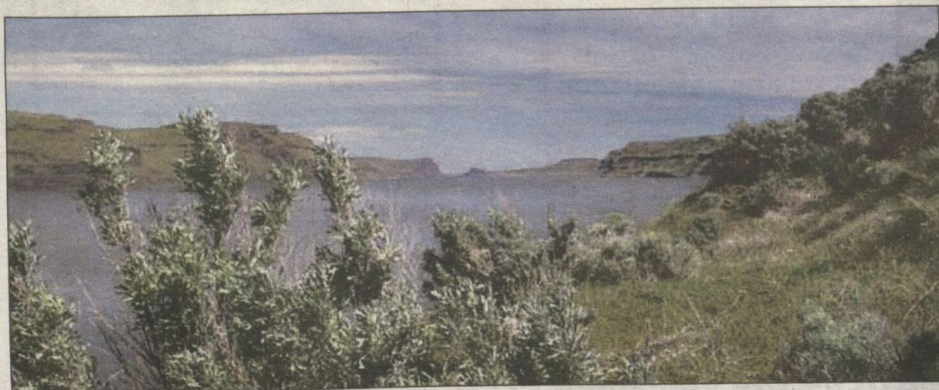
Pásxa 'balsamroot sunflower'. The area of Walla Walla, Washington, the middle Walla Walla River, and Mill Creek. Contrary to popular belief, native people did not call this area Walla Walla.

The local Cayuse band was better known as the *Pásxapu* 'sunflower people', after a place a bit up-stream of the Whitman mission between the Walla Walla River and Mill Creek, so named for the balsamroot sunflower. The Nez Perce call the Cayuse people *Weyúletpu* 'people of the waving grass', and the comparable Sahaptin term is *Wáylatpam*.

Weyúlet 'place of waving grass'. Near Whitman Mission historical park, within the city limits of Walla Walla, Washington. This name has often been interpreted to mean 'place of rye grass' but names for rye grass in Sahaptin or Cayuse Nez Perce bear no resemblance to this term. It has also been interpreted by an elder as 'place of waving grass'. On June 6, 1806, William Clark recorded the name of a band of people visiting the Nez Perce as "*Ye-E-al-po*...who reside to the South of the entrance of Kooskooske into Lewis's river," indicating the mouth of the Tucannon River at the Snake River. On June 8, 1806, Meriwether Lewis noted two men of the "*Y-e-let-pos*" band among the Nez Perce visitors that day. Subsequent to the exploration period, the term *Weyúletpu* has been applied generically to refer to all Cayuse people. The origin of this term may be Old Cayuse "Wilet." The Sahaptin cognate is *Wáylatpam*.

There is much to tell of this valley. The national stories of the Ice Age Trail, the Lewis and Clark Trail, the Whitman Mission and the Oregon Trail all contribute to the written history that has become synonymous with this valley today. A much older story, a story of what shaped the land and how the land shaped the culture of a people, is the larger history the Tribes prefer to tell.

- Submitted by *Támastslíkt Cultural Institute*, the interpretive center on the *Umatilla Indian Reservation*



Looking north towards *Waliúla* along *Nét Wána*, the Columbia River

(Images from *Čaw Pawá Láakni*, 2015)

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