

Bridge-Building Native American Registers Early Copyright

WENDI A. MALONEY

Emancipation Hall, the majestic gathering space in the new Capitol Visitor Center, showcases 24 statues from the National Statuary Hall Collection. Among them is a bronze likeness of Sarah Winnemucca, thought to be the first Native American woman to secure a copyright and publish in the English language. Sculpted by Benjamin Victor, the statue became part of the collection in 2005.

Born in 1844 as Thocmetony, or “Shell Flower,” Winnemucca was a member of the Northern Piute tribe from an area that would later become the state of Nevada. The tribe had its first contact with white settlers shortly after her birth. Her grandfather, Chief Truckee, sought an amicable relationship with them, taking Winnemucca and other relatives to California to live and work among settlers when Winnemucca was a child. By age 10, she had learned English and Spanish. When she was 13, she lived in the household of William Ormsby of Genoa, Nevada, and later attended school briefly at the Convent of Notre Dame in San Jose, California.

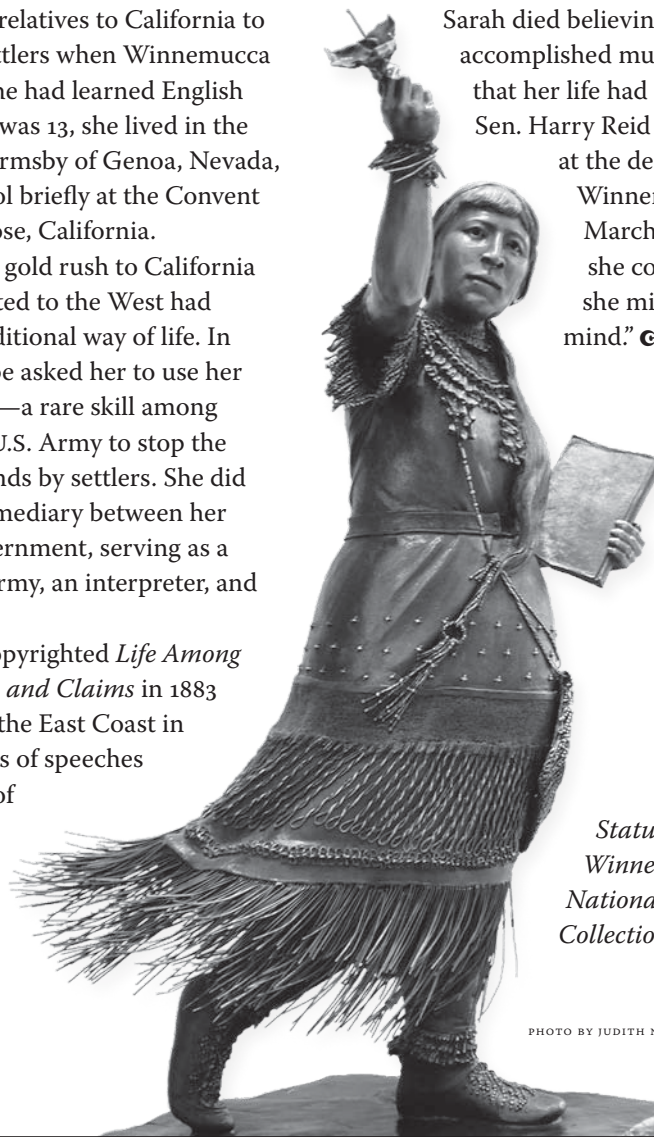
In the meantime, the gold rush to California and the settlers it attracted to the West had undercut the Piute’s traditional way of life. In 1866, Winnemucca’s tribe asked her to use her English-speaking ability—a rare skill among her people—to ask the U.S. Army to stop the depredation of Piute bands by settlers. She did so and become an intermediary between her people and the U.S. government, serving as a translator for the U.S. Army, an interpreter, and a teacher.

She published and copyrighted *Life Among the Piutes: Their Wrongs and Claims* in 1883 during a lecture tour of the East Coast in which she gave hundreds of speeches about her people’s lack of land, sustenance, and rights. She had earlier traveled to Washington, D.C., to

press President Rutherford B. Hayes to help. In *Life Among the Piutes*, Winnemucca uses tales of hardship and human interest to persuade readers to pressure the U.S. government to change its Piute policy. The final chapter even includes a petition to Congress for this purpose. Educator Mary Peabody Mann edited the book. She and her sister, activist Elizabeth Peabody, hosted Winnemucca in their Boston home during her lecture tour.

When Winnemucca returned to Nevada, she founded the Peabody Indian School, where she taught children in their native language. The school closed in 1887, and Winnemucca died four years later, at age 47.

“It has been written that Sarah died believing she had not accomplished much—unconvinced that her life had an impact,” Sen. Harry Reid of Nevada said at the dedication of Winnemucca’s statue in March 2005. “I think if she could see us today, she might change her mind.” ©



Statue of Sarah Winnemucca from the National Statuary Hall Collection

PHOTO BY JUDITH NIERMAN