

“All of this Belong to Us”: Land, Horses, and Indigenous Resistance on the Yakama Indian Reservation, 1900-1950

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The horse is very important to our culture and traditions. We always want to have a number of those. However, the dilemma we are facing is that these wild horses, or feral horses, are causing severe degradation to the natural resources of our land.

-Harry Smiskin, Yakama Nation Tribal Chairman, 2013.¹

Over the last decade, skyrocketing wild horse populations on the Yakama Indian reservation on the eastern side of Washington State have placed increased pressure on sensitive ecosystems, destroying traditional root and berry patches and depriving other wildlife of grazing resources.² Because of this issue, in recent years members of the Confederated Tribes and Bands of the Yakama Nation publically declared their intent to implement management practices directed at reducing herds to a manageable size. However, this decision to reduce herd sizes did not come easily or without contest: as many Yakamas recognize, horses play “a traditionally intricate role in [Yakama] society.”³ To complicate matters, many non-Indians and animal advocacy groups have voiced strong opposition to herd management efforts on tribal lands, claiming wild horses

¹ Kevin Taylor, “They Eat Horses, Don’t They? Bucking the Slaughterhouse Ban on Horses,” *Indian Country Today Media Network*, November 13, 2013, accessed on August 14, 2014, <http://indiancountrytodaymedianetwork.com/2013/11/13/they-eat-horses-dont-they-bucking-slaughterhouse-ban-horses-152209>.

² Ibid. In an effort to respect the wishes of the Confederated Tribes and Bands of the Yakama Nation, I have adopted their preferred spelling of “Yakama,” which will be used throughout this essay with the exception of quotations and citations that contain the alternative spelling of Yakima.

³ Ibid.

as “historically revered symbols of freedom to the American people.”⁴ Not surprisingly, as Yakama plans for herd reduction began to circulate on social media, angry animal advocacy groups and their supporters flocked to Facebook and Twitter, criticizing the tribe for their “deplorable moral bankruptcy and departure from traditional...cultural values.”⁵ While non-Indians find their attacks on Yakamas warranted, feelings of imperialist nostalgia that drive non-Indian interventions in tribal affairs fail to acknowledge the complex shared histories between the Yakamas, settlers, horses, and land.⁶

The current polarized debate over the management of wild horses on Yakama tribal lands is not contemporary in origin, but rather the resurgence of a historically contentious issue that has waxed and waned for over a century. In the early 1900s, the Yakima Indian Agency opened reservation lands for the grazing of domestic cattle and sheep belonging to non-Indian ranchers.⁷ By the 1920s, however, crowded ranges, coupled with lax administrative oversight, resulted in widespread overgrazing and land degradation. Concerned that dwindling rangelands might alienate ranchers, Yakima Agency employees sought to encroach upon un-allotted tribal lands that many Yakamas relied upon for grazing their horses and cattle. As a means to warrant this advancement, overzealous agents identified “worthless” Indian horses as the primary culprits of rangeland destruction, systematically targeting herds for elimination. However, many Yakamas strongly opposed horse eradication campaigns, seeking to keep their lands and their horse herds intact. As such, from the 1920s through the 1940s,

⁴Scott Beckstead (Representative of the Humane Society of the United States) in discussion with the author, August 2014.

⁵“Tragedy Unfolds for Tribal Horses in the Pacific Northwest,” *American Wild Horse Preservation Campaign*, June 12, 2014, accessed August 17, 2014: <http://www.wildhorsepreservation.org/media/tragedy-unfolds-tribal-horses-pacific-northwest>. For analysis of the current dispute over wild horses on Yakama lands, see Jennifer Smith, “Where the Wild Horses Roam: Cross Cultural Debate over the fate of Wild Horses on Yakama Tribal Lands,” 2014.

⁶ In 1989, Anthropologist Renato Rosaldo (p.107) defined imperialist nostalgia as “a pose of innocent yearning both to captures people’s imaginations and to conceal its complicity with often brutal domination,” resulting in imperial societies lamenting the loss of what they have transformed. For a deeper explanation of the concept, see “Imperialist Nostalgia,” *Representations*, no. 26, University of California Press: 107–22.

⁷ Established in 1859, the Yakima Indian Agency is an extension of government oversight located on the Yakama Indian Reservation that came about as part of the 1855 Treaty with the Yakamas. In order to ensure Natives complied with the requirements that came about because of the shift to reservation living, the agency also assisted in the indoctrination of Natives in Euro-American farming and practices. Originally located in Fort Simcoe, WA, the agency relocated to Toppenish, WA in 1922. The spelling of “Yakima” is used throughout this essay in referencing the Yakima Indian Agency, as it remains the spelling used in archival documents.

Yakamas and agency employees made wild horses a terrain of struggle through which they asserted competing claims to tribal lands and resources. While horses serve as a longstanding source of contestation for Yakamas and non-Indians, the underlying issue remains a need for Indigenous peoples to legitimize their sovereignty in the face of non-Indians who seek to undermine it.

