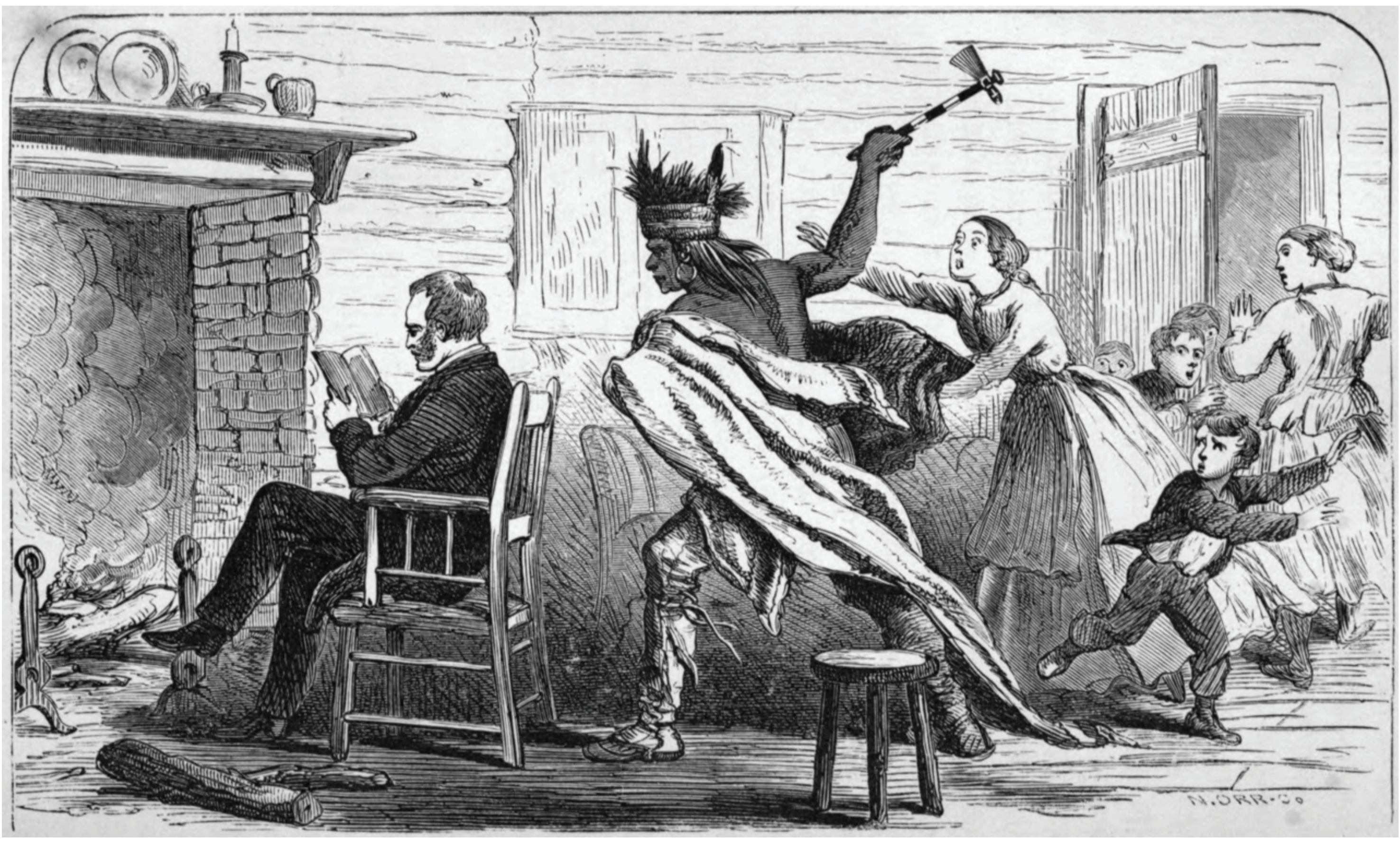
Signal Viewpoints

A FRONTIER TRAGEDY WITH LASTING LEGACY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SEEN FROM SEASIDE
R.J. MARX

Author Debra Gwartney is coming to the South County this spring for a signing at Beach Books. Her "part history, part memoir," "I Am a Stranger Here Myself" links diverse threads of her life in the Northwest and the saga of Narcissa Whitman, the first white woman to cross the Continental Divide.

Whitman's daughter Alice was the first white woman born in Oregon Country.

"As a whole, in the West we've never really dealt with the attack that killed all those people," Gwartney said in a recent radio interview. "We tend to isolate those incidents and forget how they become part of us, or embedded in us in some way."

