

ORIGIN AND MEANING OF THE GEOGRAPHIC NAME PALOUSE

In eastern Washington and western Idaho, north of the Snake and Clearwater Rivers, lies an agricultural region known as the Palouse country. The name Palouse (pronounced Pah-loose) is given also to a river and its branches traversing the region and to a town in Whitman County, Washington.

Different derivations of this geographic name have been given. Durham¹ says: "For a grassy expanse, the French have the word *pelouse*; and, a century ago, when French-Canadian *voyageurs* of the fur companies beheld in springtime the wide tumult of bunch-grass hills north of Snake River, they called it the *pelouse* country—the grass lands—and with a slight alteration in spelling, the Palouse country it remains today; and the Palouse country it will be forevermore."

Plausible as this explanation seems to be, the documentary evidence indicates that through contraction and variation, the present name has come from the name of the Indian tribe occupying the region at the time of the advent of the first white explorers. These people, the Palloatapallahs, close relatives of the Nez Perces, both of the Sahaptin linguistic family, were first encountered by Lewis and Clark² on the Clearwater (Kooskooskee). They are frequently referred to by later writers as occupying the valley of the Palouse River and the north bank of the Snake to the Columbia.³

The untrammelled orthography of the early explorers, who spelled the names as they sounded to them, resulted in numerous variants of the one under discussion.⁴ Lewis and Clark called this tribe *Pelloat pallahs*, *Pallotepellows* and *Pel-late-pal-ler*. Various editions of their journals give: *Palloatapallah*, *Pallotepallers*, *Pal-lotepallors*, *Pelloatapallah*, *Pel-lote-pal-ler*, *Selloat-pallahs* (map). *Pallatapalla* is used by Irving,⁵ and Lee and Frost.⁶ Other forms are *Pallet-to Pallas*⁷ and *Pollotepallors*.⁸

From 1835 to 1866 appeared numerous abbreviations of the tribal name. Two variants are *Polanches* and *Polonches*.⁹ Parker¹⁰

1 N. W. Durham, *Spokane and the Inland Empire*, vol. I, 629 (see also p. 53).

2 *History of the Lewis and Clark Expedition*, Coues ed., vol. III, 1070, 1246.

3 F. W. Hodge, *Handbook of American Indians North of Mexico*, pt. 2, 195.

4 *Loc. cit.*

5 Washington Irving, *Astoria*, Knickerbocker edition, vol. 2, 262.

6 D. Lee and J. H. Frost, *Ten Years in Oregon*, 51.

7 Ross, *Fur Hunters*, vol. I, 185.

8 Janson, *Strangers in America*, 233.

9 Hodge, *Handbook*, pt. 2.

10 Rev. Samuel Parker, *Journal*, 3rd ed., 289, 310.

describes the *Paloose* Indians as a band of the Nez Perces. *Paloos*, *Pelooses* and *Pelus* are cited by Powell¹¹ in a classification of the Sahaptin family. Lane¹² refers to the tribe as *Paloas* and again as *Palvas*.¹³ Mooney¹⁴ locates and describes the tribe as *Pä lus*. Other spellings reported by Hodge in his Handbook are: *Palooche*, *Pelouches* and *Pelouze*. Frequent references in the Pacific Railroad Reports¹⁵ rather consistently use *Peluse* although James Doty (p. 563) spells the name *Pelouse*.

The present spelling apparently first appears in the treaty¹⁶ with the Yakima made at Camp Stevens, June 9, 1855. This seems to have been regarded as a new form of the name for in the index to the Senate document a cross reference is made to *Paloos*. Parenthetically, it may be remarked that the Palouses refused to accept the treaty or to move from their lands on the Palouse and the Snake. The few survivors of the tribe are now widely scattered.