Tribal Background

In the pre-reservation era, Yakamas hunted and gathered in and around the Columbia Plateau, consuming a diet rich in berries, roots, salmon, and game. Through their acquisition of horses from the Shoshone and Flathead around 1730, Yakamas increased their mobility, expanding the seasonal range and diversifying subsistence resources.⁸ Additionally, adopting horses allowed Yakamas to gather and transport surplus materials and subsistence resources that promoted extended periods of tribal prosperity.⁹ By the mid-nineteenth century, however, horses transcended a utilitarian role in Yakama culture, becoming a recognized measure of wealth and prestige that fostered intertribal connectedness across much of the Pacific Northwest. As anthropologist Helen Schuster notes, horses became a “common feature at trades, gatherings, horse races, and social activities.”¹⁰ Overall, the shift to a semi-equestrian lifestyle in the early eighteenth century enhanced Yakama society, increasing food security and autonomy while enabling the preservation of important regional kinship ties and political alliances. The transition to reservation living in the latter half of the nineteenth century, however, challenged Yakamas’ independence through the fundamental disruption of traditional modes of living.

By the mid-1850s, the United States set its sights on acquiring the vast lands of the Columbia Plateau. Motivated by a series of recent legislation designed to clear the way for Indian removal in the West, the federal government remained determined to extinguish Indigenous land rights through treaties, placing Plateau Indians on reservations.¹¹ Yakamas, however, found the thought of ceding land to white settlers highly disconcerting. In her recent work *Land Divided by Law*, historian Barbara Leibhardt-Wester argues that Yakamas “did not want to give up their lands and feared ... [it] would disrupt their economies or even destroy their

⁸ Francis Haines, “The Northward Spread of Horses among the Plains Indians,” *American Anthropologist* 40, no. 3 (1938): 433.

⁹ Helen H. Schuster, “Yakima Indian Traditionalism: A Study in Continuity and Change,” (Ph.D. diss., University of Washington, 1975), 196-199.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, 199.

¹¹ Andrew Fisher, *Shadow Tribe: The Making of Columbia River Indian Identity* (Seattle, WA, University of Washington Press, 2010), 44.

entire way of life.”¹² This concern was not without merit, as many Yakamas maintained extensive networks of exchange and communication with tribes throughout the Pacific Northwest, many of whom were experiencing the consequences of similar negotiations.¹³ In fact, by the time Governor Isaac Stevens reached tribes on the Plateau, he was near the end of his whirlwind treaty tour, having already negotiated treaties with Northwest tribes such as the Duwamish, Makah, and Puyallup.¹⁴ Stevens sought to complete his mission by combining distinct and separate bands of Plateau Indians into tribes. In May of 1855, Governor Stevens encouraged the assembly of a small number of delegates to act on their behalf at the Walla Walla Treaty Council.¹⁵ As a result, the diverse Indigenous population of the Columbia Plateau became subject to Euro-American conceptions of tribal configuration that depended upon the construction of a homogenous Indian identity to which treaties and Euro-American law could be universally applied.

The Rise of the Yakama Nation

The Confederated Tribes and Bands of the Yakama Nation emerged as the result of contested and questionable treaty negotiations. Signed by fourteen tribal delegates, the 1855 treaty ceded more than 10 million acres of land in exchange for \$200,000, a guarantee of special provisions, and a 1.2 million acre reservation on the eastern side of Washington State.¹⁶ The promise of monetary compensation and special provisions in exchange for land, however, offered many Yakamas little solace. Cash played a minimal role in tribal economic transactions and the nature of the special provisions only bolstered Yakamas’ fear that ceding land would undermine their way of life.¹⁷ Ultimately, Euro-Americans imagined themselves shaping Indians into model citizens through indoctrination in the fundamental tenets of Euro-American society, and this transformation began with a shift to yeoman farming. However, aside from cultivating small camas root and potato patches, Yakamas had little interest in becoming farmers or conforming to Euro-American expectations of civilized living.¹⁸ Nevertheless, concern quickly shifted to anger as tensions between encroaching settlers and Yakamas erupted in warfare in the fall of

¹² Barbara Leibhardt-Wester, *Land Divided by Law: The Nation as Environmental History, 1840-1933* (New Orleans, LA, Quid Pro Books, 2014), 62-64.

¹³ Schuster, *Yakima Indian Traditionalism*, 27-44.

¹⁴ Thomas C. Galligan Jr. and Michael T. Reynvaan, “Pacific Northwest Indian Treaty Fishing Rights,” *U. Puget Sound L. Rev.* 5 (1981): 99.

¹⁵ Fisher, *Shadow Tribe*, 44-47.

¹⁶ “Treaty with the Yakima, 1855,” in *Indian Affairs: Law and Treaties*, vol. II, ed. Charles J. Kappler (Washington D.C., Government Printing Office, 1904), 698-702.

