THE INDIAN MIDWIFE

Elma Winnemucca, 1919

Some historical notes and comments
for the descendants of William and Emma Patt

Please share this with other family members and write or e-mail if you have corrections or information to add.

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William Andrew Patt—Billy as he was known to friends—came west from Rhode Island in 1878, after a harrowing ride in a railroad boxcar in which he nearly died. He was in Virginia City, Montana around 1880, and he said he knew Calamity Jane, which could be true since she had been living in the area since the 1860s. She called him “Red.”

For most of the 1880s, “Red” based himself in the Three Forks area, where the Gallatin, Madison and Jefferson rivers converge into the mighty Missouri. In later years, he would tell of snowshoeing into the Madison Basin to hunt for elk, wading across the Madison River to take the meat to Butte or Dillon, and then returning with supplies.

In 1889, he married a German immigrant, Emma Katherine Kerzenmacher. He was 29 and she was 24.

Their first child was born a year later at a place identified in genealogical records as “Madison Basin, Montana.” This is a large area in southwestern Montana, but presumably they were now living on the ranch William Patt had established around 1885 or 1886 along Spring Creek, a tributary of the Madison River. This was public land, which meant Bill Patt was technically a squatter, although under the provisions of the Homestead Act, he could have been eligible to receive a patent for the land after five years of occupancy. He never filed, however. Instead, when the family relocated to Humphrey, Idaho in 1897, eighty miles to the west, he turned the
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ranch over to Emma’s younger brother, Peter Kerzenmacher. According to government records, Peter purchased two 80-acre parcels in 1905 and then received a homestead patent for another 160 acres in 1910. Soon after this, plans were made to dam the Madison River and flood much of the valley where the Patt-Kerzenmacher ranch was located. In 1914, as the waters of Lake Hebgen began to raise, Peter and his wife Lulu moved most of the original buildings to higher ground, and lived there until Peter’s death in 1937 (within a few weeks of his sister Emma’s death and their mother’s, back in Germany, whom they had not seen since leaving home decades earlier). Because the Kerzenmacher’s sometimes boarded tourists, the house Billy Patt built came to be known as the Grayling Inn. The ranch was also site of the area’s post office for many years, run by Lulu Kerzenmacher.

Grandpa Patt was a carpenter, among other things, and he helped build some of the original buildings in the area, including the Sherwood Hotel at Henry’s Lake and the Norris Hotel in Yellowstone Park. Eventually, he turned the ranch at Humphrey over to his son Andy and moved to Dubois, where he was elected two times to serve a probate judge.

What I’ve related about William Patt is based mostly on the memories of his grandson, Frank Roscoe. I hope to add to it as I learn more about him from other relatives.

I remember hearing some of these stories when I was a boy. My parents named me after him and called me Billy, as he was. But I had forgotten much of this as I grew up, even though in later years I did a good deal of research on the history of the American West and its original inhabitants. Now it turns out that one of the Native Americans I studied had a place in our family’s history.

Among the memories passed down by the descendants of William and Emma is a recollection that an Indian midwife assisted at the birth of one or more of their children. When I visited with Frank and Virginia on Mother’s Day 2004, these stories came up, and Virginia added two details she had learned from, Pat Miller, a descent of Peter Kerzenmacher.
The midwife’s name was “Susie Winnemucca”; and Susan Flora, the second of the nine Patt children, was named after her.

The name caught my attention. Could this be Sarah Winnemucca, the famous “Paiute Princess” and early advocate for Native American rights?

I mulled this over and some weeks later began pulling books from my shelves. Soon I was hunting down articles through Interlibrary Loan, writing queries to historians, and surfing the Internet, trying confirm the identity of this Indian midwife.

There are many details still to be filled in, but I think I’ve solved the mystery. Along the way, I’ve also learned some fascinating history about the remote and beautiful part of the world where the pioneer Patts made their home.

But first let me give some background on who Sarah Winnemucca was and what makes her such an interesting figure.

The Paiute Princess

Born in the Northern Paiute tribe around 1844, Sarah Winnemucca grew up during the last years of her people’s traditional life as hunter-gatherers occupying the eastern slopes of the Sierra Nevada and deserts of the Great Basin. By the time she was an adult, this ancient way of life was gone, and the Northern Paiute people were facing the very real prospect of extinction.

