

# NORTHWEST ANTHROPOLOGICAL RESEARCH NOTES

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THE ELLEN SALUSKIN (*hápteliiks sáwváiilx*) NARRATIVES 1992: TRADITIONAL  
RELIGIOUS BELIEFS AND PRACTICES

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Editors' Abstract

The following are the first of several personal narratives by Ellen Saluskin gathered and translated from Sahaptin by Virginia R. Beavert Martin (daughter of Ellen Saluskin) with assistance from Deward E. Walker, Jr. The first narrative contains valuable observations on Yakima religion and history (especially on the origin of the Waashat tradition); the second narrative contains valuable observations on the Yakima River and its people. Mrs. Saluskin, now 102 years of age, wishes to see these narratives published as historical and cultural teachings for her descendants and for other members of the Yakima Tribe.

The Ellen Saluskin (*hápteliiks sáwyalilx*) Narrative of 23 September 1992:  
*Traditional Religious Beliefs and Practices.*

This is a narrative of a Yakima elder of 102 years concerning the *waáshat* religion and the Plateau peoples of the Northwest. She refers to buried spirit canoes, knee dancing, the death and revival of prophetic figures and their teachings, the sacred blue dove, miraculous bearing of berries, roots, and other vegetation, and a sacred cottonwood tree.

I was born at Sih, across the Yakima River from a place called Zillah, in Washington state. Today I am one-hundred-two years old, last year at the middle of the month called March. All my life I have lived, or made my home at this place we call Sih. The people who read the paper tell me that this name is recorded in the history books they read which was made by the *shuyápu*, white people, who first came here to our land.

I remember the first *shuyápu* I saw, was a *chmuk taátpas*, a Catholic priest, who made his camp near our home. He tried to tell my elders about his beliefs and tried to make them believe his story. When he failed to do this, he moved away and left behind in his camp mounds of *páwluk*. *páwluk* is a disease carrying bug you people call lice.

My grandmother was an intelligent woman, she knew a lot of things about diseases. She was a herbalist healing doctor. She helped a lot of people during the epidemic the whites brought to this land. She examined the camp and found the *páwluk*. She made us build a huge fire. She heated water to boiling and poured it on the mounds of *páwluk* until she was sure they were all killed. This was my first experience with a *shuyápu*.

The reason for my people to reject his teachings was because where we lived is where one of our own people died and rose again to bring us our religion called the Waashat religion. This *cimuk taaidas* was treading on holy ground. I hear tell, he became very sick and had to return to where he came from, and someone else was sent in his place.

Not many people know what kind of religion the Indian people believed before the messages were brought here by those who died and rose again. My grandmother *xaxish*, the herbalist, told us her own grandmother was one who participated in a "Knee Dance" which was held near the top of the east hill called *paxutákyut*, Union Gap. *aluk'ánim tamuluúikash* is the Indian name. There used to be water on top of the hill. It eventually became contaminated and became infested with frogs, no longer fit to drink. After that, the Indians hid there from the soldiers and used the water before it became unfit to drink. The soldiers never knew about this.

It was told that a giant canoe was inside that hill, covered long ago by the elements. During a certain time of the activity by the planets in the sky, the people gathered there and formed a circle to dance on the knees, fasting for several days. It was told that if you firmly believed in the teaching, the dancer would last throughout the fasting. If you had any doubts, the dancer would become very ill or die. Today, we learn that at a certain time of the year, things happen in the sky. Everyone becomes excited and they rush around to look more closely at the planets. Should we do more than that during this time? Is this why we have catastrophes happening all over the country.

Today, I am prepared to relate an important event never put on the white man's paper. It has been kept within our family for many, many years by our elders. Now I am old, my children need to learn and to believe in their own heritage. I am about to reveal and to speak a name that we have kept secret in our family for years before I was born. I grew up on that holy ground knowing it was special. Learning the teachings he left the people who lived along the Yakima River, and all those who speak our language and practice our traditions.

It began before there were very many *shuyápu* in this part of the country. A young man became ill for seven years. At first he was able to function as other young men, doing his work in the community, learning from the elders. It was observed that he frequently had visions while playing, or while he slept. He would see something in the clouds and he would interpret it with special meaning. Then he was struck with an ailment that the medicine man could not help. This illness worsened as the years progressed, until he finally became so weak he was unable to walk. One day he summoned his mother to his bedside. He told her that his time had come. He was going to leave her. He told her that he had something important to tell her. He instructed her to hold his body for three days after he passed away. He insisted they prepare his body for burial, but to hold it as he instructed. If nothing happened after that time, then to go ahead and bury his body.