Massacre

On Nov. 29, 1847, missionaries Narcissa and her husband, Marcus Whitman, a physician, were among 12 settlers killed by members of the Cayuse tribe.

The incident that was to become known as the Whitman Massacre, took place at Waiilatpu, the name Marcus Whitman gave his mission in the fall of 1836.

On Nov. 29, 1847, several men, secretly bearing hatchets and guns, visited Whitman under the pretense of a medical visit.

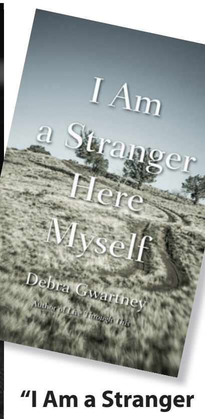
In the ensuing attack, 60 Cayuses and Umatillas killed the Whitmans, 11 or 12 at the mission and took 53 people hostage. Eyewitnesses — there were about 50 survivors, mostly children — reported the assailants used their tomahawks to release evil spirits dwelling within the whites. Marcus Whitman was battered beyond recognition, and Narcissa was shot.

There were many versions of what happened that day, she said, but it was "bloody and terrible," In "I Am a Stranger Here Myself," the prose is dramatic and unsparing in describing the massacre.

Narcissa Whitman "was shot a dozen times on a cold day in 1847," Gwartney writes, "men whipping her laid-bare back while she was still breathing. As darkness was coming on, as temperatures fell below zero, she was rolled into an irrigation ditch and left to die."

The killing of the missionaries came as revenge for the seizing of Indian lands.

The incident was so brutal, Gwartney writes, a Cayuse man returned to the ditch to smash in Narcissa's skull. "This was an assurance, the tribe believed that the missionaries who'd lived as increasingly unwelcome neighbors for 11 years would be barred from the afterlife they'd so loudly glorified."


"I Am a Stranger Here Myself," by Debra Gwartney.

Narcissa Whitman

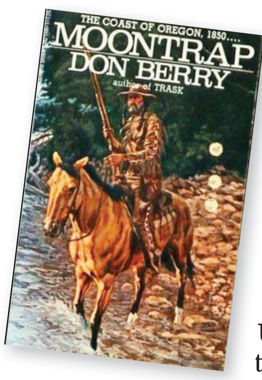
News of the violence stirred outrage "all the way back to Washington, D.C., where legislators hired U.S. Marshall Joe Meek to assign a governor of the provisional government, George Abernathy.

One of Abernathy's first acts as head of the state was to declare war on the Cayuse Nation. "Narcissa's death along (was) justification enough raise an army to strike out in retribution."

Retribution was fast and severe, with exclusionary rules meting punishment who Native Americans who crossed "newly established and often invisible boundaries."

The laws were to dictate the fate of generations of Native Americans in our state.

'Moontrap'


"Moontrap," set in 1850, by author Don Berry.

Another Northwest author, the masterful Don Berry, who died in 2001, fictionalized the immediate aftermath of the Whitman massacre and the sense of fear that pervaded the territory in his novel, "Moontrap," second of the "Oregon Trilogy," with "Trask" and "To Build a Ship."

Berry, his widow Kajira Berry recalled last fall, loved the Northwest in "all its rainy glory," and spent spent many days wandering or hunting all over Clatsop County. He was one-eighth Native American, Fox, and always had an affinity for wildness."

As Gwartney seeks to find the biographical narrative core of Narcissa and Marcus Whitman, Berry stepped into the subjective realm of the observer at the courthouse, where tribal men accused of murder were on trial for their lives.

Berry's protagonist, Johnson Monday, a witness to the courthouse scene, is caught between two worlds: a settler married to a Native woman, emotions are ripped asunder.

His Shoshone wife, Mary, recognizes the complex net they have both entered as a "mixed race" couple in those frontier days. "I say, you wish to be Shoshone, you must do what the Shoshone headmen say. You wish to be white, you must do what the white headmen say."

At the courthouse for the trial, "Indian women on the stairs began to howl a death chant for their people already dead and about to die," Berry writes. "The keening was uncanny in the crowded room."

The courtroom scene and verdict are practically a foregone conclusion, as five chieftains of the Cayuse tribe are sentenced to hanging.

It is Marshall Joe Meek himself who "clumped heavily on the steps and strode across the platform" of the scaffolding, Berry writes in the most lyrical description of a hanging I can remember. "Without pausing he swung the hatchet as he took the last step and there was a solid chunk as the blade buried itself in the wood. The ends of the rope whipped wildly through the rings as the tap dropped and banged against the supports of the underside and the five Cayuse plummeted."