It began with a few trappers straggling into the Great Basin in the 1830s. They quickly decimated region of the few fur-bearing animals to be found, sometimes befriended and sometimes assaulted the native people, and moved on. The immigrant trains came next, in growing numbers, and then in 1848 the deluge of fevered fortune-hunters scrambling to reach the gold mines in California.

By the end of the 1850s, the Paiutes’ traditional food sources were despoiled, their seasonal migrations disrupted, and their best lands occupied. Facing starvation, they fought the Americans twice, in 1860 and again in 1865, and to their credit. But theirs was a lost cause, and they knew it.

Sarah’s grandfather was the respected chief known to the whites as Truckee. When he first encountered the Americans in the year Sarah was born, he apprised their numbers and their determination and, above all, their weapons, and decided that his people’s best hope was to win their favor and learn to survive in the world they were creating. The steps he took to achieve
this were far-sighted, and they set his granddaughter on the path that would lead her to become a renowned figure in American history.

Around 1851, Truckee took most of his family, including a terrified young Sarah, on an extended trip to the Central Valley of California. Setting up camp near white settlements, the Paiutes worked in the homes and ranches of the settlers. Sarah overcame her fear of the “white owls,” as the Paiutes called them, and when a white woman nursed her back to health after she had an allergic reaction to poison oak, Sarah learned that some of their race could be kind-hearted and fair.

The turning point in her life, however, came in 1857, when Sarah lived for a year with the family of Major William Ormsby in Genoa, Nevada. It was here that she received her first lessons in English.

It was a brief interlude. When Sarah returned to her family it was a time of crisis for the Paiutes. Famine was widespread, and she had already seen the untimely deaths of several relatives. In 1865, both her mother and infant brother were killed at an infamous incident known as the Mud Lake Massacre.

The Americans were trying to confine the Paiutes and others to reservations, but the conditions at these desolate tracts were so poor that many decided to take their chances living on the run. Those who did come into the reservations found that the government kept few of its promises for food, clothing, and shelter.

As the daughter and granddaughter of a chief and a medicine man, Sarah had inherited unique talents and a profound sense of duty to her people. Indeed, by ensuring that she learned English and gained familiarity with the white world, her elders appear to have intentionally groomed her for her future role. In any case, she entered adulthood with an acute sense of the injustices her people were suffering and the ability to communicate them in powerful ways.

In 1864, Sarah joined her father, Chief Winnemucca, and sister in an unusual attempt to appeal directly to the conscience of the white community.

Appearing on stage on Virginia City, Nevada, they presented several tableaux vivant—the popular 19th century entertainment...
featuring posed still-life scenes from literature and history—followed by a speech in Paiute by the venerable Winnemucca, which Sarah translated. The performance was repeated in San Francisco, and soon Sarah was speaking in her own words, not translating, and winning the admiration of audiences.

In 1870, she turned to the written word and discovered its potential to reach even broader audiences. A letter she wrote to an army official describing her people’s condition and pleading for relief was forwarded to Washington and eventually reprinted in *Harper’s Magazine* and in Helen Hunt Jackson’s 1881 indictment of U.S. Indian policy, *A Century of Dishonor*.

In 1872, the Northern Paiutes agreed to settle at the Malheur reservation in Central Oregon. They found the setting to their liking, and for the first time in years Sarah was optimistic about her people’s future. For a time, she worked as an assistant at the reservation school. But when an agent trusted by the Paiutes was replaced by a man indifferent to their welfare and probably corrupt, Sarah became embroiled in disputes that eventually led to her being banned from the reservation.

In the years that followed, Sarah journeyed from Salt Lake City to San Francisco and back to Nevada appealing to the public and to public officials to improve the Paiutes’ plight. Whenever conflicts between natives and whites in the region threatened to erupt into violence, she stayed true to her grandfather’s policy and advocated peace, knowing that even minor incidents could provoke violent and devastating reprisals from the military and local whites. Throughout her life her view of the future for Indian people remained bleak. Yet, against all hope, she continued to struggle on their behalf.

