

“Whist-alks Way – Woman Warriors – Then and Now” scnmsci (woman who goes into battle)

The Spokane Tribe moves to honor the “Women Warriors – Then and Now.” The Spokane Tribe not only wants to honor our native women from the battlefields of the 1800’s – we also want to honor the Spokane tribal women of our families today. We honor the female warriors who daily fight to protect and preserve our culture, our lifeways, our families, our lands, our environment, and our Tribe. The City of Spokane benefits from the Spokane Indian women and Indigenous leadership that serve as nurses, lawyers, professors, school board members and directors of urban service centers.

Spokane Tribal elder Jim Sijohn shared “What I am going to share with you is not from books. My great grandfather is Ignace Garry, the great great-grandson of Chief Spokane Garry. I first heard this story in an encampment in 1978 near Clark Fork, Idaho”. Jim shared “I am going to tell you in English because that is what I was forced to learn.”

“Our people began hearing rumors the U.S. soldiers were coming. When our people started getting ready in the encampments... it was all a buzz. Like bees. Getting ready and preparing for battle. The women would run and get the bows, arrows and would bring the lances and shields to the men on horses. Hooking them on and getting them ready.”

“The Coeur d’Alene warriors began to send out work the villages. Riding horseback to the villages. They prepared through the evening and all through the night. They began putting on their medicine from the campfire. They began putting on their paint. Early in the morning they started out leaving their camp. There were medicine men and medicine women praying for them. The women in the camp started getting ready for the warriors that may be hurt, wounded or dying. They set up a medic shelter for them. They began preparing the medicines that would be needed.”

“When the battle began our warriors fought fearlessly. It wasn’t just men warriors, there were women warriors. Spokane women and Coeur d’Alene women. They fought right alongside of the men.”

“There is a story told on how one native woman, she rode bareback, and when a warrior would go down, she would ride in and get that warrior, put him on the front of her and ride back to camp. Let him off at the camp, medicine shelter, where the women would start working on him. Time after time she did this. Again, and again she rode out onto the battlefield and picked up a wounded warrior. Then she got shot.”

“A warrior picked her up and took her part way towards camp. Another woman rode out and met him and they exchanged. He went back to battle. She took the woman to camp. They say when she died, she was singing her medicine song.”

“Our warriors went up against rifles and cannons. They ended up fighting with bare hands, but they fought to protect their families. At Hangman Creek, the soldiers lined up. This Col. Wright walked through and pointed at the Indians. They made them line up... brothers and sisters, and point “You and You” selecting the Indians to be killed. The U.S. soldiers got them out there to do “their justice.” One of the warriors sang his song. He said I’m going to give it to you. You are going to have hard times. That wasn’t the only song that was sung that day. All of the sudden you would hear a woman’s voice. They weren’t singing loud because they were afraid of George Wright. They lived in fear. They were singing medicine songs and prayer songs. I hope you remember those women who were standing there. They were praying for their people. Just think what or ancestors had to go through after the battle.”

Whist-alks

Whist-alks, the daughter of Chief Polotkin and wife of Qualchan. This marriage union brought peace and stability to the region. Her family was known for their intelligence and good looks and her beauty is famous to this day (told by Mary sister of Qualchan, told to Brown p. 296). Whist-alks, whose name means "Walks in a Dress", she rode alongside her husband Qualchan. They wore their "finery of beaded buckskin" as they rode into Col. Wright's camp. Whist-alks took up Qualchan's beaded medicine staff with feathers. The Chiefs and headmen usually carry them in ceremonies. Mary spoke "it was Qualchan's custom to have Whist-alks ride with him and she carried his medicine staff." The Yakama's told the story of Whist-alks, who also served as a warrior. "Looking up, he saw Qualchan's [wife] cutting her way through the troops with a sword she had seized from one of them" (A.J. Splawn p. 119). Whist-alks remembered "when in a moment two soldiers entered the tent and grasped her husband at the head and shoulders, threw him on his back and bound him with cords." She stated "I tried to cut one soldier with my knife, but another one kicked the knife out of my hand and then a great number of soldiers crowded in, overpowered us." (Dandy Jim, p. 12 "Warriors of the Mist" p.329). Whist-alks said that when she saw the rope go over Qualchan's head, she knew all was lost and grabbing a sabre from a soldier, she started on the run out of camp. The quarter master, Tom Beall recalls "I was standing a short distance from Col. Wright's tent, when an Indian woman made her appearance in camp and she had a long lance covered with solid beadwork. She was mounted on a fine-looking horse. She rode up in front of the Col's tent and stuck the lance in the ground and rode off." Whist-alks later went into Flathead country, joining buffalo hunts east of the Rockies, where battles with Blackfoot tribe were common. She lived her final years at the mouth of the Spokane.

There is a reason the City of Spokane is named Spokane. There is a reason why members of the Spokane City Council are looking for guidance on renaming a city street. It's because of the Spokane Tribe and our important place within the community. Let's continue to provide knowledge to our city neighbors.