

Legends of the Northern Paiute: as told by

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## *Editor's Introduction*

Several years ago I attended a lecture by Wilson Wewa at an Oregon Archaeology Celebration series program at Smith Rock State Park in Terrebonne, Oregon. At the time, I was researching and writing about the Native American and settler history of Central Oregon and the Northern Great Basin. Within that context I had interviewed Wilson about the Northern Paiutes. A spiritual leader and oral historian of the tribe, Wilson is also a great-great grandson of both Chief Paulina and Chief Weahwewa, two of the most important and influential Paiute chiefs in the tribe's history.<sup>1</sup> Wilson is a wellspring of Northern Paiute oral history, storytelling, and tribal legends, most of which he learned from his grandmother and tribal elders. For years he has told these histories and legends on the Warm Springs Reservation, a confederated reservation of the Wasco, Tenino, and Northern Paiute tribes in Central Oregon—and the home of Wilson and his family. Wilson also shares this legacy in Paiute ceremonies and burials and, on occasion, at academic seminars and classes.

That evening at Smith Rock, Wilson told several Paiute legends that were entirely new to me. When his talk was over I thanked him for his presentation and inquired whether the legends he had shared had ever been recorded and saved, or if

there was a risk that they could be lost to history. Wilson responded that these legends were neither recorded nor written, and that he was deeply concerned that they would be lost with his passing. He expressed a strong desire to preserve the legends for future generations and to promote a broader public understanding. With that conversation, our collaboration of many years began, and this book is one of its results.

As Wilson explains in his engaging foreword to this book, his grandmother, Maggie Wewa, was the principal source of the original Paiute legends he shares here, and he has warmly dedicated this book to her. Historian Cynthia Stowell has written about Maggie Wewa's love of traditional Paiute stick game gambling and how much she enjoyed traveling to tournaments all over the Northern Great Basin: "You feel good when you go to a different place," she said, "instead of like a prisoner." Wilson often went along with his grandmother, traveling by bus or later in Wilson's pickup. He tells many engaging stories of those years and trips. Stowell also published a photograph of what she calls Maggie Wewa's "striking Paiute face," and that photograph is reprinted at the beginning of this book.<sup>2</sup>

My favorite research experience with Wilson was a field trip we made to the Malheur Cave, south of Burns, Oregon. There, in oceans of sagebrush surrounded by the vast, rugged, treeless, and windswept terrain of the Great Basin, we found the mouth of the very cave that is the setting for the first legend of this collection, "The Creation Story and the Malheur Cave." On the day we visited, Wilson burned a sage offering at the

entrance before entering the cave for a time of respectful reflection and prayer. That trip was an especially enjoyable and insightful journey into the heart of the Paiute homeland, and Paiute history and legends.

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Most of the storytelling, recording, and review of these legends occurred at my home at Ranch at the Canyons during the winter—the Paiute storytelling season. Wilson and I have always been committed to preserving the legends in his own words. In traditional Paiute legends, the setting and the storytelling were integral parts of each story, so we labored mightily to also preserve as much as possible of the spirit, humor, surprise, cadence, and verve of these legends.

Our lively and sustained collaboration eventually yielded this collection of original and never-before-published Northern Paiute legends. As much as this collection was created for the future, these legends are deeply rooted in the past, in the rich

history and culture of the Northern Paiutes. For too long, their tribal history has been little researched and poorly understood. But recent research, teaching, and writing about the Northern Paiutes—including my own, and that of my students and teachers at the University of Oregon—are welcome correctives.

For thousands of years the Northern Paiutes lived in the vast and rugged high desert environment of the Northern Great Basin and developed a distinct culture well-adapted to their environment. At the time of contact with Euro-American traders and explorers, there were perhaps seventy-five hundred Paiutes spread across the Great Basin—hunting, gathering, and fishing in some twenty-one bands, each with its own name, territory, chief, and spiritual leader, but no overarching tribal government. Their lives were marked by sociability and cooperation in hunting and gathering and in all aspects of their family and band lives, as well as in warfare, treaties, and major tribal events. Not surprisingly, the Northern Paiutes lived predominantly around the region's many sources of water, including the Deschutes, John Day, Powder, Burnt, Malheur,



and Owyhee river basins of the Northern Great Basin, and the innumerable tributaries that feed those streams. Although continuously challenged by their harsh high desert environment, the Paiute had access to vast land and water and grazing and fishery resources.

Legends have always been an integral element of Paiute culture. Their legends—lively, insightful, ribald, and often humorous—emphasize and reinforce Paiute social bonds through a compelling mixture of entertainment and education, and serve as a vital source of continuity for tribal ways. In the process, the legends reaffirm and pass along important tribal values, even as they warned of draconian penalties for any breach or flouting of those values.

There is considerable consensus among the tribes of the Confederated Warm Springs Reservation that important elements of tribal life and culture are much diminished on the reservation today, and in other Northern Paiute communities in the western United States—at Burns and Fort McDermitt Reservations in Oregon, Pyramid Lake and the Walker River Reservations in Nevada and Duck Valley Reservations in Nevada and Idaho, and elsewhere. In particular, many elements of Paiute history, culture, and legends have been eroded because of the traumatic and tragic native history of American invasion, warfare, land taking, and forced removal from native homelands. Not surprisingly, Paiute language and legends have been and are being lost, too. Wilson Wewa's concern about this cultural loss has provided the impetus for our sub-

sequent collaboration and endeavors to gather and preserve what we could of Paiute history and legends.

We urge the reader to be open to the vitality of these legends as told by a renowned Paiute storyteller to a village group

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gathered around a campfire during the storytelling season of a cold and clear winter night in the Northern Great Basin. Enjoy these legends as they were told, out loud, and full of conviction, emphasis, lilt, pause, and humor. Read them envisioning the storyteller as a vital part of the story, because that is how these legends took form and have been told over thousands of years.

I am especially appreciative of Wilson Wewa for his extraordinary storytelling skills and sharing, and his dedicated attention in recording and reviewing these legends for publication. These legends are a joy to hear told—and sometimes sung. Along the way, we have built a friendship based on collaboration and shared interests and objectives. Through this sus-

tained multicultural cooperation we have accomplished more together than either of us could have produced alone. Thanks also to the Paiute tribal elders for supporting Wilson's storytelling and the saving and sharing of these original legends.

I also appreciate others who have helped in this process, including in particular Gloria Colvin, who Wilson affectionately calls "the church lady." She has been part of this project since it started, and her participation has always reflected her affection for the legends and cultures of Native Americans. I want to warmly thank Julie O'Neal of my office for her invaluable assistance in the preparation and review of these legends for publication.

Finally, I would like to thank Ms. Mary Elizabeth Braun and the Oregon State University Press for their support in the preparation and publication of this book. I also appreciate the longstanding OSU Press commitment to scholarly publications relating to Indigenous and Native American Studies—including the important and often neglected Northern Paiutes of the Northern Great Basin.



This project provides a unique window into the roots and character of the Northern Paiute tribe and culture. Wilson Wewa and I are pleased to help bring these original Northern Paiute legends into the sunlight of publication, and to enhance tribal and public understanding of this Paiute legacy.

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Ranch at the Canyons, Terrebonne*

1. Because the Weahwewa family name was difficult for English-speakers to pronounce, it was eventually shortened to Wewa.
2. Image of Maggie Wewa, in Cynthia D. Stowell, *Faces of a Reservation, A Portrait of the Warm Springs Indian Reservation* (Portland, Oregon Historical Society Press, 1987) 36.