In 1878, a band of Bannock Indians, a tribe related to the Paiutes, began raiding white settlements and homesteads in central Oregon. Sarah saw dire consequences for her people should they become embroiled in the conflict, so she offered her services to General Oliver O. Howard, the one-armed Civil War veteran who was charged with subduing the hostiles. Sarah not only spoke their
language, she was an accomplished horsewoman with extraordinary powers of endurance; and she knew the rugged and broken terrain into which the Bannocks retreated like the back of her hand. Gen. Howard found her invaluable. Through the brief conflict, known as the Bannock War, she and her sister-in-law and companion, Mattie, served as scouts and translators, guiding military detachments and observing engagements firsthand. Within one three-day period, they rode 223 miles barely stopping to rest or eat. (Whether on such occasions Sarah rode sidesaddle, in the style of white women, as she claimed, seems doubtful).

Sarah’s most remarkable feat was the single-handed rescue of her father and his followers, who were being held captive by the renegade Bannocks. She walked into the hostiles’ camp in disguise and led the captives away under the cover of darkness. At the end of the conflict, her father declared her a warrior and chief, the equal of any man.

The aftermath of the Bannock War must have been a bitter disappointment for Sarah and the Paiutes. Despite her service to the government and the cooperation of the Paiutes, they were imprisoned and forced to march on foot in the dead of winter 350 miles to the Yakama reservation in Washington. Sarah’s boon companion, Mattie, was among the casualties.

The Paiutes languished at Yakama, while Sarah fought to secure their freedom, appealing to military and government officials. When this failed to produce results, she went directly to the public, undertaking a series of lectures in San Francisco. Encouraged by the reception she received, she joined her father, brother, and another Paiute leader in early 1880 on a journey to Washington, D.C. Here she made her case to Secretary of the Interior Schurz and called on President Rutherford Hayes. She left with letter from Schurz ordering the release of the Paiutes at Yakama. Her people’s ordeal was over—or so she thought.

While she was in the nation’s capital, Sarah had charmed Washington society with her stylish, Victorian dress and
dignified deportment. Now, back in Nevada, eager to bear the good news to her people, she put her finery away and rode on horseback cross-country to Yakama, a journey of some 600 miles. When she arrived, a council was organized and she read the “beautiful letter” from Secretary Schurz. But the agent refused to allow the Paiutes to leave without further instruction from Washington—and none was forthcoming. After two months of cajoling, Sarah was defeated, her credibility in the tribe undermined. 

Grateful for her service during the Bannock conflict, Gen. Howard arranged a position for Sarah at Fort Vancouver, where she served as translator for a group of Shoshone Indians imprisoned there. Here she found a new way help her people. There were nineteen children among the imprisoned Shoshones. Having assisted at reservation schools at Malhuer and Yakama, she now organized her own school and began teaching the children to speak and read English.

In October 1880, she had one more chance to appeal for the release of the Paiutes. President Hayes, who was touring the western states, spent a day at Fort Vancouver and paid a call on Sarah and her pupils. His response to her tear-filled plea was simply, “I will see about it.” But again nothing happened.

In the end, nearly a fifth of the Paiutes held at Yakama died. Eventually, the survivors began to slip away. By 1884 none were left.

When the Shoshones at Fort Vancouver were allowed to return to their reservation in Idaho in mid-1881, Sarah’s service with the government was over. That December she married a white man, Lewis Hopkins, who had been a soldier during the Bannock War.

With her new husband, Sarah took some time off from her public role. The highpoint of her career, however, had yet to come.

In 1883, Sarah and Lewis traveled to the East Coast and remained for over a year. They spent most of their stay in Boston, where Sarah found a devoted friend and benefactor in the elderly spinster, Elizabeth Palmer Peabody. With Peabody’s encouragement and support, she undertook a tour of eastern cities, delivering over 300 lectures to large and appreciative audiences. Then, in the
spring of 1884, she returned once more to Washington, calling on President Arthur and other officials, and testifying before Congress. Despite her efforts, she left convinced that “their eyes aren’t opened yet.”

It was during her stay in Peabody’s home that Sarah wrote her landmark autobiography, *Life among the Piutes: Their Wrongs and Claims*. Published in 1883, it was one of the first books written in English by a Native American, male or female; it ensured her place in history, while providing an invaluable record of Northern Paiute history and culture.

Despite the enthusiastic response to her public appearances, Sarah saw little concrete change in Indian policy over the years. In 1885, she gave her last public lecture in San Francisco. She now turned her energies to a new project.