¹⁷ Fisher, *Shadow Tribe*, 99-102.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*

1855, delaying congressional treaty ratification and the Yakamas' move to reservation lands until 1859.¹⁹

Yakamas began the transition to reservation living in 1859, bringing with them large herds of Indian horses and some previously acquired cattle.²⁰ Determined to continue pursuing customary subsistence resources and maintaining widespread intertribal relationships, Yakamas frequently left the reservation, returning at their discretion. Their refusal to stay within reservation boundaries, however, served as a source of consistent frustration for the newly formed Yakima Indian Agency charged with the supervision of reservation inhabitants.²¹ For Euro-Americans, lines drawn on a map demarcated fixed borders on the physical landscape. To Yakamas, however, borders were permeable, and their retention of horses fostered much of their continued mobility. As a result, these perceived boundary infractions exacerbated the negative feelings many agency employees harbored toward the Indian-horse relationship, reinforcing a belief that horses "enabled the Indian to indulge in the ruling propensity to roam and neglect whatever would tend to civilize him."²² In short, horses offered increased mobility that made it difficult for agency employees to complete the process of assimilating Yakamas into Euro-American society.

Unfortunately for Yakamas, civilizing the "savages" remained a pervasive theme in Euro-American discourse throughout the latter half of the nineteenth century. Consequently, by the 1880s, government officials and Indian reformers determined the reservation system ineffective in its aims to transform Indians into good citizens and farmers. Through the creation of the 1887 Dawes Allotment Act, Euro-Americans could reconcile their competing desires to assimilate Natives with their need to expropriate Indian lands for white settlement. Veiled as a promising solution to the Indian problem, the Dawes Act conferred citizenship upon Indians who would accept and cultivate private tracts of land, while renouncing tribal ties.²³ More specifically, the government believed that breaking up reservation land into 160-acre parcels distributed amongst male heads of households would instill within Indians an appreciation for private land ownership.²⁴ Given the tenuous nature of previous land dealings with the federal government, however, many Yakamas remained rightfully wary. Immersion in federal Indian policies only promised to further fracture

¹⁹ Schuster, *Yakima Indian Traditionalism*, 234-238.

²⁰ Ibid., 239-244.

²¹ Fisher, *Shadow Tribe*, 62-65.

²² Orlan J. Svingen, "Reservation Self-Sufficiency: Stock Raising vs. Farming on the Northern Cheyenne Indian Reservation, 1900-1914," *Montana: The Magazine of Western History* 31, no. 4 (1981): 16.

²³ Alexandra Harmon, *Indians in the Making Ethnic Relations and Indian Identities around Puget Sound* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1998), 138.

²⁴ Joshua L. Reid, *The Sea Is My Country: The Maritime World of the Makahs, an Indigenous Borderlands People* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2015), 138.

Indigenous communities, while providing the government with means to catalogue and control Indian lands.²⁵

As many Yakamas predicted, the Dawes Act granted government officials a license to classify tribal lands in ways that aligned against Indian interests. By categorizing land as agricultural, timber, mineral, and grazing, officials effectively minimized Indian control, while simultaneously increasing their own.²⁶ Yakamas frequently questioned this new system, concerned that breaking up reservation lands based on resource content encouraged the encroachment of white settlers.²⁷ These concerns became more pressing at the turn of the twentieth century, as the government grew discouraged by the failure of the Dawes Act to encourage Indians to abandon tribal ways. Because of this, in the decades that followed, reservation lands became subject to unwelcome advancements, as the Yakima Agency allowed Indian interests to take a backseat to the interests of the government and white ranchers.

Whose Land Is It Anyway?

Cattle and sheep ranching composed the principal industries of settlers in the eastern half of Washington State at the turn of the twentieth century.²⁸ As these industries grew, gaining access to enough pasturage to support the nutritional needs of domestic livestock became more competitive. This presented a dilemma for many settlers: how does one become a successful rancher without a substantial land base? For many, the answer lay in the prime grazing lands found within the boundaries of the Yakama Indian Reservation. Thus, ranchers began to place pressure on the Yakima Agency to open reservation rangelands for the grazing of domestic cattle and sheep. By 1904, ranchers saw their efforts come to fruition, as the government effected legislation on the reservation that set aside 150,000 acres of grazing lands and timber for Yakama use, leaving over 200,000 acres of reservation lands available for lease under the permit system to local ranchers.²⁹ While the leasing of reservation lands went against the fundamental principles of the Dawes Act—allowing settlers to make use of Indian land failed to lead them down the path to civilization—government officials and Yakima Agency employees saw little purpose in letting good land go to waste, especially when so many settlers stood to benefit from its

²⁵ Leibhardt-Wester, *Land Divided by Law*, 74-75.

²⁶ *Ibid.*, 82-83.

²⁷ Minutes of Yakama Tribal Council meeting, White Swan, Washington, Feb. 15, 1887, Charles Relander Papers, Box 115, folder 18, Yakima Valley Regional Library, Yakima, Washington.

²⁸ Grant Harris, “Grazing Lands of Washington State,” *Rangelands* 13, no. 5 (1991): 222-224.

²⁹ Leibhardt-Wester, *Land Divided by Law*, 80-84.

use.³⁰

Administered through the Forestry and Grazing division of the Yakima Indian Agency, employees initially distributed leasing permits on reservation lands in short increments based on season, location, and type of livestock.³¹ By 1910, however, the Yakima Agency noticed an increased demand for grazing land, ripe for exploitation. As a result, choice-grazing lands became leasable in three- to five-year increments through sealed bidding.³² Even though bids remained anonymous, it was not long before ranchers began to voice their dissatisfaction for the new system, threatening to take business elsewhere if the agency refused to meet their needs. As an example, in 1912, prominent sheep rancher Dan Smythe cautioned that if the agency failed to grant him satisfactory range, “it will be impossible to graze...on this Reserve.”³³ Smythes’ threat, although only one of many that year, likely proved troubling for the agency, as large-scale stockmen generated essential revenue that absorbed much of the reservations’ operational costs. Yakamas, however, resented the presence of men like Smythe, as ranching operations impinged upon their own grazing needs and, in many respects, violated terms of their treaty.

