



# In the Spotlight

Grades  
K-3, 4-6

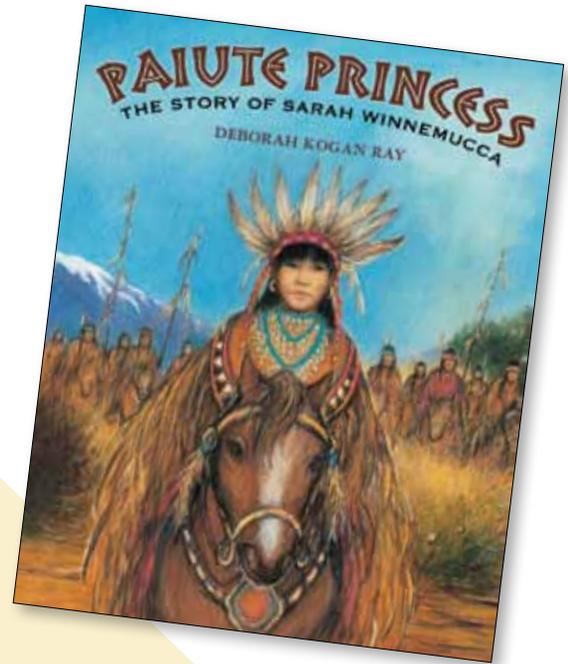
by | Sharron L. McElmeel

*Paiute Princess: The Story of Sarah Winnemucca*,  
by Deborah Kogan Ray. Farrar Straus Giroux, 2012.

## America's Royalty

Royalty—kings and queens, princes and princesses—are generally associated with European countries. While royalty is not an official part of the American culture, many people have become intrigued by the concept. During the history of the United States, some families have been informally designated as “royalty,” due to their wealth or social status. In the 1800s, specific female Native Americans were referred to as “Indian Princesses,” even though officially there are no princesses in the Native American culture. Sarah Winnemucca, a Native American activist and teacher, was often referred to by the white community as a Paiute “princess,” as she was thought to be the daughter of a Paiute chief. Her life is chronicled in Deborah Kogan Ray’s *Paiute Princess: The Story of Sarah Winnemucca*.

Thocmetony (who was later called Sarah) grew up in two worlds—the traditional world of her parents, Paiute Native Americans who lived a traditional life, and the life she lived among white people as she traveled with her grandfather to California. Thocmetony was just six years old when she first left Nevada to travel to California with her family and her grandfather, Chief Truckee, a Paiute Indian. They stayed with Chief Truckee’s friend Hiram Scott. At first, Thocmetony was frightened and hid in her mother’s blanket, but later she accompanied her grandfather on many long trips to California. It is thought that Scott gave Thocmetony the name Sarah. English and Spanish were spoken in the California region where Chief Truckee and Sarah traveled, so by the time Sarah was ten she had learned to speak both



languages well. That duality was to mark the rest of her life. She used her speaking and writing skills to obtain justice and fair treatment for her people, who suffered from starvation, violent attacks, and forced relocations. When the United States government ignored her pleadings, Sarah Winnemucca took her case to the public. She went on a speaking tour across the country, from San Francisco to Boston, giving speech after speech in churches and public halls. Not all of her efforts were successful—the abuse by the Bureau of Indian Affairs continued, but the public stir she caused did result in the Paiute being allowed to stay in their Nevada homeland.

While she was in Boston on a speaking tour, Sarah met two women who became her close friends and urged her to write her story. The women were sisters, Elizabeth Palmer Peabody and Mary Peabody Mann (the widow of Horace Mann). Sarah Winnemucca took their advice, and her autobiography, *Life Among the Piutes*, was pub-