Using income from sales of her book and donations from Peabody and others, she founded a school at Lovelock, Nevada for Paiute children. At a time when the only education available to most Indians was at government-run boarding schools, where children were punished for speaking their native languages and taught vocational skills of dubious value, Sarah’s approach was well ahead of its time. She taught in both English and Paiute, relied on rewards instead of punishment, and tailored her lessons to the day-to-day realities of her pupils’ lives.

Without government funding, keeping the school going was a constant challenge. Sarah managed to continue off and on until 1889, when she was finally forced abandon her experiment. Eighteen years would pass before the government opened a school for Paiutes at Lovelock and another twenty before Paiute children were allowed to attend public schools alongside white children.

For the first time in her life, Sarah had no crisis or all-consuming cause to absorb her attention. It must have been a bittersweet time. Now in her early forties, a widow following the death of Lewis Hopkins from tuberculosis in 1887, she spent much of her time away from Nevada, with its constant reminders of the conflicts and disappointments of her younger years. Then, suddenly, and with some mystery, it was over. Sarah Winnemucca died in 1891 at the age of forty-seven far from her home and her people. She lies buried in an unmarked grave whose location
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A Tale of Two Sisters

The details of Sarah’s life as related so far do not seem to lend credence to the story of an Indian midwife named “Susie Winnemucca.” Neither of the two biographies, nor the various articles about her that I have reviewed, mention that Sarah ever served as a midwife. In fact, although she had a rather complicated matrimonial history that included marriages to both white and Indian men, she never had children herself.

But there is one detail yet to be mentioned and it provides the key to solving the mystery of the Indian midwife. That is the location where Sarah died: Henry’s Lake, Idaho, just across the border from Montana and the Madison Valley, where William and Emma Patt were starting a family.

What was she doing so far from her home in western Nevada? To answer that question and uncover the connection between her and the Patt family we need to backtrack a little to tell the story of another woman named Winnemucca—Sarah’s younger sister, Elma. Her life is no less fascinating than Sarah’s, and it provides the answer to the identity of the Indian midwife.

When Elma Winnemucca was born around 1850, Sarah was delighted to have a younger playmate. The two girls were close throughout their childhood together. When Sarah went to live with the Ormsby’s in 1857, Elma went, too, and, like her sister, learned English. A few years later, they traveled to San Jose, where they were briefly enrolled in a convent school. In 1864, Elma joined her father and sister in their stage presentations in Virginia City and San Francisco.

After the Mud Lake Massacre in 1865, the family became divided. Chief Winnemucca and some of his followers retreated into the mountains, hoping to avoid contact with whites altogether. Sarah went to live with her brother at Pyramid Lake, where she soon became involved disputes with the Indian agent that inaugurated her career as an activist. Then, in 1867, Elma left to live with a French family in Marysville, California.

Elma’s new family moved to a ranch near Bozeman, Montana. A young woman now, she married a white man, John B. Smith. Smith, according to one historian, was a lumberman; another identifies him as a commissary clerk in Helena, Montana. He was also known as Captain John Smith. Smith took his new bride to Virginia City, Montana, where
he intended to prospect for gold. (This was about the same time that Billy Patt arrived in the area.) This seems to have been a short-lived venture, however. According to government land records, a John B. Smith received homestead patents in 1878 and 1882 for land along the Ruby River, just to the west of Virginia City. The 1880 census also has a John B. Smith, identified as a farmer, age 45, married, and living in the Ruby Valley of Madison County.

Soon, however, John and Elma Smith relocated again, this time to a homestead at Henry’s Lake, Idaho just across the state line, which follows the Continental Divide. It is believed that they settled there sometime in the early 1880s.

In those years, the region around Henry’s Lake was still pristine wilderness, unchanged since Lewis and Clark had passed through eight decades earlier. The lake itself (named after fur trapper Andrew Henry) abounded in fish, while large populations of elk, deer, and bear roamed the forests. Beneath its scenic beauty, however, lay an unstable and sometimes deadly geological zone. Criss-crossed with fault lines, it is prone to earthquakes capable of altering the landscape in an instant, as happened in 1957 when a 7.5 magnitude trembler shook loose the side of a mountain and damned the Madison River, creating a lake where none had been before. And of course, Yellowstone Park, with its percolating mud holes and hissing geysers lies just to the east.

