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A RECORD OF THE SAN POIL INDIANS*

It was several years after the close of the Nez Perce War that the Government concluded to locate Chief Joseph's band of Nez Perce Indians permanently on the Colville Indian reservation, in the neighborhood of Nespelem, where they had been placed temporarily after their surrender at the close of the Nez Perce War.

When the commissioner of Indian affairs informed me of the intentions of the Government, I wrote informing him that the land in question was claimed by the San Poil Indians, who would be bitterly opposed to any action on the part of the Government in locating Chief Joseph's Nez Percés on their lands permanently. I was satisfied that the Government would pay but little attention to the claims of the San Poils to the ownership of the lands in question. I was therefore somewhat prepared for trouble ahead when in the summer of 1888 I received instructions from the commissioner of Indian affairs for me to request from the commanding officer at Fort Spokane a detail of troops to accompany me and to proceed immediately to carry out my instructions.

When I made my request to Major Kent, commanding Fort Spokane, for a detail of troops, I explained to him that I anticipated trouble with Skolaskin, chief of the San Poil Indians, who had been telling his people what God and he would do if the Great Father of the whites tried to give their land to Joseph's people. Skolaskin was good for much and serious consideration. He was shrewd, cunning and the power he had over his people was almost absolute, and obtained by a curious chain of circumstances.

The chief of the tribe dying and their being no hereditary successor, a council of the tribe was called to elect a chief. Skolaskin was

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one of the many aspirants for the position, but he, having been a cripple from birth (one of his legs being much shorter than the other, so much so that he was compelled to use a heavy staff when walking), his candidacy did not appeal, or satisfy the warriors, who wanted a strong, athletic man for chief, a man who could lead them and to whom they could look up, not a cripple who could not walk. Skolaskin, hearing of their talk from some of his followers, became angry and, mounting his pony, rode to where the warriors were assembled, and shaking his fist at them exclaimed:

"Before another sun you will be sorry that you did not make me your chief.

"For," he continued, "God sent me here to be your chief."

His remarks were met with shouts of derision by the assembled braves, some asking him if his medicine was so strong why he didn't straighten his crooked leg. He answered their jibes by saying that when he was born "God cut him up in little pieces," and "when he put him together again one of his legs was bent under the other, but that God would straighten it when he was ready to do so, and, raising his voice, he shouted that "before another day has passed God will punish you for making sport of his work."

He then rode away amidst jeers and laughter. That night came an earthquake that shook the entire country and worked on the fears of the frightened and superstitious Indians, who, remembering Skolaskin's prophecy of the previous day, thought it was the vengeance of their God upon them for ridiculing his prophet, for that is what they now considered Skolaskin to be. As soon as day broke, after a night of terror, they hastened to the teepee of Skolaskin. As they approached they could see Skolaskin seated on a bearskin at the entrance. One by one they hailed him "Illunigum Skolaskin!" (Chief Skolaskin).

He paid no attention to their salutations until the entire tribe was before him. Then, selecting the member of the tribe who owned the greatest number of horses, said to him:

"Am I your chief?" The other answered immediately that he was.

"How many kuitans [horses] have you?" was the next question. "One hundred," was the answer. "Then, if I am your chief bring me twenty-five of them," said Skolaskin.

This was done immediately. Another was called with the same result, and so it kept on until the entire tribe had contributed and before the sun had reached the meridian Skolaskin was not only the chief but the wealthiest member of the tribe, and from that time on

as chief, prophet and medicine man, his power was almost absolute among his people.

Besides being chief, Skolaskin continued to claim the rights and powers of a prophet. He insisted that he held direct and almost daily communication with God, whom he said directed all his actions, and on one occasion, nearly forty years ago, informed the tribe that God had told him to prepare for a flood that was soon to come, and which would cover the earth and destroy all wicked people, and directed him to build a big boat that his people might be saved when the wicked were destroyed. Immediately the men and women of the tribe began preparing timbers for the ark, but after a great number were made ready and piled at White Stone, one of the principal villages of the tribe (these timbers were still there a few years ago), Skolaskin told them that God had changed His mind and would not destroy mankind at present, so the timbers for the ark were never put together.

