

Surgical lifestyles



*Surgeon chronicles
Native American history*

by Karen Sandrick, Chicago, IL

Wisps of fog swirled outside the mission to the Cayuse Indians at Wailatpu in Walla Walla Valley, WA, muffling the sounds of indigenous wildlife on the morning of November 29, 1847. But the stillness amplified the cacophony of violence within: the harsh bursts of angry accusations, the thwack of a tomahawk on the skull, and then the rapid retorts of gunfire as five Cayuse Indians, led by Tilaukait and Tomahas, killed 14 of the local mission's 72 residents, including physician and Presbyterian elder Marcus Whitman and his wife, Narcissa.^{1,2}

Vagabonding from tribal area to tribal area for the next three years, hardly welcome even in Cayuse or Nez Perce Indian communities while white settlers clamored for retribution, the band of five finally surrendered to Oregon Territory authorities in April 1850. Indicted on May 21, 1850, these Cayuse Indians went to trial for murder under the first Oregon Territory justice, Orville C. Pratt. After listening to testimony from several women who saw the five kill the Whitmans and other missionaries as well as a Cayuse Indian named Stickus and a white missionary to the Nez Perce tribe who had warned the Whitmans about the murder plot, the jury on May 24 returned a verdict of guilty, and the five Cayuse were sentenced to death, hanged on June 3, 1850, and buried in the Oregon Territory.³

But as retired general surgeon Robert H. Ruby, MD, FACS, Moses Lake, WA, argued in a 2004 letter to Sens. Ron Wyden (D-OR), Maria Cantwell (D-WA), and Gordon Smith (R-OR), and Rep. Doc Hastings (R-WA), the attack was not a rampant crime spree but the first salvo in a two-year war between the Cayuse nation and American troops that ended with the loss of independence of the Cayuse people.² The five Cayuse were not wanton murderers but victims of terrorism fomented by what Dr. Ruby calls mixed-blood bullies who claimed white settlers were insurgents, usurping the ownership and farming of Cayuse land, and that Dr. Whitman was spreading poison, not medicine, to the Cayuse from bottles containing measles.

This is one of many stories chronicled by Dr. Ruby since he began writing histories of American



Dr. Ruby on duty at the Pine Ridge Indian Hospital on the Pine Ridge Reservation, South Dakota, in 1953.

Indians in 1955. His first book, *The Oglala Sioux, Warriors in Transition*, was written while he was chief of the department of surgery at the hospital on the Pine Ridge Reservation in South Dakota. After serving as a member of the Army Air Corps during the occupation of Japan in the late 1940s, Dr. Ruby completed a fellowship in cancer surgery at the Sugarbaker Cancer Clinic in Jefferson City, MO, a year of postgraduate work at the Washington University School of Medicine in St. Louis, MO, and a four-year residency in pathology and surgery at the St. Louis County Hospital.

How Dr. Ruby began his second career

In July 1953, Dr. Ruby joined the U.S. Public Health Service (PHS) and was assigned to the Indian Service. Reigniting a boyhood interest in the lifestyle and lore of Native Americans, Dr. Ruby befriended members of the Sioux, attended their traditional ceremonies of worship,

Opposite page: Dr. Ruby with Crow Dog. All photos © Robert H. Ruby, MD, FACS; courtesy of the Eastern Washington State Historical Society, Spokane, WA.

witnessed their rituals, and became one of the first authors to report on the use of peyote by American Indians.

After completing his service in the PHS, Dr. Ruby and his wife, Lelia Jeanne Henderson, moved to Moses Lake, WA, a semi-arid basin that had recently been transformed into a fertile agricultural area through irrigation. Dr. Ruby set up a private practice in general surgery, which concentrated on orthopaedics and abdominal surgery, and continued his research into the past and present lives of Native Americans, beginning a more than 40-year collaboration with John A. Brown, former professor of history at Wenatchee Valley College, Wenatchee, WA.

