

INTRODUCTION

The Snake River runs its course swiftly across present-day Washington, from its confluence with the Clearwater to its junction with the Columbia River. Over the years, the Snake cut a spectacular canyon, exposing the black basalt left by a large lava flow that covered the Inland Northwest.¹ In recent geological time the rocky shores of the river and its tributaries provided shelter from inclement weather from the Plateau above and a home for a group of American Indians known as the Palouses.² The various bands of Palouse Indians had much in common with one another and with their neighbors, the Nez Perces, Wanapums, Walla Wallas, Yakimas, and others who possessed a common language known as Sahaptin. Palouse Indian life was intimately tied to the rivers, mountains, and plateaus of the region. The earth provided them with every necessity of life, including nutritious roots, berries, game, and fish.³ But their life and environment would change radically and rapidly after the arrival of the first whites.

When Meriwether Lewis and William Clark canoed down the Snake River in 1805, they misidentified the Palouse Indians who lived between Alpowa Creek and the Snake's confluence with the Columbia.⁴ They believed that the Nez Perces inhabited this vast region, and their error has been repeated many times since. Explorers and trappers, soldiers and surveyors made the same mistake. Scholars continued to publish the error in their studies, and much confusion has resulted.⁵ The Palouse Indians, not the Nez Perces, lived along this portion of the Snake River, sometimes sharing their villages with the Nez Perces, Walla Wallas, and Wanapums. The Palouses claimed this vast domain drained by the Snake River and characterized by rolling hills, steep canyons, and arid plateaus. This is a study of the Palouse Indians and their relationship with whites and other Indians of the Columbia Plateau.

Palouse Indian history cannot be separated from that of other Plateau Indians, because of the intimate relationship between the Palouses, other Sahaptin-speaking Indians, and the interior Salish-speaking peoples of the Plateau. All of these people shared a common heritage to some extent, and all were influenced by the flow of historical events after the arrival of whites.⁶ The Palouses shared a common language with the Nez Perces, Yakimas, Wanapums, and others. But just as these Indians considered themselves separate peoples, so too did the Palouses consider themselves a distinct group. White observers and scholars typically think of Indians in terms of tribes that function as unified political units. The Palouses and other Plateau Indians did not fit into such convenient molds, for they lived, worked, fought, and married each other in a fluid social world. Each was distinct with their own dialect and "tribal" identity, but they moved freely in and out of the other tribes. Thus, a person considered a Yakima Indian for over fifty years could move to the Palouse Country where the people would consider that person a Palouse Indian, particularly if that person had one or more parents