The young man died. His mother told those who were preparing his body for burial what her son told her. They were washing and applying the *maxáx* [translates "white clay"] all over his body until he was completely encased in *maxáx*. This is how they buried the body. After the clay hardened they dressed the body. There are men and women who specialize in preparing the body for burial.

After the "wake" the body was put on his own horse and taken to the graveyard, riding upright on the horse. When he was put in the ground the horse was also killed and buried beside the body. The young man's horse was also being prepared. He was washed and painted with *shápinchaash* [translates "Indian paint"], as though he was going to war.

This horse also knew he was going to die. He was prepared for the event. Unfortunately, because he was all prepared ahead of time to die he had to die, although his master woke up after three days laying in wake.

There were some members of the family who did not believe the mother. They wanted to bury the body right away. The mother insisted they follow his instructions. This created a lot of misgivings within the family, until an elder intervened.

On the morning following the third day his body stirred. His mother went to his side. He tried to raise his hand but the hardened clay prevented it. He could only use his eyes to speak. He wanted to have his body released from the dried clay. After they did this, he could not talk. They sat him up and gave him water to drink. They say it was three days before he could talk. At that time he asked them to inform all those people who spoke and understood the language to come and listen to what he had to tell them. Runners were sent to the east, north, and south wherever there were people living who understood the language.

He told his people to build a longhouse, and to make sure it faced the east. In front of the longhouse they were to set up a long pole, make a small platform, and fill it with the earth. He told them to carve a *mimim* [translates "dove"] made of cottonwood, paint it blue, and place it on top of the pole. They did this.

And while all of this activity was going on, two people in the family were outside wondering how they were going to feed and take care of those people he invited to come. He knew their thoughts and he summoned them to his bedside. He told them, "Do not worry, He will provide." At that time a spring gushed out of the ground northeast from the longhouse. It formed a pool which formed into a lake. Inside that lake were all kinds of fish. Suddenly, the chokecherry bushes were filled with large *tmish* [translates "chokeberries"] and there were other kinds of berries in abundance everywhere. Whitetail deer were wandering close by. *pyaxi* [translates "bitterroots"] were popping up from the ground, *mámin*, *sikáwya* [translates "breadroots"], and celery. Everything they needed to feed the people was everywhere.

When I was growing up at this place, I took for granted all of these things -- the lake, the fruit, the deer, the fish in the lake, and the roots. These were still there. We always had enough food, except for the roots, they gradually began to die out as time elapsed. There are a few lettuce roots and *pyaxi* around. The chokecherries are still there. They were as large as the commercial cherries we have today. The large berry bushes dried up when my grandmother *xaxish* passed away in 1929. Someone has desecrated this holy land. It is no longer the paradise it used to be. The land was green. It was like the golf course you see today, like a green, lush planted grass. Blue iris bloomed everywhere, yellow and white daisies, and all kinds of flowering vines. Someone has desecrated the spring, and the lake is all muddied and the land is gouged up. The government calls it a slough. This is sad.

The people came on horseback and on foot. They were asked to wait where the city of Toppenish now stands. There were some cottonwood and willow trees there for shade. They gathered there until they were summoned. They had to receive instruction on how to enter the longhouse. The women on the left side and men on the right side. They lined up and went inside to shake his hand and to shake the hands of others, and each other before they sat down.

### A Teaching

When the young man rose to speak to the people, the dove atop the pole in front of the longhouse lit up. It is difficult to say his name after keeping it to ourselves for so long a time. If you will have patience, perhaps soon it will be allowed to come out and I can say this young man's name.

He recited the message he was told to bring back to his people:

There will soon come a people with white eyes to your land. They will come to take away your land, your children, and things that you value here on this earth. He will bring bugs with huge bright eyes that run around carrying people. This bug will kill many people. There will be snakes with bright eyes who carry people in their stomach. There will be birds flying around in the sky, carrying people, they, too, will kill many people. They will not enjoy it long. We will all be destroyed by fire when we don't take care of His creation.

Even though I was not born yet, I know this to be a true account, because it was handed down from my grandmother *xaxsh*, who was a small girl at that time.

