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*-Sasha, "And She Cooks"*

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NORTHWEST news

# A TRUE TRAILBLAZER

**Native American guide laid the groundwork—quite literally—for gay and lesbian Oregonians** by Pat Young

For the seventh year, Oregon Gov. John Kitzhaber has issued a proclamation declaring October to be Lesbian and Gay History Month. The state has a rich history that reaches back to the days of Lewis and Clark.

One story concerns a Native American woman who dressed and lived as a man in the early 1800s. She belonged to the Kootenay tribe, which spread from western Montana to parts of Idaho and British Columbia.

She appeared in the journals of explorers and traders under a number of names: Ko-come-ne-pe-ca, Madame Boisverd, Manlike Woman or the strange Kootenay woman. The descriptions of her are just as varied: She was a warrior, a prophetess, a guide, a courier, a peacemaker and a bold, adventurous amazon. She was strong, she was frail. She was single, she was married. Each journal entry referred to the same woman, albeit at different times and adventures in her life.

British astronomer and explorer David Thompson was one of the first to mention her. In the early 1800s, he was in the Northwest searching for the source of the Columbia River. Between expeditions he lived on a fur-trading post, where he had a servant named Boisverd.

Boisverd married Ko-come-ne-pe-ca, who was working on the post. As reported in Jonathan Katz's *Gay American History*, she was a large woman and unable to find a mate within her tribe, so she looked elsewhere.

The marriage did not last long. Within a year, Thompson thought her conduct was so "loose" that he asked Boisverd to send her away—back to her people.

When she returned to the tribe, she claimed her white husband had operated on her and changed her into a man. To complete the picture, she took a woman as her wife.

She later developed her skills as a warrior. She showed such courage and bravery fighting the Blackfoots that many young men put themselves under her command.

In other adventures, she traveled from tribe to tribe with her wife entertaining the Native Americans with prophecies. She pretended to have magical powers as she told stories about giants who would cause havoc throughout the land by turning people into stone. Her prophecies claimed evil would occur—white man would bring smallpox and destroy the Native Americans.

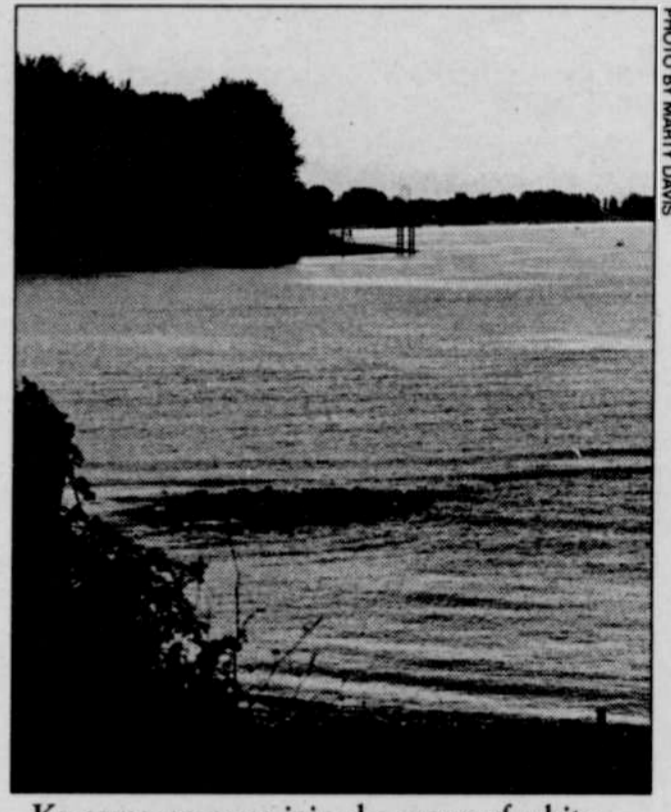
Such negative predictions caused many tribes to hate her. Some even tried to kill her.

But she was a quick learner and changed her stories to reflect only good things. As a result, she was rewarded with gifts.

She had been passing as a man for almost three years when she was asked to deliver a letter from a member of the North West Company to a fellow explorer/fur trapper. She traveled hundreds of miles across unexplored land, avoiding warring tribes to deliver the correspondence to a vague address.

Along the way, she met up with a group of white explorers who were headed to the mouth of the Columbia River. A few days later, Thompson joined the group.

He recognized Ko-come-ne-pe-ca as Bois-



Ko-come-ne-pe-ca joined a group of white explorers along the Columbia River

verd's wife and told his companions that the couple were two women, not husband and wife. This revelation apparently did not cause any negative backlash.

On a later journey, Thompson wrote: "It is some regret we proceed past several parties of the Natives, they are all glad to smoke with us, and eager to learn the news; every trifle seemed to be of some importance to them, and the story of the Woman that carried a Bow and Arrows and had a Wife, was to them a romance to which they paid great attention and my interpreter took pleasure in relating it."

Their reputation was spreading. Explorer Alexander Ross had this to say about the women: "In the account of our voyage, I have been silent as to the two strangers who came up at Astoria, and accompanied us from thence; but have noticed already that instead of being man and wife, as they at first gave us to understand, they were in fact both women—and bold adventurous amazons they were."

*"Instead of being man and wife, as they at first gave us to understand, they were in fact both women—and bold adventurous amazons they were"*

—Alexander Ross

passed were well calculated to astonish as well as to attract attention...these stories, so agreeable to the Indian ear, were circulated far and wide."

After all of her adventures, Ko-come-ne-pe-ca sought to bring peace to warring tribes. She was trying to mediate between the Flatheads and the Blackfoots when she was killed. [E]

- SOURCES:**
- *Gay American History* by Jonathan Katz.
  - "Two Kootenay Women Masquerading as Men? Or Were They One?" *Washington Historical Quarterly*, 1930.
  - "Ko-come-ne-pe-ca, the Letter Carrier," *Washington Historical Quarterly*, 1929.

PAT YOUNG is a Portland free-lance writer and gay and lesbian historian.

PHOTO BY MARTY DAVIS