

EGAN OF THE PIUTES

"News from the Indian country produces great excitement and stir here. At four o'clock every available man was under orders to move. At 8:30 tonight Major J. A. Kress left on the steamboat *Welcome* with 25 men, one Gatling gun and howitzer, having volunteered to serve as river patrol."

This quotation from a dispatch dated at Vancouver, Washington, July 5, 1878, and appearing the following day in *The Oregon State Journal* of "Eugene City," indicates the apprehension which prevailed in various parts of the Pacific Northwest during the Bannock-Piute War.

Chief Egan was writing in letters of fire and blood the concluding chapter of his life history. With a formidable force of Bannocks and Piutes, he was moving rapidly northward across Eastern Oregon toward a possible coalition with other members of his race encamped approximately sixty miles south of the Umatilla Indian Reservation.

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According to General O. O. Howard, Egan himself was neither Bannock nor Piute, but a Cayuse born.¹ Captured as a child by Shoshone raiders, he had found a home among the Paviotso, commonly known as Piutes, Paiutes, or Pah Utes.² Thus, through the fortunes of primitive warfare, Egan, as the whites styled Egegante,³ left the region now constituting Northeastern Oregon and Southeastern Washington to dwell in the neighborhood of Pyramid Lake in the present state of Nevada.

As a boy, Egan may have seen John C. Fremont when the first Chief Winnemucca and eleven picked men of the Paviotso—or Piutes—enlisted as scouts under the "great Pathfinder." This meeting between Fremont and Chief Winnemucca took place where the Union Pacific Railroad now crosses the Truckee River at Wadsworth, Nevada.⁴

Winnemucca, christened "Captain Truckee" ("All Right") by his white friends, saw service in the Mexican War and thenceforth followed the white man's way. A son of "Captain Truckee" then became principal chief, under the name of Winnemucca II.⁵

¹ Howard, O. O. *Famous Indian Chiefs I Have Known*, 259-260.

² *Bureau of American Ethnology, Bulletin No. 30, Part II*, 186-187.

³ Howard, cited before, 259-260.

⁴ Hopkins, Sarah Winnemucca: *Life Among the Piutes: Their Wrongs and Claims*, 9-10.

⁵ Same.

As for Egan, he married a sister of Shenkah, chief of one of the Piute bands, and became chief of another band.

When Chief Shenkah was mortally wounded in a battle with the whites, his daughter Mattie was adopted by Egan. Mattie tells of her adoption thus:

"My father had been hurt in battle. . . . He was lying down on the ground, and he took me and pressed me tenderly in his arms. . . . Chief Egan, my uncle, was kneeling by my father's side and bending over us with tears in his eyes. At last my dear father spoke and said: 'Egan, my brother, the Great Spirit calls me away—I must go. I cannot take my child with me. . . . My brother, I leave her with you to be her father!' My uncle, Chief Egan, . . . laid his hand very gently on my head. . . ."⁶

The Piute War of 1860, in which Chief Shenkah appears to have lost his life, is said to have been caused by the mistreatment of two little Piute girls on the part of two white men. The fathers of the girls, finding them in a cabin bound with cords, became so enraged that later they killed the two white men responsible for this mistreatment. This was interpreted as an "outbreak," and the Piutes suffered the white man's vengeance.⁷

Following this disturbance, the Piutes were placed on the Pyramid Lake Reservation. Congress then appropriated a sum with which to build a saw-mill and a grist-mill for the Indians at Pyramid Lake. The Piutes, however, received no benefit from the appropriation.⁸

Some time after the Piutes had been placed on the Pyramid Lake Reservation, they were accused of cattle-stealing near Harney Lake. As a retaliatory measure, soldiers from Camp Harney attacked one of the Piute camps. A number of Indians were killed, mostly old men, women, and children. The soldiers, during this massacre, are said to have thrown living children into the flames. Sarah Winnemucca, daughter of Winnemucca II, records the loss of her baby brother that terrible day.⁹

Little by little white settlers encroached upon the Piute lands. Finally, even the lakes from which Egan's people took fish were claimed by the whites. During the 1860's the Piutes were confronted by conditions similar to those described by Bancroft as affecting the Shoshones and Bannocks:

6 Howard, cited before, 240-241.

7 Hopkins, cited before, 70-72.

8 Same, 76.

9 Same, 77-78.

"The natives had no alternative but to steal or starve; the white man was in possession of their pastures, game was rapidly disappearing, in the depth of winter they were starving and almost unclad."¹⁰

When it was proposed that the Piutes be transferred to a reservation in Southeastern Oregon, Egan counseled his followers thus:

"The white men are taking away from us all our land here in Nevada. They are driving off all our ponies. The war-chief of the Piutes was angry, and he had already taken the war-path. He, Chief Shenkah, was my brother, as you know. He did not succeed. . . . We see very plainly that the red men cannot fight the white men. . . . And now the white men say *Peace*. They say take a home in Malheur, Oregon. . . . I now say this is good—let us go. Egan is done."¹¹

The Piutes went to the Malheur Agency about the year 1870 and almost immediately began to show commendable industry. Under the enlightened leadership of their agent, Major Sam Parrish, the Piutes made rapid advancement. General Howard, writing of his visit to the Malheur Agency in 1876, says:

"Early the next morning I visited the agent's office and had an interview with Chief Egan . . . and several leading Indians. I noticed then how superior Egan was to the others. He had on an ordinary farmer's suit of light linen duck, with a leather belt around his waist, a sheath holding a sheath-knife by his side. He wore a straw hat that he removed when he spoke to me. . . . His hair, parted in the middle, was cut short at the neck. His pleasant face and resonant voice were mainly used that morning in praising Major Parrish and in telling me how grateful all the Indians were that the Great Father had sent them such an honest agent and good friend."¹²

This happy state of affairs was not to continue, however. Notwithstanding the protests of the Indians, Major Parrish was superseded on June 28, 1876, by Major W. V. Rinehart. The new agent was noted for his terrific outbursts of temper and dealt with the Indians in a manner which led them to suspect him of dishonesty.

Nevertheless, it must be conceded that Rinehart acted with courage in behalf of his wards when he protested against the continued trespassing of whites upon Malheur Reservation lands. After hostilities had begun in 1878, Rinehart reported that twenty trespassers, in violation of orders issued by the commanding officer

(See also O. O. Howard's *My Life and Experiences Among Our Hostile Indians*, 373.)

¹⁰ Bancroft, H. H.: *History of Utah*, 629.

¹¹ Howard, cited before, 244-245.

¹² Same, 269.

¹³ *Report of the Secretary of the Interior, 1878-79, Vol. IX, Part I*, 614.

at Camp Harney, had pastured 1400 horses and 10,839 cattle on the Reservation.¹³

The foregoing may help to explain why certain Piute bands were off the Reservation in 1877. Noteworthy among the leaders of these bands was Winnemucca II.¹⁴

Having in mind conditions among the Bannocks and Shoshones on the Fort Hall Reservation in Idaho, where the Indian uprising of 1878 began, General George Crook wrote as follows:

"It was a matter of surprise to no one acquainted with the facts that some of the Indians should so soon afterward break out into hostility; the great wonder is that so many have remained on the reservation. With the Bannocks and Shoshones our Indian policy has resolved itself into a question of war-path or starvation, and being merely human, many of them will always choose the former alternative, where death shall at least be glorious."¹⁵

Chief Buffalo Horn and a number of his Bannock warriors chose the "former alternative." This may have come as a surprise to certain officials high in authority who were not "acquainted with the facts." In a telegram dated at Washington, D. C., April 3, 1878, commenting on the Fort Hall agent's request for military protection, General William T. Sherman said: ". . . I think the agent at the Shoshone Agency, near Ft. Hall, unduly scared."¹⁶

Less than sixty days later Buffalo Horn and his band took the war-path. Crossing the Snake River at Glenn's Ferry, the Bannocks on June 8 encountered troops commanded by Captain R. F. Bernard. The battle of South Mountain followed, and Buffalo Horn was killed.¹⁷

The Bannocks then moved on toward the Malheur Reservation. When they arrived at Steen's Mountains, where the Piutes were encamped, they found sentiment divided. The disaffected Piutes wished to join the Bannocks, and, for a time, accepted the leadership of one of their own medicine-men, Oytes, a persistent trouble-maker. After much persuasion, Egan consented to lead in the war against the whites¹⁸—a war which was to cost him not only his life, but also the lives of his wife and two of his three children.¹⁹ Thus the mantle—or blanket—of Buffalo Horn, successor of Pocatello, descended upon Egan.