As remote as it was, Henry’s Lake had long been a crossroads. A trail used by the Bannock Indians to reach the Plains crossed Red Rock Pass to the west and looped around the southern shore of the lake. Chief Joseph used this route in 1877 as he led the Nez Perce on their doomed quest for freedom across 1200 miles of wilderness. At Targhee Creek, which flows into Henry’s Lake, they fought a holding action against General Howard’s forces, and a Bannock chief fighting with Joseph was killed; the creek bears his name.

At an elevation of 6500 feet, the climate here is as extreme as the geology, alternating between a few warm days in summer and 200 inches of snowfall in the winter. With only 45
frost-free days a year, there is not much that can be grown by way of food. The earliest settlers lived by fishing, hunting, and raising cattle or sheep.

Among the first was Gilman Sawtell, who arrived in the late 1860s and built house on the lake shore as a base for his trapping operation. In the early 1870s, Dick Rock established a ranch on the north shore. Following the creation of Yellowstone National Park in 1872 the area began to lose some of its isolation. In her voluminous travel journal, Carrie Strahorn describes her arrival at Henry’s Lake in 1880 on the first stage coach to make the journey to the park. Soon stage lines were bringing tourists from train stops in Idaho. The Salisbury ranch, which I believe was just across the border from Henry’s Lake in Madison County, was an early station.

By the end of the 1880s Joseph Sherwood and his first wife, Susan, had made their a home on the north shore of the lake. Sherwood built a general store with four guestrooms, by virtue of which it became known as the Sherwood Hotel. An enterprising fellow, Sherwood undertook various ventures over the years, including cattle raising and an attempt at commercial fishing. He hosted Fourth of July celebrations for the local residents and acquired a launch to take tourists for rides on the lake. In 1907, he received a patent for his “auto snow-car,” designed to surmount snowdrifts. His hobbies included photography and taxidermy, both of which were generously showcased in the hotel.

In November 1889—the same month William and Emma married in Helena—Sherwood store’s was designated a post office. If William Patt worked on the its construction, he must have been in the area before his marriage and before he settled in Madison Valley.

Life at Henry’s Lake had its charms. John and Elma’s cabin was on the north shore, not far from the Sherwood store. Down the road was Dick Rock’s ranch, which featured tame buffalo that Rock had trained to pull a buggy. Elma herself tamed several antelope, trying red ribbons around their necks to identify them to the local hunters. Her father was a shaman who reputedly had the power to charm game animals. Perhaps Elma inherited some of this skill.

John and Elma Smith had two
children, who died in infancy. When two neighboring white boys, Will and Ed Staley, became orphaned the Smiths adopted them.

Elma seems to have had a lively sense of humor. As a girl, she had staged tableaux vivante with her sister depicting scenes from the life of Pocahontas. So the irony of her marriage to a man named John Smith was not lost on her. She took to calling herself calling “Pokey Smith,” which is the name most of the white settlers knew her by. Lillian Culver, a settler in Centennial Valley, refers to her in her diary as “Mrs. Indian Smith.”

According to Frank, Grandpa Patt once said he knew a “squaw man”; no doubt John Smith. This was a derogatory term then as it is now. In the nineteenth century interracial marriage was hardly less controversial between whites and Indians than it was between whites and African-Americans. This was part and parcel of the common attitude toward Indians in those days. The question of fairness and rights aside, few white Americans doubted that that Indians belonged to a race intellectually and morally inferior to theirs.

Sarah’s Refuge

After she accompanied the Shoshones to Fort Hall, Idaho in the summer of 1881, Sarah’s service with the government was over. In her autobiography she writes, “Finding it impossible to do any thing for my people I did not return to Yakima, but after I left Vancouver Barracks I went to my sister in Montana.”

It was their first reunion in fourteen years.

When Sarah returned to Nevada that September, Elma accompanied her. Apparently, wilderness living had not robbed the sisters of a sense of fashion; according to the local newspaper, they disembarked at the Winnemucca station from a Central Pacific palace car “dressed in fashionable attire.”

That December Sarah married Lewis Hopkins, a white man she had met serving as a soldier during the Bannock War. In February 1882, they traveled to Henry’s Lake and remained there for several months. They were probably still there when Sarah’s father, Winnemucca, died.

In the spring of 1883, Lewis joined Sarah on her extended tour of the East Coast.

