

by Blythe Thimsen

SPOKANE'S GREAT FIRE, brick buildings and horse-filled dirt roads are often what come to mind when thinking about how Spokane got its start. The truth though, is that long before those brick buildings were built and roads were filled, a tribe of Indians known as The Spokanes had long been living in the area, making it their home. Chief Spokan Garry is one of the most well known of their chiefs; a leader among his people, he was a man who was a friend of the whites, yet lost much when they moved into what is known today as Spokane.

The exact date and place of Garry's birth are unknown, as is his original boyhood name. It is estimated that he was born across the river from the North West Company's Spokane House along the Spokane River. His father was Chief Illim-Spokanee and was head of the Middle Spokanes. (There were three groups within the Spokanes: Upper Spokanes, Middle Spokanes and Lower Spokanes). The Middle Spokanes occupied territory along the Spokane River from the falls above Latah Creek to the mouth of the Little Spokane and as far south as Cheney, Washington.

Garry was born two months after the arrival of Finan McDonald and Jacob Finlay, the first white men in the area. These two traders built the North West Company's post at the spot where the Little Spokane flowed into the Spokane River. As a result of the post, white men frequently passed through and stayed for periods of time. Garry grew up with these whites around, spending much of his childhood sitting at the trading post and listening to their stories. He even saw several of them marry members of his tribe. To him, the whites' presence was a normal part of life.

In 1825, Governor George Simpson, governor of the Northern Division of the Hudson's Bay Company, wrote to the leader of the Spokane House, requesting that he send two Indian boys between the ages of

Befriender of the Whites Chief Spokan Garry



*Above: Chief Spokan Garry, possibly by Latah Creek, with one of his horses.
Photo courtesy of Northwest Museum of Arts and Culture, L95-39.20*

eight and ten from the Spokane tribe to be educated at Red River School, which was located in nowadays Manitoba, Canada. The school, run by the Church Missionary Society of the Church of England, was opening its doors to 30 Indian boys, from tribes all across the country, to receive an education and instruction “to learn how to know and serve God.”

Garry, along with the son of a Kootanais chief, was selected as one of the boys to attend the school. Estimated to be 14 at the time, Garry was small, so may have appeared 10 or 12. Governor Simpson and his men arrived to meet with the boys’ families, and to take them on the long journey to the school. They also gave Garry his English name, after Fort Garry which was where the school was located; the name Pelly was given to the other boy.

According to Thomas E. Jessett in his book *Chief Spokane Garry*, “To the Indians, religion meant power, and if they were to meet the challenge of the white men they would need to possess their power also. Hence, the willingness to send their children to the mission school.”

Before they left, Garry’s father, Illim-Spokanee said, “You see we have given you our children, not our servants or our slaves, but our own. We have given our hearts—our children are our hearts—but bring them back again before they become white men.” He could not know it then, but Illim-Spokanee would never see his son again. In the winter of 1828, three years after Garry had left home, Illim-Spokanee passed away.

It was a long, 75-day trip from Spokane House to Fort Garry, during which time he learned some English. This was helpful, as all students were required to learn English first, as they nearly all spoke different dialects and languages and were in need of a common tongue.

Red River School was an Anglican school, so the students were exposed to an opposition and dislike of Roman Catholics. Among the students, the Anglicans were called “Black Robes,” while the Catholics were “Long Robes.”

After four years of education and training, Garry and Pelly returned home for the first time in 1829. They spent the time teaching their tribes all that they

had learned about Christianity and God’s teachings. It appears that they made a good impression on their fellow tribesmen, and Christianity was widely accepted. In 1830, Gary and Pelly returned to their school, bringing with them five newly recruited students from neighboring tribes.

Sadly, Pelly, who had become Garry’s best friend, died the day after Easter in 1831. He had fallen from a horse, never



Above: Spokane Garry. Note his clothing, which was in the style of the white man. Courtesy of Northwest Museum of Arts and Culture, L94-12.10

recovered from his injuries, and had gotten increasingly weaker during the winter. Garry was sent on the long journey back home to share the sad news with Pelly’s family.