Independently scavenging depositories in state and university libraries and ordering documents about the same topic—Chief Moses of the Salish Tribe, who refused to lead 200 warriors onto the Yakima Reservation in 1878—Dr. Ruby and Mr. Brown were brought together by a librarian in Olympia, WA, in 1958. Until Mr. Brown's illness in 2003 and subsequent death in 2004, theirs "was a perfect cooperative arrangement," says Dr. Ruby. "What I couldn't do, he did; what he couldn't do, I did. We meshed. That is the reason we produced so much." The two authored 13 books on the American Indians of the Pacific Northwest, contributed to biographical sketches of North American Indians, and wrote more than two dozen articles and book reviews on Native Americans for academic journals.

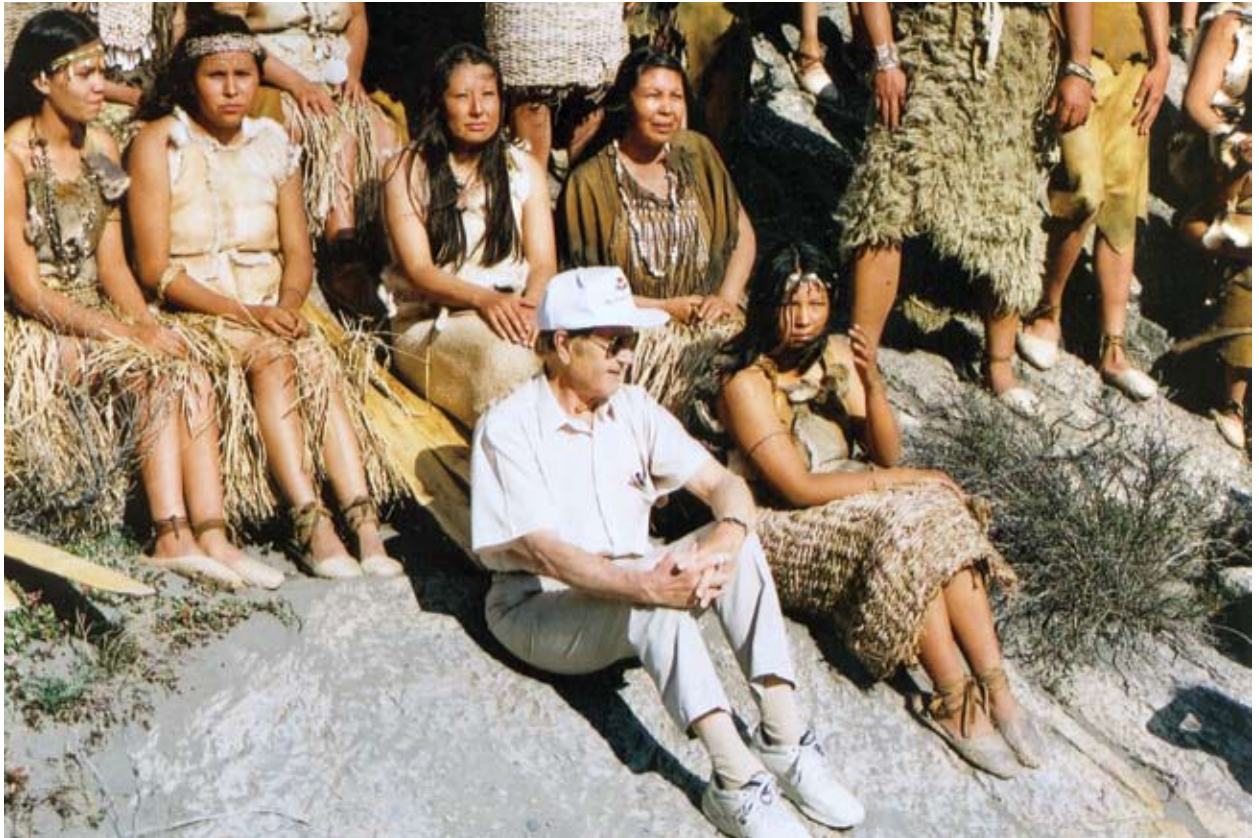
Their hunt for primary sources of information about Native American history took Dr. Ruby and Mr. Brown to depositories along the West Coast—at the University of Washington, Washington State University, and in British Columbia, which was part of Indian tribal lands until the northwestern lines of the U.S. were drawn—as well as to sailors' and fur traders' logs in libraries on the East Coast. Dr. Ruby explained that before white settlers established communities in the Pacific Northwest, visitors to the area arrived by sea. "Sailors who came from Britain and the eastern U.S. had to travel around the end of South America and come up to the West Coast, and the sailors and traders who bought furs from the American Indians kept journals and diaries," he says.