This young man also told them: "You must protect yourself by following the words of the One Above, the Creator of this land." He told them the laws they must follow. These laws are exactly like the words Moses brought down from the mountain which is written in the Bible for you white people.

He taught them the songs he was told to teach the people. There are songs for ceremonial food, for burials, and Sunday services. There are words in these songs to convey the message. He did this for many months, teaching the people who came to listen to his message. He told them he would be here for only five days. He actually spent five years teaching his message before his life ended. He was buried the usual way. There was no need to hold his body for any length of time after he completed his mission.

He told them to observe the seventh day of the week as a Holy Day. To prepare themselves on the fifth day, cleansing their body, bathing and taking sweat baths. On the sixth day to prepare the food to feed the people and clean the longhouse. On the seventh day to refrain from work and observe the Holy Day with prayer and singing. The men and women dressed in buckskins with no beadwork. The men and women danced with one eagle feather in their right hand, waving it in time with the sound of the seven drums and singing.

There was a man named *tyaáwit*. He was a brother to this man who was teaching the people. *tyaáwit* did not believe his brother's teaching. On a Sunday he told his brother he needed wood for his family, and that he did not have time to sing and dance all day while his family was in need. He went into the woods and cut down three large cottonwood trees. He cut one tree into sections ready for chopping. Suddenly he felt weak and dizzy. He thought he was hungry and decided to go home and eat. After he ate his meal he went back to where he left the trees. He found the tree he cut into sections had stood back up. *tyaáwit* fainted. They carried him back to the longhouse where they prayed for him. Afterward *tyaáwit* became a firm believer in the *waáshat* religion and lived a charmed life. The cottonwood tree became a "sign" for people to see. It stood there for many years until 1935, and there was a trail worn down by people who came to see it.

After this time other people arose after death and brought back more messages, predictions, and songs. All teachings did not begin at Sih. For the first time I am going to speak this man's name. His name was *xaniwáshya*. Most of the bands of Indian people who reside along the Yakima River, and its tributaries, followed his teachings about the Ceremonial Feast, Burial services, and First Root Ceremonial services. It's true that other longhouses conduct their services differently and have their own songs.

The Ellen Saluskin (*háptetiks sawwáilx*) Narrative of 30 September 1992:  
*The Yakima River People*

This is a narrative by a Yakima elder of 102 years. It presents important information concerning various settlements, place names, and natural and mythic features of the Yakima River. She describes various traditional beliefs about water and life as well as lakes and rivers. Relationships with Salishan neighbors to the north, with other Sahaptins, and with early non-Indians are described as are actions by non-Indian settlers.

There is much to tell about this part of the land called *yákmú*. Many people occupied the *wána* [translates "river"] called *vákmú*. There are many village sites that have never been identified, especially within the Reservation.

Indian people knew all about the fisheries. They practiced conservation by taking only enough to fulfill need. The *wanawish* fishery at the mouth of the *yákmú* River was the first. Next was *táptat*, at Prosser. There was a freshwater clam spawning area near the mouth of *sátus* Creek. People gathered there to dig and smoke clams that were strung on soft cedar bark. There were large mounds of clam shells there, which people gathered and used to make decorations.

At Sih, there was a *nixanásh* [fishing weir]. People came there to obtain their food supply. Everything was doled out to them by the leader. The old people were first, the widows with orphan children were next. Everyone benefitted from the resource. Nobody was left out. This is how the leaders were recognized and respected a long time ago. *sawyalílx* was the leader at Sih. There were other small fisheries, too. *awátam* was a big fishery. *wiyáwíkt* was there. About a half mile further up river was another fishery where *sháwaway* was the leader. There were other fisheries along the small tributaries, such as *naxchiish*, *kutayakín*, and *naánim*, where fish passed.

The people who lived here where the river flows down to the *nch'í wána* recognized each other by the name of their homeplace. This river which is referred to now as the Yakima River began at the peak of the high mountains from the mid-Cascades in the west. The headwaters of the river were formed by four important snow-water lakes. Small tributaries carried the melting snow down the canyons to the lakes. Three lakes were formed [translates *tyálim*] at the headwaters, and one was formed at the lower midway, now called Bumping Lake. There were numerous creeks and riverlets coming down from the *winátcha* [translates "Wenatchee"] mountain peaks in the north which fed the river. *simk'wii* [translates "Simcoe Mountains"] and *tap'ashnák'it* [translates "Horse Heaven Hills"] in the south all poured pure water into the Yakima River. Many home sites were located along these waterways.