Pursuant to the terms of Section 3 within the 1855 treaty with the Yakamas, the leasing of Indian lands remained subject to approval by the tribal council.³⁴ In spite of this, agency employees regularly bypassed such protocol, granting grazing permits without tribal consent.³⁵ Yet, the council was not oblivious to this usurpation of Indian authority, asserting they “should be the party to decide grazing conditions on the reservation.”³⁶ In response to tribal complaints concerning grazing on reservation lands, agency employees became defensive, deferring the blame to central offices in Washington, D.C. However, agency files tell a far different story. In a 1917 report to the Commissioner of Indian Affairs,

³⁰ *Ibid.*, 86-87. Yakima Agency employees, often referred to as “Indian agents,” were government employees who remained responsible for the maintenance and day-to day operations on the Yakama reservation. This included, but was not limited to, administering grazing leases, dispensing money and food rations to Yakamas, and making detailed reports to the Bureau of Indian Affairs in Washington, D.C. For a more detailed general description of the BIA, see Cathleen Cahill, *Federal Fathers and Mothers: A Social History of the United States Indian Service, 1869-1933*.

³¹ *Ibid.*, 89.

³² *Ibid.*

³³ Dan Smythe (Pendleton, OR) to Yakima Indian Agency [Fort Simcoe, WA] February 28, 1912, Grazing Administrative Records, 1910-1923, Folder 1, Box 176, National Archives (Seattle, WA).

³⁴ “Treaty with the Yakima, 1855.”

³⁵ E.B. Merritt (Fort Simcoe, WA) to the Secretary of the Interior [Washington D.C.] July 20, 1916, Grazing Administrative Records, Folder 2, Box 176.

³⁶ L. V. McWhorter (Fort Simcoe, WA) to the Department of the Interior, Office of Indian Affairs [Washington D.C.] June 8, 1909, Grazing Administrative Records, Folder 3, Box 176.

reservation Superintendent Don Carr warned that if Yakamas controlled the reservation grazing system, “such a course would be disastrous in the way of the efficient use of grazing area.”³⁷ Ultimately, the Yakima Indian Agency and its numerous employees sought to maintain a paternalistic role over tribal affairs, buttressed by the continued espousal of subversive rhetoric designed to portray Indigenous peoples as incapable of making decisions in the best interest of their own communities. By doing so, the agency remained free to distribute reservation lands in ways that advanced government interests.

In spite of agency disregard, Yakamas continued to be very vocal in their opposition to non-Indian livestock grazing. In 1918, for instance, the tribal council made a series of complaints to local agency employees and government officials in Washington, D.C., regarding non-Indian sheep and cattle destroying important root and berry patches. In response to these objections, Assistant Commissioner of Indian Affairs E.B. Merritt chided, “Do you think we ought to let the grazing lands go to waste when the government needs...to supply food ... in order that Indians may go and get roots out of the pasture?”³⁸ Through 1855 treaty negotiations Yakamas secured their right to gather roots and berries. Yet, in the eyes of many Euro-Americans, especially government officials, Indians occupied a unique position as wards of the federal government who desperately needed Euro-American encouragement to abandon problematic and uncivilized practices.³⁹ This rationale allowed government officials to justify restricting Yakamas’ access to tribal lands. Moreover, it ensured the government’s ability to continue exploiting indigenous land and resources to feed and clothe American soldiers and citizens during the First World War.

Throughout history, wars have given rise to periods of famine and instability; World War I was no different.⁴⁰ However, it must have seemed strange to many Yakamas that Indians— not yet acknowledged as legal citizens — should be responsible for providing lands for animals used to sustain American citizens, while being deprived of their own subsistence needs. Thus, as World War I ended and the economy temporarily stabilized, the need for animal products to feed and clothe soldiers and families in a war-torn economy dissipated.⁴¹ Despite this change, grazing on the Yakama reservation intensified, displacing Indian livestock as domestic cattle and

³⁷ Don M. Carr (Fort Simcoe, WA) to the Department of the Interior, Office of Indian Affairs [Washington D.C.] February 20, 1918, Folder 02128-04-0700, National Archives (Washington D.C) accessed November 7, 2015, <http://congressional.proquest.com/histvault? q=00128-024-0700>.

³⁸ E.B. Merritt (Washington D.C.) to Tribal Council [Fort Simcoe, WA] May 17, 1918, Folder 02128-04-0700, National Archives (Washington D.C) accessed November 7, 2015, <http://congressional.proquest.com/histvault? q=00128-024-0700>.

³⁹ “Treaty with the Yakima, 1855.”

⁴⁰ Avner Offer, *The First World War, an Agrarian Interpretation* (Oxford [England]: New York: Clarendon Press; Oxford University Press, 1989) 38-52.