The reader can see what power this cunning savage had over his people. He was somewhat of a Mormon as concerned himself, taking a new wife every few months as "God directed him to do." Skolaskin was always a thorn in the flesh to the Indian agent, as he always opposed the management of the Indians by the Government.

Skolaskin held a bitter enmity against Chief Joseph and his people, as well as against Moses, chief of the Columbia Indians, who was a warm friend to Chief Joseph. Moses and his tribe since located at Nespelem, the Government having built a mill and school for his people at that point. Moses knew of the hatred that Skolaskin had for him and naturally wanted Joseph as a neighbor and friend on whom he could depend if the San Poils should at any time start hostilities, for Joseph's warriors had the reputation of being good fighters.

The Major, taking the same view of the situation, detailed two companies of infantry and a troop of cavalry to accompany and assist us in locating the Indians on their allotments. The distance from Fort Spokane to Nespelem by the Idaho trail was about seventy miles, but the route the troops were compelled to take was twice that distance, as they had to cross the Columbia River at "Wild Goose Bill's" ferry, and build a road from there the greater portion of the way to Nespelem.

When the troops left Fort Spokane it was thought that they were going on their summer outing or practice. I remained at the agency until an Indian runner brought the information that the troops had crossed the river the day previous, and then, accompanied by my interpreter and Indian farmer, I crossed the Columbia above the mouth

of the Spokane River, in a canoe, swimming our horses. We made camp for the night in the neighborhood of one of the San Poil Indian villages and the headquarters of Chief Skolaskin.

Knowing of our arrival he sent a messenger to request me to be present at a council of his people to be held that evening. Knowing what absolute power he had over his people and how bitterly he opposed the locating of the Nez Perces on the lands claimed by the San Poils, I was very anxious to hear what he would have to say.

After our horses had been picketed for the night, with my two companions I proceeded to the council, which was held in a crater-like enclosure, capable of holding 2,000 people. It was almost surrounded by a solid wall of stone and was well lighted by two fires of resinous wood, attended to and kept burning brightly by the old squaws. Excepting on a platform built against the wall at one end of the enclosure, there were no seats. The rough seats and the platform were covered with skins of the bear, cougar, lynx, wolf and beaver. Never had I seen so numerous and great variety of wild animal pelts at one time.

Skolaskin, chief, prophet and medicine man of the San Poils, occupied a raised seat on the platform. On each side of him were his two principal men. In front of the platform was a band of picked warriors, to the number of fifty, decked out in all their barbaric bravery, war bonnets, beaded and silk-worked suits of buckskin, in fact, all the paraphernalia belonging to a well-dressed warrior. It was certainly a formidable looking band of warriors.

Giving me a seat alongside of his latest and favorite squaw, and seating my companions near me, he wasted no time in preliminaries, but immediately launched into a violent attack on the Government for wanting to place Joseph's band on the land of the San Poils.

This land, he said, was the home of the San Poils from the beginning, and should be to the end, when all the country from there to the rising sun was a big sea.

"When God made dry land," he chanted, sonorously, "when there was water, it was our land, and here our forefathers hunted the cougar, bear and deer, ages and ages before the white-faced race was known. Our medicine men prophesied to our forefathers of the coming of a new race with white faces like the snow, and warned us never to injure them, but to help them and be their friends. The white man of to-day is the race our medicine men prophesied were to come, and we have lived up to their advice, and have always been friends to the whites, and our boast that a white man's blood has never been shed by a San Poil is true.