¹⁴ Same, 612.

¹⁵ *Report of the Secretary of War, Executive Documents, Vol. II, 90.*

¹⁶ *Report of the Secretary of the Interior, Vol. IX, Part I, 452.*

¹⁷ Arnold, R. Ross: *Indian Wars of Idaho, 184-186.*

¹⁸ Howard, cited before, 276.

¹⁹ Same, 277.

In the meantime, General O. O. Howard of the Department of the Columbia had left Vancouver in order to take charge of military operations, C. E. S. Wood being his "Aide-de-Camp and Adjutant-General of troops in the field."²⁰

* * * *

Now, after long absence, Egan was returning to the land of his birth. Would the Columbia River tribes remain friendly to the whites? Or would they rally to Egan's call and join the hostiles? Well might the situation be regarded as critical. Only the previous year Chief Joseph's band of Lower Nez Perces had caused the whites a long and expensive campaign. And the Modoc War, particularly remembered for the death of General Canby, was but a half decade in the past. Once more the Pacific Northwest was haunted by the fear of a general Indian uprising.

Eastern Washington, in the direct path of the hostiles, might soon feel the red man's wrath.

* * * *

Egan and his followers were having their difficulties, however. While crossing the divide into the John Day Valley, they encountered snow. Scarcity of food compelled them to subsist upon the inner bark of pine-trees.

As for Egan, himself, he was in a desperate condition from wounds received during a skirmish in which he engaged in personal combat with Colonel Orlando Robbins, chief of scouts. While Egan lay over his pony's side firing, Robbins contrived to send a bullet through the wrist by which his enemy held himself in place. Egan then fell to the ground. Before his men could rescue him, he received at least one additional bullet from Robbins.²¹

Egan's force continued northward toward the Columbia River and a number of engagements followed. Describing one of these, under date of July 14, a certain writer reported:

"Among the interested spectators (of the fight at Cayuse Station) were a large number of Umatillas who took sides with neither party, but appeared to relish the sport. It is said, but with what amount of truthfulness I cannot state, that a number of young men belonging to this tribe, under Wenap Snoot having joined the hostiles."²²

²⁰ Hopkins, cited before, 250.

²¹ Arnold, cited before, 192-196.

²² *The Oregon State Journal*, Eugene, July 20, 1878.

Two days later this was written from LaGrande:

"It is not true that the Umatillas have joined the hostiles. On the other hand, one hundred warriors have joined Colonel Forsythe. They fought the hostiles yesterday and brought in twenty-two scalps and three hundred horses."²³

Was one of these scalps Egan's? "Yesterday" means July 15, 1878, the date of Egan's death.

The Oregonian relates the story thus:

"About forty Umatillas (who had joined the Bannocks and Piutes) desired to desert and return to the reservation, but were afraid of being punished. They were assured they might return, provided they brought Egan. . . . Egan was seized and informed that he was to be carried to the camp of the Bostons. He attempted to escape . . . and . . . was killed.

"Egan was a man rather below the medium size of white men, 40 or 45 years of age and was a born devil, having only been restrained from constant pillage and murder through fear. He was regarded as a leader of the whole force, though others ranked him in command. Homely, a sub-chief of the Umatillas, claims and is reported to have fired the shot which killed Egan and will probably get the \$1000 offered by Mr. Robie²⁴ for his scalp."²⁵

Mrs. Mollie Jett, an Eastern Oregon pioneer, but now a resident of Portland, does not subscribe to the "born-devil" theory regarding Egan. In a recent interview she said:

". . . You can read in history about what a blood-thirsty chief Egan was. Egan visited our home frequently. He was one of the wisest and most honest Indians I ever knew. . . . Chief Egan told the young men that it was folly to oppose the whites. . . . But the young men felt they would rather be killed than starve to death. . . . The Umatilla Indians were going to fight with the Bannocks, but changed their minds and fought against them."²⁶

According to one account, Egan was slain by Five Crows, "Pak-ut-ko-ko," of the Cayuse tribe.²⁷

"Umapine²⁸ and Five Crows went to Egan's camp and requested his presence at a conference. . . . Arriving in the vicinity of the pro-

²³ Same.