⁴¹ Ibid.

sheep continued to monopolize grazing resources.

The 1855 treaty guaranteed Yakamas the right to pasture their horses and cattle on open and unclaimed reservation lands. However, as grazing areas increased in size to meet ranchers' needs, Indian grazing lands diminished.⁴² These shrunken lands failed to provide enough resources to support tribal members' horses and cattle, leading them to travel beyond borders in search of food. These boundary breaches aroused angry responses from ranchers, especially toward horses. In 1918, Chief Si-sa-se-lit Palmer lamented, "Indians have few...horses. When we turn them on the range where people are running sheep and other things, they tell us they will take our horses."⁴³ Worried that some harm might befall their horse herds, Yakamas grew increasingly cautious, afraid to allow herds to roam too far without adequate supervision. Native horses were not the only animals to venture outside of grazing areas, however; as growing numbers of cattle and sheep exceeded the carrying capacity of their ranges, they too went in search of food. As historian Andrew Fisher explains, however, many ranchers "did not feel inclined to ponder their own hypocrisy or to share range with...Indians."⁴⁴ Overall, ranchers on the Yakama reservation shared a common belief that paying for rangelands entitled them to an elevated status over Indians. The Yakima Indian Agency likely shared ranchers' sentiments, as evidenced by the ways in which agency employees responded to widespread overgrazing that threatened to undermine the continued success of non-Indian livestock operation.

The introduction of large numbers of cattle and sheep by the Yakima Indian Agency in the first few decades of the twentieth century fundamentally altered the landscape of the reservation, placing undue pressure on land and depriving Yakamas of access to resources essential for their own subsistence and the subsistence of their animals.⁴⁵ Despite this, agency employees and ranchers continued to increase range loads, paying little attention to the deteriorating condition of the land. As the situation worsened, reaching an apex around 1920, agents sought to protect the economic interests of ranchers by intensifying efforts to decrease tribal land holdings to compensate for damaged ranges. However, siphoning additional tribal lands would not come without resistance, and agents sought out a feasible means of justification for their actions. Having a

⁴² E.B. Merritt to Tribal Council.

⁴³ Ibid.

⁴⁴ Andrew Fisher, "The 1932 Handshake Agreement: Yakama Indian Treaty Rights and Forest Service Policy in the Pacific Northwest," *The Western Historical Quarterly* 28, no. 2 (1997): 196.

⁴⁵ Kathleen A. Dwire, Bruce A. McIntosh, and J. Boonie Kauffman, "Ecological Influences of the Introduction of Livestock on Pacific Northwest Ecosystems," in *Northwest Lands, Northwest Peoples: Readings in Environmental History*, ed. Dale D. Goble and Paul W. Hart (Seattle, WA, USA: University of Washington Press, 2012), 314.

longstanding disdain for Indian horses—referring to them as worthless and wasting resources—agency employees cited Indian horses as the primary culprits of overgrazing, calling for their immediate removal and eradication. Over the next two decades, Indian opposition to horse elimination created opportunities to undermine the efforts of the Yakima Indian Agency designed to deprive them of their horses and, ultimately, their lands.

The Indian Horse Problem

Wild horses residing on tribal lands in the early twentieth century were likely the descendants of Indian horses that accompanied Yakamas to the reservation in the 1860s.⁴⁶ Long recognized as “hardy, and capable of shifting with but little food,” plateau horses remained adaptable and able to thrive in the semi-arid eastern Washington climate.⁴⁷ However, the same durability that earned these horses praise and admiration served as a source of exasperation for agency employees, many of whom likely saw the presence of wild horses as akin to a rodent infestation in need of extermination. Moreover, to many Euro-Americans, Indian horses epitomized everything a horse should not be. They lacked the looks, speed, and traceable lineage of the Thoroughbred horses whites preferred, and their small size and unpredictable nature made them unsuitable for the rigors of farm work.⁴⁸ In short, as overgrazing and land degradation on the reservation became of more imminent concern, agents espoused a heavy anti-horse rhetoric, hoping to promote the widespread removal of Indian horses from valuable reservation grazing land.⁴⁹ The determination of agents to remove horses from grazing lands, however, was met with equally strong resistance as Yakamas fought to retain decision-making authority over the fate of horses and tribal lands.

By the 1920s, the relationship between Yakamas and horses considerably shifted. Heavily utilized throughout much of the nineteenth century, the advent and availability of alternative forms of transportation replaced the tribes’ dependence on horses for mobility, making their presence more sentimental than practical. As a testament to this, the prevailing argument for retaining large herds of horses simply remained,

⁴⁶ “A.J. Splawn Tells How the Yakimas Secured their Horses,” *The Yakima Herald*. (North Yakima, W.T. [Wash.]), 22 May 1907. *Chronicling America: Historic American Newspapers*. Lib. of Congress, accessed November 9, 2015, <http://chroniclingamerica.loc.gov/lccn/sn88085523/1907-05-22/ed-1/seq-12/>

⁴⁷ George Gibbs, *Indian Tribes of Washington Territory* (Fairfield, Wash.: Galleon Press, 1967), 10-11.

⁴⁸ Svingen, “Reservation Self-Sufficiency,” 18.