Although subsequently there were occasional variations, the form used in the treaty became well established. In the official report on his engagement with the Indians in 1858, Colonel Steptoe refers to the *Pelouses*.¹⁷ Father Joset,¹⁸ writing of the same event, spelled the name with an *a*. Colonel Wright¹⁹ used this spelling also but Mullan and Kip²⁰ wrote *Pelouses*.

The river upon which the Palouses lived has had a series of designations, the variations of the Indian appellation being interspersed with English and French names.²¹ Lewis and Clark²² in 1805 called it *Drewyer's* River for George Drewyer, one of their hunters. It was later called *Pavillion* River, or *Pavilion*, as it appears on Parker's map (1838). According to Irving²³ the Canadians of the Astor party called it the *Pavion*. In another place, Irving²⁴ speaks of "two Indians. . . of the Pallatapalla tribe, who live upon a river of the same name," which may or may not be a reference to the *Pavion*. *Flag* River was used by Work²⁵ of the Hudson's Bay Company (1825). The Wilkes Expedition Narrative²⁶ refers to the

11 J. W. Powell, Bureau of Ethnology, *Seventh Annual Report*, 106, 107.

12 *Senate Ex. Doc.*, 52, 31st Congress, 1st Session, 171.

13 *Ind. Aff. Rep.*, 159 (1850).

14 James Mooney, *Fourteenth Report B.A.E.*, 735.

15 *Senate Ex. Doc.* No. 78, 33rd Congress, 2nd Session.

16 *Sen. Doc.* 319, 58th Congress, 2nd Session, vol. II, 698.

17 N. W. Durham, *Spokane and the Inland Empire*, vol. I, 225.

18 *Ibid.*, 231.

19 *Ibid.*, 263.

20 *Ibid.*, 259.

21 Edmond S. Meany, *This Quarterly*, vol. XII, 66-67 (1921).

22 *History of the Expedition*, Coues ed., vol. II, 630.

23 *Astoria*, vol. II, 258, 280.

24 *Ibid.*, 262.

25 *This Quarterly*, (Jour. Ed. by T. C. Elliott), vol. V, 88.

26 *Ibid.*, vol. 12, 66-67.

Peluse River. In the Stevens treaties²⁷ with the Yakima and the Nez Percé, the boundaries defined include the *Palouse* River.

Varying interpretations of the meaning of the original tribal name have been given. Mooney²⁸ says that the Indians "can not explain the meaning." Coues,²⁹ referring to *Paloos* as the name of the tribe, derives it from a Chehalis word meaning, "slough covered with trees." Hodge's *Handbook*,³⁰ quoting Boas, ascribes this meaning to *Palux*, the name of a Chinook tribe on the Palux River, Pacific County, Washington. Although *Palouse* and *Palux* are similar in sound, there seems to be no evidence that in early days these two widely separated tribes had any communication with each other or that the two names are in any sense related.

The original tribal name of the Palouses, according to Jermark,³¹ means "people living in the gooseberry valley." The first half of the compound word in the various forms given in foregoing paragraphs is the descriptive part while the second half means "people of." Other forms³² of the second part are "pah-loo" and "poo," as in *Pal-loats-poo*.

Based on material presented in this paper, the conclusion is that the present geographic name is clearly a modification of the Indian tribal name. Examining the original word it is not difficult to conceive that the present form might have had its genesis in either the first half or the second. Using the Nez Percé meaning, as given by Jermark, however, it is logical to assume that the parent word is *Palloats*, the descriptive term given by the Indians to the region. This word, when combined with the suffix, designated the people who made the Palouse country their abode.

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27 *Sen. Doc.* 319, 58th Congress, 2nd Session, vol. II, 698, 702.

28 Bureau of Ethnology, *Fourteenth Annual Report*, 735.

29 *History of the Lewis and Clark Expedition*, vol. III, 1070 (footnote).

30 Pt. 2, 195.

31 E. W. Jermark, Superintendent Fort Lapwai Indian Agency, Lapwai, Idaho, private communication.

32 *Ibid.*