When Sarah returned in 1884, however, she was alone. Lewis had squandered their savings through gambling and then disappeared. With little to show for all her efforts, Sarah was not eager to face her tribespeople in Nevada, so decided to visit Elma again at
Henry’s Lake.

As the years passed, Sarah established a pattern of spending summers with Elma and winters in Nevada. Getting to Henry’s Lake in those days was not a Sunday drive. Sarah would have traveled first on the Central Pacific train line to Salt Lake City, then on the Utah and Northern line to Spencer or Monida, where stage lines departed for Yellowstone with stops at Henry’s Lake. The ride took three days with nights spent at primitive hostels or ranches along the way.

On January 19, 1889, John Smith died unexpectedly. Joe Sherwood, now assuming the role of coroner, declared the cause to be too much chokeberry wine—Elma’s specialty. He built a wooden casket for Smith and a simple funeral was held. A group of Bannock Indians that Smith had befriended arrived on horseback in traditional regalia and gathered on a hillside to wail as their friend was buried.

Smith had left some savings, and there was the little cabin near the lake, so Elma was fairly well-situated, all things considered. Now that both sisters were widows, they spent an increasing amount of time together. Elma joined Sarah in Nevada for the winter of 1889, then both sisters returned to Henry’s Lake the following spring.

That summer would be an eventful one.

We have some glimpses of Sarah and Elma’s life at Henry’s Lake thanks to the diary of Lillian Culver and the recollections of Julia “Dewey” Sherwood. Her mother, Mary Ann Garner, settled at Henry’s Lake with her family in 1890. (In 1899, she married Joe Sherwood, who had become a widower after his wife Susan’s death earlier that year.) A young woman of nineteen, Ann Garner discovered that she had two remarkable neighbors—one who could tame wild animals and make her own chokecherry wine; the other who had been to the White House and shook hands with the president. According to Dewey (as reported in Gae Whitney Canfield’s biography of Sarah), her mother joined the Winnemucca sisters on their treks into the forest to pick berries and called on them at their cabin.

It is the stories Dewey heard from her mother Ann that answer our question. There was indeed an Indian woman in that neck of the woods who was called on by local settlers when they needed a midwife. It was Elma.

In the spring of 1890, Sarah and Elma planted a large vegetable garden. To protect it from squirrels, Sarah watched over it with rifle in hand. When the settlers gathered at the Sherwood place to celebrate the Fourth of July, Sarah
and Elma delighted them with their renditions of lively Mexican dances, learned years earlier in California.

A few days after this, Sarah spotted a party of Bannocks on the old trail that skirted the lake. She generously invited them to dinner at the cabin. All seemed to go well, but the Bannocks may have been harboring grudges toward Sarah because of her role in the Bannock War. In 1878, there had been skirmishes between Bannocks and Americans near Henry’s Lake area.

In any case, after their guests departed, Sarah had a premonition of danger. She and Elma hid in a haystack and watched as the Bannocks returned and set the cabin on fire.

The Winnemuccas were not homeless for long. According to the Lillian Culver diary, a new cabin was quickly built. Local settlers may have helped.

The sisters spent the winter in Nevada, but the spring of 1891 saw them returning one more time to Henry’s Lake. They took the Monida-Yellowstone stage, stopping along the way for dinner at Lillian Culver’s home.

That summer Sarah and Elma picked chokecherries, which Elma used to make wine. In the late summer, Sarah traveled to Bozeman to serve as a guide for a woman tourist from New York. She was back at Henry’s Lake on October 16, 1891, enjoying a large meal with Elma, when suddenly she gasped and collapsed. A neighbor was sent to bring Joe Sherwood, but by the time he arrived Sarah was laid out in bed, her eyes closed peacefully. In his capacity as postmaster/storekeeper/coroner Sherwood again declared the cause to be too much chokecherry wine.

A simple ceremony was organized. Once again the Bannocks came to join the mourning (presumably, not the ones who burned down Elma’s cabin). According to the Sherwood’s daughter, they buried Sarah near John Smith’s grave, which was somewhere outside the Targhee cemetery on the slope below the old Richard’s ranch house.

Given Sarah’s frequent sojourns at Henry’s Lake, there would have been many opportunities for her and the Patt’s to meet. William and Emma may have been present at the July 4th celebration in 1890, for example, where Sarah and Elma performed dances. They might
have used the occasion to alert Elma to Emma’s immanent delivery.