⁴⁹ Frank B. Lenzie (Spokane, WA) to Milton A. Johnson [Toppenish, WA], November 17, 1936, Miscellaneous Correspondence Indian Office and Spokane, 1934-1939, Folder 2, Box 91, National Archives (Seattle, WA).

“these horses belong to us Indians...they just belong here.”⁵⁰ Yakamas and horses shared a history that spanned close to two centuries, built on respect and reverence, as well as a mutual dependence on the other for survival. Horses came to the Yakamas during a time when periods of famine endangered survival, allowing for the gathering of surplus resources and ushering in a period of stability.⁵¹ Because of this, many Yakamas continued to hold horses in high esteem, seeking to repay them for their service through ensuring horses had grass to eat and lands to roam. In short, the agency’s targeting of Indian horses for eradication likely seemed unnecessarily egregious, placing additional strain on an already fragile relationship between the tribe, agency, and ranchers.

Although Yakima Agency employees insisted that horse eradication remained necessary to repair lands damaged by consistent overgrazing, the practice of perpetuating state-sanctioned acts of violence against Indian horses to weaken Native resistance is evident as far back as the mid-nineteenth century. As a nascent United States sought to expand its territorial holdings through clearing a path for settlement in the West, military forces frequently encountered powerful equestrian tribes, often proving difficult to bring under the hegemonic control of the United States. However, as military officers soon discovered, “nothing can more effectively cripple the Indians than to deprive them of their animals.”⁵² To test this theory, in 1858 United States military forces slaughtered two hundred Palouse horses on the Washington-Idaho border, as officers argued large herds slowed their advancement and hindered war efforts.⁵³ Similarly, historian Colin Calloway describes a brutal scene in 1874, when United States military forces launched an assault on groups of Kiowa, Cheyenne, and Comanche, slaughtering over fourteen hundred of their horses in the Palo Duro Canyon.⁵⁴ Although military officers actively engaged in acts of violence against Indian horses that devastated many Native communities, agency employees on the Yakama reservation likely had little interest in getting their hands bloodied through participation in a mass slaughter of Indian horses, and instead outsourced the violence to meat processing plants or canning facilities.⁵⁵

⁵⁰ Schuster, *Yakima Indian Traditionalism*, 299.

⁵¹ Ibid.

⁵² Clifford E. Trafzer, and Richard D. Scheuerman, *Renegade Tribe the Palouse Indians and the Invasion of the Inland Pacific Northwest* (Pullman, Wash.: Washington State University Press, 1986), 90.

⁵³ Ibid., 89.

⁵⁴ Colin G. Calloway, *Our Hearts Fell to the Ground: Plains Indian Views of How the West Was Lost* (Boston: Bedford Books of St. Martin’s Press, 1996), 12.

⁵⁵ “Indians Check Horse Canning Scheme,” *Evening Star* (Washington, D.C.), 19 Dec. 1903. *Chronicling America: Historic American Newspapers*. Lib. of Congress, accessed November 9, 2015, <http://chroniclingamerica.loc.gov/lccn/sn83045462/1903-12-19/ed-1/seq-35/>.

While agency employees avoided participating in the violence against Indian horses, they took little issue with orchestrating campaigns intended to eradicate large herds. In fact, in 1924 the Yakima Agency enlisted the help of the King County Humane Society to petition government officials in Washington, D.C., to sanction the killing of fifteen thousand Yakama horses.⁵⁶ Initially veiled as concern for the well-being of the animals, as many suffered from starvation and cruelty at the hands of ranchers, the joint proposition deftly shifted to justifying the mass killing so that the “range could be rented to grazing stock.”⁵⁷ Rangelands and grazing resources on much of the reservation continued to suffer from serious depletion. Thus, agents preached the need for emergency conservation efforts, the mainstay of which relied upon the removal of horses.⁵⁸ In order for grazing on the reservation to remain a lucrative business venture, Indian horses needed to be cleared from un-allotted lands so that cattle and sheep could be relocated and overgrazed lands restored. This plan, however, relied on Indian cooperation that might only occur if agency employees could convince Yakamas that their horses exacerbated poor land and grazing conditions. This would be no easy task, however, and as Superintendent Don Carr had noted a few years earlier, any previous attempts to reduce wild horses had been met with staunch Indian opposition.⁵⁹

Ultimately, Yakamas showed little interest in disposing of Indian horses at the behest of the Yakima Agency. Nor did they see any reason to alter their stance on increasing grazing lands for the benefit of ranchers. To the contrary, in 1925 the Tribal Council went above the Yakima Agency to Washington, D.C., in an effort to effect changes to the current grazing system in place on reservation lands. Addressed to the Committee on Indian Affairs, tribal delegates petitioned to prohibit “the grazing of sheep on unallotted land,” with encroaching ranchers made to pay grazing fees

⁵⁶ It is important to note that the Humane Society has evolved concerning the welfare of animals considerably since the 1920s. The rise of the modern day animal rights and welfare movement has origins in the 1960s. For a more in-depth discussion of the rise of animal advocacy in the late twentieth century, see Frans de Waal, “Anthropomorphism and Anthropodenial: Consistency in our Thinking about Humans and Other Animals,” 260-268.