“Then why should the white race, whom we have always befriended when they were few and we were many, now that they are strong and numerous, take our land from us and give it to our enemies? To a people who have made war against the Great White Father of the whites, who have murdered the white settlers and their families, burned their houses and stole their cattle, and after fighting two or three battles with the soldiers of the Great Father, lost their heart and surrendered. And the great chief, instead of punishing them for being bad, took care of them and placed them on the lands of San Poils—only for a short time, as the Indian agent told us to protect them from the angry settlers; and from that time to the present they have become fat, lazy and good-for-nothing. And now the Government wants to give them our lands.”

“I would ask the Indian agent who is present if it is right for the Great Father to take the land of the San Poils, who have always been industrious and self-supporting, who have never asked or taken anything from the Government, and at all times have been friendly to the whites, and give it to a people like Joseph’s band of Nez Percés? If the agent would answer as his heart tells him, he would say that the great father was doing wrong, but he will not speak his straight mind. He will say, ‘My chief orders and I obey.’

“But I say the San Poils will not obey. They will not see their country, the country they have inherited and lived in since the coming of man, the country that their children will inherit after them, be taken from them without making a struggle for the future welfare of their children.

“The cougar, the wolf and the bear will fight for their young, and why not the Indian? Does he care less for his offspring than the wild beast does for its young?”

As he finished he sank into his seat apparently exhausted. The fierce expression on the countenance of his hearers, and the simultaneous expression of the Indian words, “Onah, onah sha” (yes, we understand), convinced me that his talk was well received and met with their approval.

Waiting until quiet was restored, and putting on an appearance of ease that I did not altogether feel, I arose and addressed the assembled Indians. I said to them that, while their chief had made a strong talk, that a great part of it was foolish and childish. That no race or tribe of people could be allowed to hold large territories of land without putting them to some use that would be of benefit to them as well as others. That it was true, before the coming of the white man, the Indians claimed large tracts of land which they held

in its wild state for hunting grounds, which supplied them game to live upon and skins for clothing, as the Indians killed game as their needs demanded, game being plentiful, but with the coming of the white race there came a great change. Game was hunted for the skins, the carcasses left for the wolves, and became more scarce every year, and the Indians, who depended on them for their existence, became sufferers and hunger and disease swept them off by thousands. Wagons and roads took the place of the pack horse and trails. Railroads were built and the white race began to pour into the country, establishing their ways and customs.

"I say to you, they have come to stay," I told them, "and the sooner you San Poils fall into line the sooner your conditions will be bettered. Some of the chiefs on this reservation, looking to the welfare of their people, have taken the advice of the Great Father, and thir people are protected and cared for, for the white man's laws reward or punish all alike.

"Whistelposum, chief of the Spokanes; Tonasket, chief of the Okanogans, and Moses, chief of the Columbias, have taken this advice and their people have mills and schools, and are taken care of by the Government until such time as they will be able to care for themselves, while you San Poils, who claim ownership to all this land, and who persist in refusing to listen to the Great Father, or take his advice, will be treated like disobedient children, who refuse to obey their fathers, and be punished according to your disobedience. When your Chief, who should talk words of wisdom to you, says that you will oppose the will of the Great Father, he talks foolish. As well might a few trees on the mountain try to stop the avalanche as for you to attempt to oppose the will of the Great Father."

From the expression on their faces I could see that my remarks were not well received by my hearers, so I drew them to a close, and was satisfied after what I had seen and heard, that Skolaskin intended, by force if necessary, to oppose the locating of the Nez Perces on the lands the Government gave them. I was also satisfied that as yet they had no intimation as to the movement of the troops.

I was not surprised greatly the next morning, when I started on my way to Nespelem, to find Skolaskin and twenty of his warriors following me. When we arrived at Whitestone, another of his villages, we were joined by about as many more; at San Poil another bunch joined us, and by the time we arrived at Nespelem, late in the evening, there must have been nearly two hundred of Skolaskin's to find that the troops had not yet arrived, and the agency farmer knew nothing of their movements or present location. After sending

a couple of runners with a letter to the commanding officer of the troops, explaining the situation, and requesting him to make all haste, I instructed my interpreter to go among the Indians and learn the feelings of the different tribes.