Pioneers who later journeyed to the Pacific



Dr. Ruby (left) presented a copy of his book, *The Chinook Indians: Traders of the Lower Columbia Basin*, to Clement Conger, Archivist of the White House, in the Map Room, May 6, 1977.

Northwest on the Oregon Trail wrote letters about their encounters with Native Americans. Newspapers recorded major events—treaties with the tribes of the Oregon coast; wars and skirmishes between and within tribes; and laws that banned the Indian languages, tribal organizations, religions, and family life.⁴ Government documents traced the transfer of Indian lands to white settlers, the consolidation of tribes, and the formation of tribal reservations for the Colville, Spokane, and Yakima tribes in Washington; the Umatilla and Siletz in Oregon; the Coeur d'Alene



Dr. Ruby on the set of the Hallmark film *Dreamkeeper*, 2003.

and Nez Perce in Idaho; and the Salish and Kootenai in Montana.⁵ The authors also consulted other sources of information, such as letters from pioneers who later journeyed to the Pacific Northwest on the Oregon Trail and wrote about their encounters with Native Americans.

Working before photocopy machines were widely available in libraries, Dr. Ruby and Mr. Brown transcribed entries from different sets of original source documents, copied them, and placed them in duplicate three-ring notebooks so they could confer with one another, by letter, across the 90 miles that separated them, about the meaning of individual facts within an overall historical context. On average, the historians created 20 to 30 three-ring notebooks for each of their books.

The authors' style

The authors' attention to the details of Indian life and lore placed them on the cutting edge of scholarship in studies of Pacific Northwest American Indians, observes William L. Lang, professor of history at Portland State University.⁶ According to Professor Lang, the first edition of the book *The Cayuse Indians* came at a time of renewed interest in the histories of Native American tribes in the region and a wish to present these histories in a fresh light "by putting American Indian interests at the center of the narrative."⁶ The book, therefore, dwells on the most contentious and critical events of the past: the murders of Marcus and Narcissa Whitman, the ensuing war, and the Walla Walla Treaty Council of 1855, which resulted in opening the

Pacific Northwest to white settlers and driving the Indian tribes of the Columbia Plateau off most of their land.⁶

Despite their exhaustive research of primary and secondary unpublished documents, as well as interviews with Native American elders, Dr. Ruby and Mr. Brown added vibrancy and depth to their storytelling. In one book, for example, they juxtaposed descriptions of the geological formation of the Spokane River with tales of Spokane Indian mythology, which trace the creation of the riverbed to a dragon that dragged trees and rocks from the mouth of the Columbia River to Lake Coeur d'Alene.⁴ In another, they explained that the Flathead, or Salish, Tribe did not get its name because their ancestors flattened their heads. The authors related other explanations for the name: sign language identified the tribe by pressing hands to the sides of the head. "Salish" means "we the people," which is designated by striking the head with the flat of the hand. The Flatheads did not flatten their heads, but left them in a normal configuration, flat on top rather than forcing them to slope toward the crown. The tribes that did flatten their heads included the Chinook, who lived along the coast of Oregon, Washington State, and British Columbia.