⁵⁷ “Wild Ponies Declared a Nuisance,” *American Indian* (Seattle, WA) August 21, 1925, Lucullus V. McWhorter Collection, Manuscripts, Archives, and Special Collections, Washington State University (Pullman, WA), accessed November 9, 2015: <http://content.libraries.wsu.edu/cdm/ref/collection/mcwhorter/id/220>.

⁵⁸ Yakama Tribal Council (Fort Simcoe, WA) to the Department of the Interior, Office of Indian Affairs [Washington, D.C.] January 18, 1925, Folder 002128-024-0776, accessed November 7, 2015, <http://congressional.proquest.com/hist-vault?q=0012128-024-0776>

⁵⁹ Don M. Carr (Fort Simcoe, WA) to J.H. Henson [Glenwood, WA] November 29, 1918, Grazing Administrative Records, Folder 3, Box 176.

until the offending stock was removed.⁶⁰ Unlike horses and cattle, sheep are opportunistic grazers, content eating grasses, shrubs, and brush.⁶¹ Because of this, virtually all vegetation remained subject to sheep consumption, exacerbating already pressing environmental concerns. Continuous ungulate grazing and habitation wreaked havoc on reservation rangelands, removing native grasses, as well as creating trails and trampling vegetation.⁶² Moreover, ungulates are selective grazers, eating more flavorful species of plants, and allowing cheatgrass to flourish, in turn reducing the biodiversity of available plant life.⁶³ Agency employees were not ignorant to the fact that sheep and cattle were equally as devastating to rangelands as horses, if not more so. Acknowledging the impact of livestock grazing, however, comprehensively stood to significantly weaken the Yakima Agency's argument in favor of widespread horse elimination.

The Indian horse problem was not isolated to the Yakama reservation, but rather affected horse-laden reservations across the country. In 1934, John Colliers' New Deal came to the Navajo Indian Reservation seeking to effect large-scale stock reduction as a means to repair depleted ranges, while simultaneously preparing Diné for long-term stewardship of the range.⁶⁴ While government livestock reduction efforts on Navajo lands did not single out a specific ungulate, looking to reduce sheep, goat, and horse herds to more manageable numbers, soil conservationists and New Dealers alike felt "eliminating worthless horses must be the first step towards better range management."⁶⁵ As historian Marsha Weisiger describes, however, many Diné openly rebelled against horse elimination, some going so far as to hide herds from government officials for fear they would confiscate them.⁶⁶ Although New Deal stock reduction did not evolve from concerted non-Indian efforts to confiscate Navajo lands, it forced upon the Diné an American system of valuing livestock that remained incompatible with traditional understandings of the role of livestock in the Diné world.⁶⁷ Ironically, Colliers' New Deal

⁶⁰ Yakama Tribal Council to the Department of the Interior, Office of Indian Affairs, their ability to maintain and manage important tribal lands and resources to asserting tribal autonomy, Indian resisted to wide their ability to maintain and manage important tribal lands and resources to asserting tribal autonomy, Indian resisted to wide their ability to maintain and manage important tribal lands and resources to asserting tribal autonomy, Indian resisted to wide

⁶¹ Dwire, McIntosh, and Kauffman, *Northwest Lands, Northwest Peoples*, 317.

⁶² The term "ungulate" refers to an animal with hooves, either odd or even toed, such as horses, rhinos, cattle, and sheep. For a more detailed definition, see Marsha Weisiger, *Dreaming of Sheep in Navajo Country*, 132-134.

⁶³ Dwire, McIntosh, and Kauffman, *Northwest Lands, Northwest Peoples*, 317-320.

⁶⁴ Marsha L. Weisiger, *Dreaming of Sheep in Navajo Country* (Seattle, WA, USA: University of Washington Press, 2011), 12-20.

⁶⁵ *Ibid.*, 157.

⁶⁶ *Ibid.*, 44-49.

⁶⁷ *Ibid.*, 29.

boasted a promise of Indian self-determination; in an effort to promote conservation, however, Collier actually hindered Diné efforts at autonomy and long-term land and community preservation.⁶⁸ The push for horse eradication sponsored by Euro-American officials on the Yakama and Diné reservations share many striking similarities. Yet, what makes Yakamas’ resistance to horse eradication so interesting is that much of the focus on Pacific Northwest Indian resistance has centered on retaining access to fishing rights. While Yakamas remained vocal advocates for the retention of treaty fishing rights, their resistance to horse removal served multiple purposes, thwarting white encroachment and asserting tribal autonomy while shaping tribal responses to the New Deal.