²⁴ "Robie died July 19 (1878), and I can find no mention of the payment of the reward."—Nellie B. Pipes, Editor, *Ore. Hist. Quarterly*.

²⁵ *The Oregonian*, July 20, 1878.

²⁶ *Oregon Journal*, April 24, 1934. Fred Lockley's "Impressions and Observations of the Journal Man."

²⁷ Five Crows, "Pak-ut-ko-ko," who died in 1903 at the age of sixty, is said to have been a son of the more celebrated Five Crows of the Cayuse War period. (Information furnished by O. L. Babcock, Agent, Umatilla Indian Reservation.)

²⁸ Also called "Wa-kiu-kou-we-la-sou-mi." Umapine was a Cayuse. He died December 23, 1924, at the age of 79. (Information furnished by O. L. Babcock.)

posed rendezvous Egan became suspicious, leaped from his horse and closed with Five Crows. . . . Egan was a cripple from his wounds; he soon fell, stabbed to the heart by Five Crows."²⁹

Here is another version:

Umapine's "father had been killed many years before by Egan . . . and (Umapine) wanted revenge. . . . He told Egan the Cayuses would join him, and persuaded that chief to accompany him the next night to a certain point, twelve miles from the agency, to meet the Cayuse chiefs. . . . He then sent word to Major Cornoyer (the agent) to have forty soldiers stationed . . . to capture or kill Egan when he appeared. . . . (Cornoyer) told them the best way to convince the whites of their loyalty was to go out themselves and capture Egan. Chief Homely acted on this advice, and quietly selecting forty young men, repaired to the rendezvous. Egan and Umapine appeared, . . . followed by a number of warriors. The great Pah Ute chief was seized and bound and placed in charge of Ya-tin-ya-wit, son-in-law of Howlish Wampoo, head chief of the Cayuses. A fight ensued with the hostiles who had followed their leader and who were reinforced from the camp as soon as the sounds of battle reached it. Egan was a very troublesome prisoner, and in a struggle to escape was shot by his guard and killed."³⁰

Later, during a triumphal procession before General Wheaton and his command, Ya-tin-ya-wit displayed Egan's scalp.³¹

It was the opinion of Dr. Fitzgerald, who examined Egan's body, that the Piute chief, in the natural course of events, would have died of his wounds. Egan had been shot in the wrist, chest, and groin. The broken wrist was bound in willow splints and laid across a pillow on the breast. The whole was strapped to the body.³² According to one authority, Colonel Orlando Robbins took the head and wounded arm to General Wheaton's camp.³³

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Some have believed, General Howard among them, that Dr. Fitzgerald sent Egan's head as a specimen to the Army Medical Museum at Washington, D. C.³⁴

Under date of June 3, 1934, T. C. Elliott of Walla Walla sends

²⁹ *Illustrated History of Central Oregon*, 1905, 76.

³⁰ Gilbert, F. T.: *Historic Sketches*, 1882, 484-5.

³¹ Same.

³² Hailey, John: *The History of Idaho*, 243.

³³ Same.

³⁴ Howard, cited before, 277.

this memorandum from a surviving veteran of the Bannock-Piute War, Dr. Mauzey of Weston:

"I know nothing about who killed Egan. His head was brought in by Chief Homily Umapine³⁵ to our camp near Meacham. We placed it in alcohol and it was sent to the Army Medical Museum.

"Dr. H. G. Mauzey,
Late Asst. Surgeon, U.S.A."

Nevertheless, the Army Medical Museum is not in possession of Egan's head. Under date of June 12, 1934, the Assistant Curator of the Museum writes:

"We have searched our records covering the period of October, 1877, to January, 1879, in an attempt to find an accession of the head of Chief Egan of the Piutes. So far as we are able to determine, this specimen was never received at the Army Medical Museum.