## In the Spotlight

lished in 1883. The following year, she boarded a train back to her Nevada homeland. She had a goal of starting a school where she would teach Paiute children to live in the white world while retaining pride in their Paiute culture. At first, she had to convince parents to send their children to her—they were skeptical because of her long association with the white world. But within two years, more than four hundred children had sought admission to the Peabody School, which her friends in Boston helped to finance. The Peabody School taught children in the Paiute language as well as in English. Students learned to read, did math and spelling, and used grasses and flowers to make art projects. They also wrote and performed plays based on Paiute lore and sang songs. But Sarah's school was closed after four years, due to the government's policy of assimilation, or subsuming Native American culture to American culture. Government agents rounded up children and sent them to boarding schools, to "civilize" the children. The children were required to speak only English. After Sarah's school closed in 1889, she retreated to an isolated home near Henry's Lake in Montana, where she lived with her sister. Sarah Winnemucca died at the age of forty-seven in October 1891.

An author's note confirms that "princess" was not a Paiute concept but a creation of the white community. In fact, Sarah's grandfather was not the central leader of the Paiute tribe to which Sarah belonged, as the Paiutes did not have a central leader. A person to speak on behalf of the tribe was designated only when outsiders demanded a spokesperson. Her grandfather became the appointed "talker." Since "chief" meant "talker" or "storyteller," Truckee was referred to as Chief Truckee. As the granddaughter of a respected leader, Sarah was revered by the white community and referred to as a "princess." However, later in her life, her own tribe called her "Mother" as a sign of respect for her accomplishments.

Deborah Kogan Ray's biography is a compelling read detailing an outspoken Native American woman living in a world where her people's future and fate were dependent on the white world. She remained a defender of peace and an advocate for her people, despite the power of the white world. Today, she is a respected historical figure. In 2005, a statue of Sarah Winnemucca was added to the National Statuary Hall Collection in Washington, D.C., by the state of Nevada. (Information about the statue can be found at [www.aoc.gov/cc/art/nsh/](http://www.aoc.gov/cc/art/nsh/)

[winnemucca.cfm](http://winnemucca.cfm).) In 1994, the Sarah Winnemucca Elementary School in Washoe County, Nevada, was named in her honor.

### More Research: Intermediate Readers

Searching the Web for information about Sarah Winnemucca yields conflicting information. Some sources say she learned both English and Spanish by the time she was ten, while others indicate that she learned at least one of the languages while working in a white household when she was thirteen. Another site indicates she was an alcoholic, while others do not. Some list the names of husbands; others indicate names are not known. Details of Sarah Winnemucca's life seem controversial or elusive at best. Reading only one source is not enough. Intermediate students will have to read and sift through the facts to determine the most credible information and make decisions.

Older students who are curious about Sarah Winnemucca might begin by reading her biography on the University of Nevada–Reno website, *Nevada Women's History Project*, at [www.unr.edu/nwhp/bios/women/winnemucca.htm](http://www.unr.edu/nwhp/bios/women/winnemucca.htm).

The controversial part of Winnemucca's life is examined, in part, in an article that appeared in *Nevada Magazine* in 1978 by Patricia Stewart. The article, "Sara Winnemucca: Paiute Princess," is available online at [www.nevadamagazine.com/issues/read/sarah\\_winnemucca\\_paiute\\_princess/](http://www.nevadamagazine.com/issues/read/sarah_winnemucca_paiute_princess/).

### Activity:

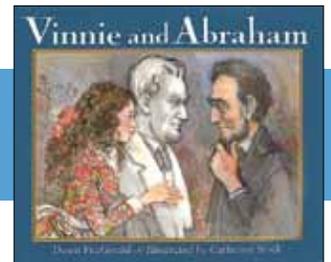
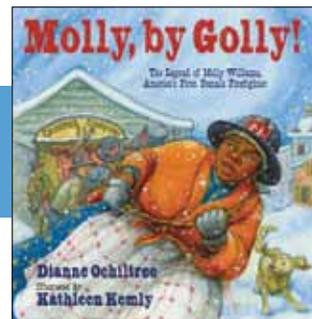
1. Make a list of twenty facts about Winnemucca's life that students can verify in at least three credible sources.
2. As a class, put the facts in sequential order to form a time line of Winnemucca's life.
3. List the honors that have been bestowed on Winnemucca since her death.
4. Ask students to explain why they think Winnemucca wore clothing associated more with the Plains Indians than the feathered clothing of her own tribe, the Paiutes. Have them back up their answers with comments or quotes from sources during the time period.
5. Discuss: What do you think was Winnemucca's most significant contribution to the culture of the Paiutes in Nevada?