Like the Diné, the Yakama Nation ultimately rejected the New Deal, seeing no reason to obtain government permission to practice tribal autonomy.⁶⁹ Ultimately, a temporary increase in government intervention in tribal land matters, many Yakamas believed, would only aggravate current tensions. Land and horses, it seems, formed the crux of many heated interactions between Yakamas and agency officials. Thus, as word spread concerning the livestock catastrophe in Navajo country, Yakamas grew more determined to undermine the efforts of officials to divest them of the land and resources that remained rightfully theirs. In 1936, Yakima Agency Range Supervisor Frank B. Lenzie, vexed by the lack of Indian cooperation in horse removal efforts, reached out to the Agronomy and Range Soil Conservationist, Liter E. Spence, in an effort to “secure some authority that would permit [agents] to eliminate horses from the reservation.”⁷⁰ Concerned that the continued presence of horses threatened the livelihood of sheep and cattle ranchers, Lenzie, and the agency more generally, grew tired of waiting for Yakamas to approve herd eradication and instead hoped to obtain governmental authority to bypass any approval needed from the Tribal Council. Council members, however, quickly caught wind of Lenzie’s underhanded tactics, reminding both agency employees and government officials that reservation lands had been set aside for the exclusive use of the Nation. The council members offered an alternative solution to rangeland problems, calling for a marked reduction in the grazing seasons and the number of permits issued to non-Indian ranchers.⁷¹

By the mid-1940s, Yakamas recognized the power in resisting the demands to remove their horse herds. If there continued to be a lack of

⁶⁸ Ibid., 23-29.

⁶⁹ Schuster, *Yakima Indian Traditionalism*, 265-269.

⁷⁰ Frank B. Lenzie (Spokane, WA) to Liter E. Spence [Washington, D.C.] November 11, 1936, Miscellaneous Correspondence Indian Office and Spokane, 1934-1939, Folder 2, Box 91, National Archives (Seattle, WA).

⁷¹ Tribal Council (Fort Simcoe, WA) to the Department of the Interior, Office of Indian Affairs [Washington, D.C.] March 11 1937, Folder 002427-029-0738, accessed November 7, 2015, <http://congressional.proquest.com/hist-vault?q=002427-029-0738>.

compliance on their behalf, the Yakima Agency could not move forward with herd eradication efforts or premeditated land grabs. This fundamental realization helped to restore some of the tribal autonomy lost throughout the chaotic transition to reservation living. Despite this, many Yakamas were not blind to the fact that range horses lacked few natural predators and were steadily increasing in numbers. This growing awareness did not negate the fact that Yakamas wanted the power to decide the most effective way to manage tribal lands and resources. While livestock grazing by non-Indian ranchers in the early twentieth century did in fact generate income that helped to maintain some reservation operations, the environmental consequences and fragmentation of Indian land left a lasting impact on the reservation. As a result, in 1950 the Yakama Tribal Council approved a measure to create a program where Indians engaged in the roundup of wild horses, trained them to ride, and attempted to adopt out horses to homes off the reservation.⁷² Although moving beyond the sentimental attachment to Indian horses likely seemed far overdue to agency employees, for Yakamas the timing made sense. For decades Yakamas fought to have their voices heard, and with an eye towards self-determination, renegotiating the relationship between horses and land constituted the next step forward.

Conclusion

Beginning in the eighteenth century, horses played an important role in Yakama culture, making meaningful contributions that earned them the reverence and respect of many Yakamas and securing space for their existence on tribal lands. By the turn of the twentieth century, however, the rise of non-Indian livestock grazing and encroachment placed Indian horses and lands in jeopardy, as the Yakima Agency and ranchers sought to erase wild horses from the reservation landscape. Although the debate over the fate of wild horses grew increasingly contentious over the course of the 1920s to 1940s, the issue goes far deeper than determining the worth of Indian horses. Euro-Americans had long adopted a problematic rhetoric grounded in ideas of racial superiority premised on beliefs that white settlers were entitled to the land and resources the country had to offer. Hence, Yakamas' resistance to horse eradication and land encroachment challenged dominant ideologies and threatened to deprive Euro-Americans of lands they felt entitled to control. Nevertheless, Yakamas remained focused on subverting the authority of reservation agents and government officials in an effort to foster the growth of tribal sovereignty. Yakamas would see their efforts—and the efforts of Native communities across the nation—come to fruition in the latter half of the twentieth century, as a series of protests, campaigns, and legislation brought about long overdue

⁷² Minutes, Timber and Grazing Committee Meeting, Yakima Indian Reservation (Toppenish, WA), January 25-26, 1950, Tribal Records, 1897-1950, Folder 7, Box 289, National Archives (Seattle, WA).

changes for Indigenous people in the United States.

Recent responses to Native attempts to manage wildlife resources on tribal lands are indicative of the influence that convoluted historical narratives and Native stereotypes continue to have over the dominant culture. Accusations that the proposed reduction of range horses on tribal lands is in contradiction to traditional Native beliefs reflect the ways in which non-Indians see Indigenous people as incompatible with the modern world. Moreover, these accusations ignore the efforts Yakamas made throughout the first half of the twentieth century to protect wild horse herds, much to the chagrin of the government and agency employees. As times have changed, technology has advanced, and the role of the horse as a mode of transportation has diminished, however, Yakamas view their relationship with the horse through a different lens. Horses remain important to many Yakamas, but the cultural significance of the horse must be weighed against their environmental impact. The damage resulting from long-term overgrazing and land management will likely take years to repair, and with an increase in wild horses estimated at twelve to twenty-five percent each year, failure to manage herd sizes proves harmful for both land and horses. Nevertheless, as long as non-Indians continue to rely on archaic and problematic tropes to question the competency of Indigenous peoples to make meaningful decisions in their best interests, Native communities face continued threats to their ability to maintain and manage important tribal lands and resources.

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