The objective of the authors was to reach the average reader. "Few academic books about American Indians have been written for the general public. Anthropologists and archaeologists have done extensive studies and published work in journals, but the average person doesn't read those things. And a lot of what the academic people write doesn't read like a good story," Dr. Ruby says. But



Dr. Ruby with Mr. Kunstler and Ms. Wanrow, February 21, 1976.



Dr. Ruby with Mr. Bellacourt (right), February 20, 1976.

Savoie Lottinville, the director of the University of Oklahoma Press in the 1960s, wanted to publish well-researched and well-documented books that were nonetheless good reads, and the style of Ruby's and Brown's books fit this vision.

Dr. Ruby and Mr. Brown, and their books, have been widely praised. Dr. Ruby has received literary awards, including the Northwest Author Award, Pacific Northwest Booksellers Award, and

the Eastern Washington State Historical Society Distinguished Author of History Award, as well as recognition for his contributions to history from the Washington State Historical Society and the Center for Columbia River History, and he was named Soo Huk Min (Caretaker of Tribal History) by the Okanogan Tribe in 2003.

Authorship leads to more

Dr. Ruby also served as cultural advisor for the award-winning Hallmark Entertainment Presentation, *Dreamkeeper*, a 2003 made-for-television film that traced the spiritual journey of 17-year-old street-gang member, Shane Chasing Horse, as he learned the tradition of storytelling and the legends of the Pine Ridge Sioux from his grandfather, Old Pete Chasing Horse (see photo, page 17). “The filmmakers wanted the film to be as correct as possible, so they came to me asking about the costumes, the tools, the types of housing of the American Indians,” Dr. Ruby recalls.

His explorations of Indian history have brought Dr. Ruby in contact with many prominent and notorious present-day Native Americans. When he and Mr. Brown were writing *Dream Prophets of the Columbia Plateau: Smohalla and Skolas-kin* (University of Oklahoma Press, 1989 and 2002), Dr. Ruby interviewed Crow Dog, author of a book about Wounded Knee and spiritual advisor on the Rosebud Reservation in South Dakota (see photo, page 14). He met with attorney and defender of Indian activists William Kuntsler, lead counsel for Yvonne Wanrow, who had shot and killed a man who molested her child in 1976; Vernon Bellacourt, a member of the Ojibway tribe and one of the founders of the American Indian Movement in 1976 (see photos, page 18); and David Sohappy, upon his release from jail for committing a fishing violation in 1988.

Dr. Ruby’s work with American Indians continues today. Just last year he finished updating *The Cayuse Indians: Imperial Tribesmen of Old Oregon*. He regularly visits and consults with elders from the Umatilla Tribe from northeastern Oregon about their history. He is lecturing widely about the five Cayuse Indians from the Whitman Massacre and hopes the U.S. Congress will take the same path as the Washington State Supreme Court, which in 2004 exonerated Chief

Leschi of the Nisqually Tribe because he was acting in a time of war when he killed a militiaman in 1858. “The U.S. Congress was the Supreme Court of the Territory, so it has the jurisdiction to exonerate the Cayuse,” Dr. Ruby explains.

If Congress acts on this idea, Dr. Ruby will not only be a recorder of history—he will have played a part in changing it. □

References

1. Whitman Massacre. Available at: <http://www.oregonpioneers.com/whitman2.htm>.
2. New Perspectives on the West. Available at: <http://www.pbs.org/weta/thewest/>.
3. Ruby RH. Letter to Sens. Ron Wyden, Maria Cantwell, Gordon Smith, and Rep. Don Hastings. Oct. 30, 2004.
4. Ruby RH, Brown JA. *The Spokane Indians. Children of the Sun*. Norman, OK: University of Oklahoma Press; 1982.
5. Ruby RH, Brown JA. *A Guide to the Indian Tribes of the Pacific Northwest*. Norman, OK: University of Oklahoma Press; 1986.
6. Ruby RH, Brown JA. *The Cayuse Indians. Imperial Tribesmen of the Old Oregon*. Norman, OK: University of Oklahoma Press; 2005.

Karen Sandrick is a freelance writer in Chicago, IL.