

The Name Controversy: Hangman vs. Latah Creek

BY GLENN LEITZ

As the Spokane River runs from Coeur d'Alene Lake to the Columbia River, its largest tributary flows in from the southeast just below the Spokane city center. This stream has a special history of its own. One of the most colorful aspects of that history centers around the name controversy that has become one of its hallmarks.

When Lewis and Clark came through the Inland Northwest, charting and mapping the new territories were their main priorities. They did not travel as far north as what would later become Spokane, but they did make a distinct effort to get descriptions of this region from the Indians along their route. As a result, they learned something about our local river systems. They thought the Spokane region's rivers ran much farther to the northwest before draining into the Columbia River, and on

their charts this whole river system was called the Lau-taw.

A number of interpretations of that name later evolved to the southeastern tributary of the Spokane River being called the Lah-too, which further evolved into Latah Creek. We should note at this point that Latah also became the name for Latah County in Idaho. That connection is always agreed to be a Nez Perce Indian name, and this tribe is of a very different language family than our local Spokane and Coeur d'Alene Indians.

About the only name that has come down in history from the local tribes (such as the Salish) is the "Sin-too-too-ooley," and it has been used only rarely. Lau-taw or Latah does not seem to appear anywhere in the local languages.

The name situation got even more confused when local explorations began in the mid-1800s. The military forces were one of the primary mappers during this period. On army maps appear the names "Camas Prairie Creek" and "Nedl-Whauld." Camas Prairie Creek is a natural because much of the upper watershed is a major



This gathering of Nez Perce warriors on July 4, 1906, may have included descendents of the Indians who met Lewis and Clark a century earlier.

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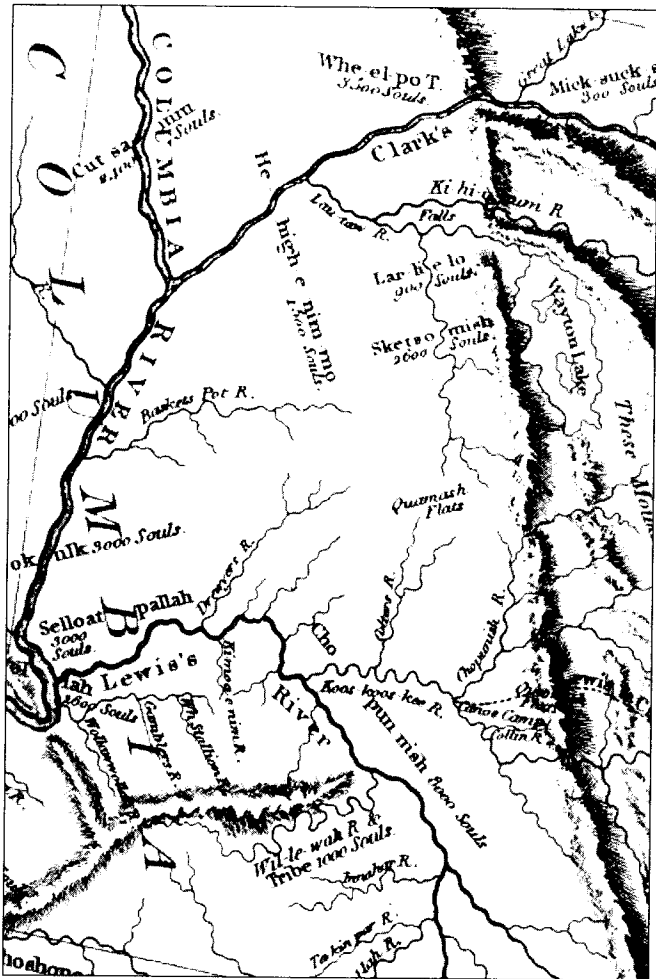
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This map, drawn by William Clark in 1805 from information gathered from local Indians, includes many geographical inaccuracies and archaic names. Note the "Lau-taw River" (top center), a combination of today's Spokane River and Hangman/Latah Creek; Wayton Lake, now Coeur d'Alene Lake; and Lewis's River, now called the Snake.

Camas harvesting area. But the Nedl-Whauld name only adds more confusion. Is it an Indian name? If so, it has no known definition. Some historians speculate that there may have been a fur trapper in the stream basin called Ned Whauld. Feel free to make your own call on this matter!

It is in 1858 that the real crux of the name debate comes to the fore. Colonel George Wright came into the region with a well-armed force to settle the Indian unrest. In a number of battles he effectively subdued the Indians and extracted stringent treaty terms and meted out punishments. His last treaty camp in this campaign was on

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Chica-ma-poo, or Old Jeat, stoically bears her burden. She was photographed around 1903.

this stream about twenty miles from Spokane.

An important part of the proceedings at this location was the hanging of seven Indian warriors. This was the event that initiated the Hangman Creek name in our area history. Much of the following mapping in the region quickly adopted that name.

Today, most of the residents in the watershed use the Hangman Creek name, but there have long been objections that it is too gruesome and bloody a term. Today you might hear, "It is not politically correct." Spokane County and the State of Washington both long ago passed legislation to make Latah Creek the official name. However, all Federal agencies retain the Hangman Creek usage on their maps.

Farther upstream, the creek crosses the Idaho state line and the headwaters rise on the Coeur d'Alene Indian Reservation. On all of its maps, Idaho uses the Hangman Creek name, and the major tributary of the stream is called "Little Hangman Creek." Finally, the Coeur d'Alene tribe uses the Hangman Creek name on their tribal records. Tribal Council members say the historical significance of the name's origin makes it an appropriate designation.

Just a few years ago a national organization called the United States Board on Geographic names held their an-



Taken sometime after 1877, this picture captures Teacher Kate McBeth (standing, far right) with her scholars – Nez Perce Indian women – and their children.

nual convention in Spokane. Most of its members are college staff people or governmental agency members. High on the convention agenda was a close look at our local streams name controversy. The convention group took a bus tour, with the Colonel Wright treaty camp site as their first stop. This writer spoke to the group about the local history aspects of this spot and said that as a resident of the watershed, he unequivocally supported the Hangman Creek usage. Later in the convention proceedings, the group passed an advisory vote of approval for the Hangman Creek name.

Over a long period of time, this stream has had a long and unusual list of names. As we look at the current status, we may admit that the decision of local lawmakers regarding the Latah Creek usage was perhaps well-intended. However, the people closest to the scene, who speak about the stream on a daily basis, continue to use the colorful and historic name of Hangman Creek.

Considering the duration of time over which this controversy has occurred and the passion of the arguments, it is more than likely this debate will continue for some time.

Glenn Leitz retired in 1995 from a career farming in the Hangman Creek region. Since then, he has been bitten by the historical research virus. While he is interested in many aspects of local history, Glenn says that Hangman Creek Valley history is currently his top priority because of

Photo courtesy Spokane Public Library, Northwest Room

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