Garry spent that winter with his tribe, teaching them more of the Christian teachings he had learned. He used a bell to call them all together on Sunday mornings, conducting a simple service from the Book of Common Prayer, singing hymns and teaching them to say “Amen” at the end of prayers. Indians from surrounding tribes came to hear Garry teach and preach. During the week he held classes where he taught English. His classes at times drew hundreds of Indians. In addition to English and Christianity, he also taught them to use a hoe and to plant and raise potatoes and vegetables, something he had done as a chore at the Red River School.

When spring came, Garry decided not to return to school in Canada, but instead continued in his teaching role among his tribe. In addition to his new job, Garry had something else new: a wife to whom he gave the name Lucy.

In 1837, Reverend Henry Harmon Spalding, a missionary among the Nez Perce Indians, stopped at the village across from the abandoned Spokane House. Here he met Garry and together they preached to a group of Spokanes in the 20-foot by 50-foot school house Garry had built. Spalding, along with his colleague, W.H. Gray, was impressed with Garry’s work and wrote to the American Board, a missionary group, asking for reinforcements to come help finish the great work Garry had started. The reinforcements, Elkanah Walker and Cushing Eells, did not take a liking to Garry.

“Garry taught his people a simple morality based upon the Ten Commandments as interpreted by the catechism of the Church of England,” wrote Jesset. “Walker and Eells issued strong denunciation of gambling, horse-racing, dancing and smoking as un-Christian, in all of which Garry engaged, as did most of the Spokanes. These two approaches to Christianity were no doubt the cause of considerable debate in the lodges of the tribe.”

Eells and Walker attacked Garry’s teachings as well as the Middle Spokane’s form of worship. According to Jessett, “...to Walker and Eells there was nothing good among these people they regarded as sunk in sin.” Neither Eells nor Walker’s attempts to change the Spokanes, nor those of two Catholic priests who were in the area in 1840, had much of an impact on the Spokanes. “Whatever may have been the discussions among the Spokanes about the rival forms of Christianity, one thing is certain: not one member of the Spokane tribe was converted either by Walker and Eells or the Roman Catholic priests. They preferred to continue to use the simple form of Christianity that Garry had brought back from the Red River Mission of the Church of England,” wrote Jessett.

The missionaries’ opposition to the Spokane’s form of Christianity was so upsetting to Garry that he resigned from his role at the school and quit teaching

and preaching. As he stepped out of the limelight, his prominence and importance within the tribe waned. Distraught, he went back to the Indian way of dressing, after years of dressing in the style of the white man, in hopes of being embraced again by his tribe.

Disheartened and frustrated, around this time Garry took a second wife, a 15-year old Umatilla Indian he named

Nina, after one of his favorite teachers at his school. Her parents gave Garry several Appaloosas horses as her dowry. With this he was able to become a horse-owner and breeder, which gave him status. No longer involved with the school, and now with horses at his use, he joined some of the men of his tribe who were buffalo hunters. This meant that he would be gone for long periods of time, traveling through

Northern Idaho, Western Montana and the Rocky Mountains.

The agricultural knowledge that Garry gained at the Red River school served him well. Isaac I. Stevens, the first governor of Washington Territory, who got to know Garry when he came to Spokane as part of a survey for a possible railroad route, was surprised to discover that Garry had a large field where he raised large amounts

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of wheat. "We found Garry's family in a comfortable lodge, and he informed us that he always had on hand flour, sugar and coffee, with which he could make his friends comfortable," Stevens wrote in his October 17, 1853 diary entry.

Even with his horses and well-stocked home and land, trouble was afoot for Garry and his fellow tribesmen. The Indian wars during 1856 were a volatile time for neighboring tribes and the white men, explorers, missionaries and settlers who had come to the area. War broke out after a treaty, negotiated by Stevens in 1855, and describing onto what land the Indians would be moved, upset many neighboring Indian tribes, including the Yakima, Umatilla, Cayuse and Nez Perce. It was the Yakima Indians who murdered A.J. Bolon, a Yakima Indian agent, and pushed the Indians toward a war, which lasted until 1856.