The Indians held two councils during the night, one composed of Joseph's and Moses' people, and one of the San Poils, and early the following day sent a messenger to request me to have a pow-wow immediately. I answered that I would have a talk, but was not yet ready. It was almost noon when my interpreter informed me that the Indians were getting impatient, and were saying that the agent was afraid (and I sure was), as to the windup. If the two factions started a fight the finish would be like the fight of the Kilkenny cats, nothing left but head dresses.

I immediately called the council at the Government mill. Standing in the doorway I directed where each band should be placed, so that when they were all in the places assigned them Chief Joseph and the Nez Perces on my right, Chief Moses and his people on my left, and Chief Skolaskin and the San Poils in front of me, I had forbidden them to carry arms to the council and there were none visible, but if hostilities had started I believe there would have been plenty visible in short order.

When quiet was restored I stated to them that my object in coming to Nespelem at that time was to notify the Indians that Joseph and his people were to be given lands, and located permanently upon the reservation by order of the great father, in Washington. Immediately there was an uproar, Joseph's and Moses' people shouting "Orah" (Yes) and Skolaskin's people shouting "Tah" (No).

When quiet had been partially restored Skolaskin was on his feet denying the right of the Great Father to give away land that did not belong to him; that the land he wanted to give to Joseph's people was the land of the San Poils, and that the Great Father was a thief when he gave their lands to murderers like Moses and Joseph.

I stopped him at this point and said to him that he must cease that manner of talk and if he persisted in abusing the Great Father that I would stop his talk entirely. I couldn't see my way clear to do it if he persisted, but the bluff worked and the rest of his harangue was a bitter denunciation against Chief Moses as a coward, liar and murderer, but had little to say about Joseph and his people.

When he concluded Chief Moses arose, using his usual expression on such occasions, "Uika Moses" (I am Moses) began his talk. He pointed out to his hearers how he had taken the advice of the Great Father and by so doing had helped his people, who now had lands,

mills and a school, and horses and cattle. At one time, he stated, he was an enemy of the whites, but that was when he was as ignorant as a child and did not understand the ways of the Great Chief and the good he was doing for his Indian children, but he could see it now and his friend Joseph and his people could now see it as he and his people saw it and would always obey and do "as the great father wished them to do."

Continuing, he said that he was glad that his people were not ruled like the San Poils, whose chief was a dreamer, who could not make a talk without frothing at the mouth like a dog and who in his opinion was not as good as a dog. At this point the San Poils became wild, but without orders from Chief Skolaskin, who sat as stolid and impassive as a stone image, could not make a movement.

Seeing how critical the situation was I stopped further talk from Moses, for it only needed a word from Skolaskin to start the fireworks, and I believed that he was debating in his own mind whether or not to give it. If anything started I would be held to blame by the Indian department for not using proper precaution and I would be the goat, for the department would have to have one.

The reader may imagine my feelings at the situation, but at that moment I heard the bugle call of the cavalry. The troops had arrived and not a minute too soon.

Ordering the Indians to keep their places I went to the door as Lieutenant Hoppin rode up with the advance guard. In a few words I told him the situation. He immediately gave orders to his men to dismount and picket their horses and forming these in front of the entrance to the mill, gave orders to load and stand at ease. A portion of the Indians could see what was being done, but all of them could hear the military click as breech of the carbine was closed. The lieutenant and I then entered the mill, when I closed the pow-wow for the time, the main body of the troops having arrived. The crisis was passed and wily Skolaskin perceived in an instant that he had been outgeneraled, and, without delay left for home, accompanied by his San Poils. Without further trouble Joseph and his band of Nez Perces were located on the land the Government gave them and have resided there to the present time.

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