Andrew Jeremiah Patt was born a few weeks later, on August 29, 1890. If Elma went to the Madison Valley to be midwife, it seems likely that Sarah joined her. Given their recent encounter with hostile Bannocks, it would have been wise to travel together.

The next Patt—Susan Flora—was born on January 12, 1892, barely three months after Sarah’s death. Did the Patts mean to honor her memory and comfort Elma by naming the little girl after Sarah, who was sometimes called Sallie and Sadie, and whom they remembered as Susie? Another possibility, however, is that she was named after Joe Sherwood’s first wife, Susan.

Whatever the case, the memory of an Indian midwife turns out to have a good basis in fact. If the Patt’s did not name their first daughter after Sarah, they certainly knew her.

We can only imagine now the conversation William and Emma might have had with Sarah Winnemucca. I see them sitting at a kitchen table, covered in an oil cloth, with a kerosene lamp burning. The stories of the daughter of an Indian chief, who had served as an army scout in time of war, been to Washington, D.C. and shaken hands with two presidents, and wrote a book must have been fascinating to hear.

I would have like to have been there.

Afterwords

The residents around Henry’s Lake saw more than their share of untimely deaths. Joseph Sherwood lost his first wife and an infant child born to his second wife. The Patts lost two children, as did Elma and John Smith. Then there were the unexpected deaths of John Smith and Sarah Winnemucca—within a span of three years.

In 1892, one of the white boys Elma had adopted, Will Staley, disappeared without a trace. Some of the settlers speculated that foul play was involved and pointed fingers at Elma. The rumors—including the improbable theory that Emma poisoned Sarah because they were both in love with the same man—had a long life. Biographer Sally Zanjani has recently repeated them, adding the even wilder speculation that the object of their mutual affection was their cousin, William Ferguson. (Ferguson, who homesteaded near Henry’s Lake, died in a blizzard in 1915 and left his possessions to Elma.) According the Lillian Culver diary, “The people tried Mrs. Smith before Judge McMinn as it was thought there was foul play, but nothing could be proved so she
was set free."

The Paiutes had a different view of Elma’s misfortunes: She was the victim of witchcraft.

At the time, Mary Ann Garner was among those to come to Elma’s defense. She quickly reminded those who were spreading rumors how often they had relied on Elma when they needed a midwife.

Whatever Will Staley’s fate, his brother, Ed, remained loyal to Elma the rest of his life. In 1896, she loaned him money to buy the old Sawtell homestead, whereupon it became known as the Staley Ranch, and she lived with him until he left the area. An old man in 1961, he related his memories of Elma in a letter to author George Brimlow.

Meanwhile, four more Patt children—Frank William, Jerry M., Joseph Stubb, and Samuel B.—were born in the Madison Valley. Elma may have been present at all of these births. She continued to live in her cabin on the north shore of Henry’s Lake until her death in 1920. She is reportedly buried in one of the unmarked graves in the Targhee Cemetery.

Our ancestors who settled in the Madison Valley in the 1890s were part of a social experiment that lasted barely a generation. Pattys and Kerzenmachers and Roscoes were lured to the arid plains and mountains of the West by a dream of self-sufficiency and independence, of living close to the land and feeding themselves with their own hands. But it was not a dream that could be sustained at those rarified altitudes. At the end of a life of constant physical work men like William Patt owned little more than what they had started with and had little to pass on to their sons and daughters.

As the pioneer generation’s dream faded, so has memory of the skills and knowledge frontier living required. I caught glimpses of this growing up in Missoula—men who built their own houses and fixed cars with homemade parts; women who could grow and preserve enough fruits and vegetables to last through long winters and knew cures for the kinds of injuries and illnesses that these days land us in the emergency room.

Frontier living required particular social skills, as well. The memory of an Indian midwife who served our family reminds us that frontiers are places where cultural boundaries reach a vanishing point. Here and there, in the long history of the European encroachment in North America, there were places like southwest Montana in the 1890s, where people of different races came to know and depend on each
other. It is a part of our history worth remembering.

June 8, 2005
San Francisco

Sources


Links

http://virtualguidebooks.com/Montana/WesternMontana/HebgenLake/HebgenLakeShore.html -- panoramic view of the lake now on top of the Patt homestead.