(Signed) "Raymond O. Dart,
Major, Medical Corps, U.S.A.
Asst. Curator."

Major Dart suggested that a letter of inquiry be directed to the National Museum, Smithsonian Institution, Washington, D. C. This suggestion was acted upon and a reply came dated June 28, 1934. The essential part of this reply follows:

". . . You are advised that we do not have in our collections the skull of Chief Egan to which you refer, nor do we find any record of it. . . .

"I am enclosing a copy of our only reference to Chief Egan, which it is thought may be of interest to you.

Very truly yours,

(Signed) J. E. Graf,
Associate Director (National Museum,
Smithsonian Institution.)"

The enclosure reads thus:

"Surgeon General, U.S.A.,
Washington, D. C.

Post Hospital,
Angel Island, Cal.
Nov. 8th, 1878.

General:

"I have the honor to inform you that I have this day turned

³⁵ This is a peculiar combination of names. Umapine may have been the son of Homily.

over to the Post Quartermaster for transmission to your office at Washington, D. C., a box containing the *skull* of a *Piute Indian* named 'Charlie,' a *brother-in-law* of *Chief Egan*, a *Piute Chief*. These two Indians, with about a dozen of their tribe, were killed by the friendly Umatilla Indians under command of 'Umapine,' one of their chiefs, on the 15th day of July, 1878, at a point in the 'Blue Mountains' in N. E. Oregon, about 1 mile north of 'Emigrant Springs' on the 'Meacham Toll Road.'

"I was informed, while there during the past summer, that *Dr. Fitzgerald, U.S.A.*, had secured the *skull* of *Chief Egan* with the view of sending to your office. I found *Chief Egan's* headless trunk lying but a short distance (a few rods) from the body of his brother-in-law 'Charlie' whose head I secured and now forward for the Army Medical Museum.

"The Quartermaster's receipt is herewith transmitted.

"Very Respectfully

Your Obt. Servant,

(Signed) V. B. Hubbard,

Asst. Surgeon, U.S.A.

"Note: Spec. Received 14th and acknowledged Dec. 16th, 1878."

That the body of *Egan* was decapitated, there seems to be no doubt. What happened to the head may be conjectured.

* * * *

With the death of *Egan*, the Bannock-Piute War was brought to a virtual close. A majority of *Egan's* surviving Piutes were gathered together at Camp Harney, whence they were transferred the following winter to the Yakima Reservation.

As for Sarah Winnemucca—"Toc-me-to-ne"—this accomplished daughter of Winnemucca II became a teacher as well as an interpreter, at Vancouver. Apparently, her pupils were the children of Bannock prisoners quartered there. In a letter written at Vancouver Barracks, and dated March 28, 1881, Sarah mentions the fact that fifty-three prisoners, belonging at Fort Hall, were then at the post. Supplementing her regular duties as interpreter, she had begun teaching the previous July with twelve girls and six boys in attendance.³⁶

About this time Sarah Winnemucca visited Washington, D. C., as one of the tribal representatives of the Piutes. The purpose of

³⁶ Hopkins, cited before, 244-245. (The letter was directed to the Secretary of the Interior.)

this mission was to inform our government of the dissatisfaction of the Piutes with conditions on the Yakima Reservation and to petition that the exiles be returned to their Nevada home.³⁷

This petition was granted, as the following attests:

“Presidio, San Francisco, California,
October 5, 1881.

“To the Commanding General,
Department of Columbia,
Vancouver Barracks, W. T.

“Sir:

“The Piutes on the Yakima Reservation, who desire to return to their people, have been given permission to do so by the Interior Department. . . .

Very respectfully.

J. C. Breckenridge,

“By command of Major-General McDowell.”³⁸

J. F. SANTEE

Oregon Normal School, Monmouth.

³⁷ *Bureau of American Ethnology, Bulletin No. 30, Part II*, 962.

Bancroft, H. H.: *History of Nevada, Colorado, and Wyoming*, 222.

³⁸ Hopkins, cited before, 265.

Note: Sarah Winnemucca married an army officer, and, under the name of Sarah Winnemucca Hopkins, became known as an author. Aided by Mrs. Horace Mann, she wrote *Life Among the Piutes: Their Wrongs and Claims*.