Indian people value water. It gives them life, and it gives life to other living creatures and things such as wildlife including fish, animals, birds, plants, [and] berries. Everything is edible. It also includes serpents, plants, and insects that are not edible. They believe that everything with life has a purpose on this earth.

There were trails into the high country used for food gathering and for trading with other tribes. The *wána* [translates "river"] was one of the main roads for salmon, eels, and other anadromous fish to spawn. It was inhabited by people who spoke the same language.

### Upper Yakima

A long time ago, the people respected and were afraid of the lakes. They preferred to establish their villages along the running streams and rivers. They didn't want to fish in the lakes. They preferred the fresh rushing water fish. There was a man from Wenatchee named *núxway* [Lewis Sam: born 1874; died 1934] who married *áhakan* Nason [enrollment No. 792], daughter of *sháminwash*, Wenatchee [Wenatchi] band, and Louis *Aántaak*, Chelan band. He came from the lake-fishers. He made his village nearest to *watám tlyálim* [translates "Lake Cle Elum"]. Further down the river *pyál* made his village.

The people from the north [Wenatchi-Entiat-Chelan-Methow] area were driven from their homes. One very old woman from Methow had her home near the mouth of the Methow River. She went to the mountains to gather food during the summer months. When she came home, she found her homesite occupied by settlers. She tried to have it returned, but it was declared "abandoned property." She eventually moved to *pshwánapam* [translates Kittitas Valley] to live with relatives. *mamunáshat* [Charles Nason: born May 1840; died 17 December 1918] lived at *naánim*. This village was quite large, and eventually homesteaded by members of his family. His father was Chief *pátu* [Alexander] Chelan tribe, and his mother was *naxchiúshpam*, Wenatchapam. His allotment was located in Section 23, Township 19 North, Kittitas County. *wáysipam*, a Wenatchee descendant, was born at *naánim*, married and lived at *tkwáywaychaash*.

There were nine large villages in the upper Yakima River, according to Ida Nason [deceased] and to other informants from descendants of Wenatchee, Chelan, Entiat, and Methow tribes. Some of the names for the permanent villages are in Salish. I do not understand Salish, but the Yakima words are easy to translate: *k'títaas* means "shale rock" place; *yuúmaash* means "a place to gather"; *ktlákta* means "jagged forked tree; [and] *tyánanish* means "a place to trap deer." There are other places with the same name in different locations where the people drove the whitetail deer into a coulee. *naánim* means "something that is all in one piece," probably something that's "solid." This might interpret the "solid petrified wood" found in those hills. *tatxanísha* means "the narrows." *tlyálim* means "place of death." "A place where there was death," probably referring to a time when the United States Army sneaked up on a peaceful gathering of people who were celebrating the end of their food gathering season with different tribes who gathered there, and were getting ready to move back to their homes. There is more to tell about this at another time.

All of these people who lived in the upper Yakima River were under one leader, *áwxay*. He had relatives as head men in those villages. Some of the men and women who were forced off their own home places stayed there. Some members eventually were sent to the Colville, but some preferred to stay in Wenatchee, Chelan, Entiat, or Methow on homesteads; some of their children later moved to the Colville Reservation. These people speak both Sahaptin and Salish. They can be identified by their manner of speaking. Some of the descendants from the Salish tribes who live on the Yakima Reservation do not know their own Salish heritage.

### Ellensburg Canyon

Most of the elders, who knew these names, are gone now. One told me that he thought some of the names identify the shape of the river. One name, *pátkwaynp* [translates "a tight or confined place to hunt"], identifies the first village site entering the canyon, as one informant suggested, six and one-half miles [4 km] into the canyon in the *manáshtash* [mountain]. *manáshtash* means "a place to dig roots." He said, "Wherever



there is a spring, or at the mouth of a small running creek entering the Yakima River there were village sites not yet identified." *pátkwavnp* means "walking into a confined area." It could mean "walking into the canyon." Nearly midway down the canyon is a spring flowing into the mouth of a creek presently called "Squaw Creek." There is a place near Wymer: this spring is located east across the river from that place. The spring is now called Ten Dollar Spring. Evidently a settler purchased this home site for ten dollars from some Indian. Further down the Ellensburg Canyon are two springs called Gus and Windy springs which flow into Burbank Creek.