In *The Case of Spokan Garry*, author William S. Lewis writes, "It would not be unreasonable to assume that Spokan Garry was instrumental in persuading his people not to join the warring factions, because in a letter from Isaac I. Stevens to Jefferson Davis, the Secretary of War, dated July 7, 1856, the governor wrote: '[Yakima chief] Kamiaken at a council held with the Spokanes on the 25th May, wherein he urged that tribe to join the war received a negative to his proposition.'" Garry's leadership among his people was once again respected.

Garry served as the representative when it came to negotiating land for the Spokanes. On March 28, 1859, on behalf of the Spokanes, Garry presented this request to military and Indian agents: "My people are desirous of having peace with the whites. Their wish is to have an Indian agent and soldiers to live in their country to protect them. All the chiefs and all the people are ready and willing to make a treaty with the government for the sale of their lands.....For myself, if a 'treaty' is made with us for our lands, I wish our reservation to be located where we will not be interrupted by the whites, nor our people have a chance to interrupt the whites."

Differences in the practice of religion played a role in Garry's request for spe-

cific land. He didn't want his people to mingle with the Coeur d'Alene Indians nor the Upper Spokanes, both of which practiced Catholicism, having been in contact with Catholic missionaries. At the same time, though, he didn't want to live with many of the other Spokanes. "He would not move onto the reservation that was given to the Spokane tribe because they were Presbyterians and he thought they were too Calvinistic," wrote Jessett.

His quest for a reservation was fruitless for over 15 years. Finally, in June



Above: Chief Spokan Garry, ca. 1889. Courtesy of Northwest Museum of Arts and Culture, L91-119.3

1874, General Jefferson C. Davis, Commandment of the Department of Columbia, met with Garry and let him know that he had no plans to make a reservation for the Spokane Indians.

Three years later, during Nez Perce War in the summer of 1877, several Nez Perce came to convince the Spokanes to join them in war, but Garry would not allow it. Seeing their willingness to be peaceful, the government officials promised Garry they would take good care of the Spokanes if they promised to remain peaceful, which they did.

At an 1880 council, Indian Inspector Colonel E.C. Watkins promised a "new and ample" reservation for the Spokanes, but it was never delivered. In fact, things only got worse for the Spokanes. On

March 18, 1887, they signed a treaty that relinquished their land titles and had them move from their land. Additionally, Garry and other chiefs of the Spokanes were supposed to receive a \$100.00 annuity payment for ten years, but the payments were never made.

Garry was living on a homestead east of the Hillyard area during this time. In 1888, white men took possession of Garry's land while he was camping by the river with his family. He went back to try to reclaim his land, but never got it back. Nor did he ever find another permanent home; rather, he moved from Hangman Creek to Latah Creek Canyon and finally to an Indian camping ground on the property of a settler named Mr. Mouat.

"Having been overlooked when the various neighboring tribes were allotted to reservations, Garry and his people, driven at last from their homes by covetous homesteaders, found themselves wanderers on the face of the earth; blown hither and yonder by the winds of adversity; regarded as a nuisance wherever they chanced to stay, and tolerated only when it was impossible to compel them to further pilgrimage," wrote Lewis. "The life of Spokan Garry shows a remarkable advance from savagery to education and civilization, through the influence of the early fur traders and first missionaries; a progress unhappily checked and thwarted by acts and conduct of later settlers and government officials, which forced the chief, in his old age, to return to the nomadic tent life of his fathers."

Living that nomadic life, Spokan Garry died in poverty on January 14, 1892. When his body was laid to rest at Greenwood Cemetery, it represented not only the death of a man, but the death of one who had given so much of himself: he had been a friend to the whites and in the end, abandoned by many of them.

While his life came to an end on that cold day in 1892, his legend lives on, and the sacrifices he made and the influence he had on the people and the religious practices of this area will never be forgotten. **S**

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