### More Reading: "Firsts"

In 1883, Sarah Winnemucca's book *Life Among the Piutes* became the first English-language book ever

published that was written by a Native American woman. Read more about “firsts” achieved by women, as well as other significant contributions women have made to society.

- *Amelia to Zora: Twenty-Six Women Who Changed the World*, by Cynthia Chin-Lee (Charlesbridge, 2005). Illustrated volume containing short biographies of twenty-six women who made important contributions in fields such as sports, arts, science, and entertainment.
- *Girls Think of Everything: Stories of Ingenious Inventions by Women*, by Catherine Thimmesh (Sandpiper, 2002). Collection of illustrated short stories detailing some of the most famous and innovative inventions by women, such as the windshield wiper and chocolate chip cookies, as well as the first patent by a woman and the youngest female to get a patent.
- *Girls Who Looked Under Rocks: The Lives of Six Pioneering Naturalists*, by Jeannine Atkins (Dawn, 2000). Collective biography featuring Maria Merian, Anna Comstock, Frances Hamerstrom, Rachel Carson, Miriam Rothschild, and Jane Goodall. Each of these women became renowned in their fields.
- *Girls Who Rocked the World: Heroines from Joan of Arc to Mother Teresa*, by Michelle Roehm McCann, et.al (Aladdin, 2012). Collected accounts of forty-six females, all who took action to make an impact on the world as teenagers or younger.
- *Molly, by Golly! The Legend of Molly Williams, America's First Female Firefighter*, by Donna Ochiltree (Calkins Creek, 2012). Picture book detailing how Molly Williams, an African American cook for a firehouse, became the first known female firefighter in U.S. history when she volunteered to help fight a blaze in a burning house in 1818.
- *The Poppy Lady: Moina Belle Michael and Her Tribute to Veterans*, by Barbara Walsh (Calkins Creek, 2012). Picture book describing Moina Belle Michael's efforts to honor veterans during World War I. The red poppy became a lasting symbol for veterans of all wars.
- *Vinnie and Abraham*, by Dawn Fitzgerald (Charlesbridge, 2007). Historical fiction picture book that tells the story of Vinnie Ream, a teenage sculptor who became the first woman to receive a commission from the United States government. Her sculpture of Lincoln still stands in the Capitol Rotunda today.
- *A Woman for President: The Story of Victoria Woodhull*, by Kathleen Krull (Walker, 2004). Picture book detailing the accomplishments of Victoria Woodhull, an activist for women's rights and labor reforms. In addition to being the first woman to start a weekly newspaper and a brokerage firm on Wall Street, Woodhull was the first woman to run for president of the United States (in 1872).



**Sharron L. McElmeel** is director of the literacy organization McBookwords ([www.mcbookwords.com](http://www.mcbookwords.com)) and an instructor of children's literature and young adult literature in the University of Wisconsin-Stout's online education programs. She often writes and speaks about authors/illustrators and their books. Visit her at <http://mcelmeel.com>.

### About the Author and Illustrator: Deborah Kogan Ray

Deborah Kogan Ray is an accomplished writer and artist who has written or illustrated more than seventy-five books for children. Many are biographies of people who are relatively unknown but played a pivotal role in the history of the United States. Ray first became interested in Sarah Winnemucca while doing research to illustrate a book called *Women of the West*, which included information about the Oregon Trail. That research uncovered a quote and brief information about Winnemucca and her role as advocate for the Paiute nation. Winnemucca stayed in Ray's mind for twenty years before Ray began to research the book, which took three years to create (2008-2011). Ray attended to every detail until the book went to press. Learn more about Ray on her website at [www.dkray.com](http://www.dkray.com).