Monday looked up at the sky, Berry writes, "where the indifferent sun poured joy and energy into the world below. No, he thought. No, not on a day like this."

And yet on a day like this in 1848 — when five Indian chiefs suffered the ultimately punishment before the settlers of the new world and their God — is where it begins. Violence begets violence and Monday is soon to experience his own personal and family tragedy.

Aftermath

The Cayuse were losing the war, Gwartney picks up in her narrative.

"Less than half were still alive, most hidden in the mountains, sick and starved. They no longer occupied any of the land around Waiilatpu. No one did. The place was empty."

In years to come, the government "pretty much wiped out that tribe and took all the land for white settlers," Gwartney said. "Their deaths made a huge difference in the West."

Two Cayuse chiefs remained among the tribal leaders to negotiate a treaty in Walla Walla, about eight miles from the Whitman Mission. The sovereign nations of Walla Walla, Umatilla and Cayuse secured a reservation of 510,000 acres, but surrendering their access to traditional hunting and fishing grounds.

Today, the visitor's center of Waii-Lat-Poo is "sparsely visited," Gwartney writes.

A visitor can peer through smudged glass to study excavated items from the site: a pair of broken eyeglasses, chipped plates and cups, a torn Bible and a set of mannequins enacting the first encounter between Cayuse and missionaries.

"On one side, a tall man and woman — her knees bent as if in prayer, her long arms stretched out, palm raised in supplication — who look down on small brown Native women on the other side," Gwartney writes.

"Most of the Native women are kneeling in the dirt, planting seeds, with woven reed hats atop their heads," the author writes. "Every time I take in this scene, I find myself wishing that both sides had remained exactly this far apart for the decade they were around each other. Curious about each other, but protected from whatever harm they could inflict."

Gwartney's conclusion reflects the conflicted feelings we all feel as we inherit this beautiful land around on.

"I'm still trying to figure it out," she writes. "I'm trying to make my way through a miasma of doubt to give permission to call myself a woman of the West — even on the days I can't quite grasp what that means."

Eve Marx
Back on my wrist again, after a long hiatus.

The return of the Native bracelet

VIEW FROM THE PORCH
EVE MARX

In college, living in a little college town, there was a shop in that town selling what was known as hippie-dippy things. There was a shelf of hand-thrown pottery, mostly cereal bowls and coffee mugs; there were candles and handmade soaps and batik bedspreads. There was incense. You could buy macramé plant-hangers and small batch potpourri. In addition to a limited line of denim (I remember purchasing my one and only pair of overalls), in a locked case along one wall there was a selection of fine handmade jewelry, some of it Native American. For the entirety of my final semester, senior year, I coveted a rather spendy sterling silver Native American cuff bracelet whose center was an oblong stone of green turquoise. There was a hairline crack in the stone that to me only made the bracelet more beautiful. I tried it on a few times, but I never had enough money to purchase.

At graduation, my college boyfriend's mother surprised me by gifting me the bracelet. I was overjoyed and oblivious to the notion she might have thought of the bracelet as a sort of pre-engagement present. Her son and I never did become engaged as I went off to graduate school and he fell in love with a red-haired beauty who he married shortly after. I wore the bracelet every day because I loved it and was glad to see it on my wrist. Only after I married someone else and had a child did I finally take it off. I put it in my jewelry box and there it stayed for 15 years.

At which time I took it out and in a fever of purging my belongings, I gave it to the 15 year old daughter of my best friend who wore it a few times before putting it to rest in her own jewelry box.

Fast forward to last summer when Mr. Sax and I visited Santa Fe. It wasn't the greatest trip as they were experiencing a shocking to me heatwave. We went to the Georgia O'Keeffe Museum and we booked a private hot tub and sauna at the spa Ten Thousand Waves. We had dinner one night with an old friend. It being too hot to sightsee, we spent most of our time drinking margaritas. We spent an inordinate amount of time in the shops looking at Native American jewelry. I fell in love with a few pieces but they were way out of my price range, and then I remembered I had a beautiful Native American bracelet that I had given away.

My whole life I've had a fascination with Native American jewelry. For the record, I also love moccasins, deerskin apparel, dream catchers, and tipis. I don't have a drop of Native ancestry. And yet I feel completely drawn to their jewelry.

Back home, I found a website called Pueblo Direct that sells the Tommy Singer cuff bracelets I'd so admired in Santa Fe. Singer, who was born in 1940 and passed away in 2014, was a world famous Navajo silversmith with a distinctive style. He learned silversmithing from his father, a Navajo Medicine man, when he was just a lad. Singer's early works were done in the silver overlay technique, but over time, he began to work more with turquoise. Using scrap turquoise chips, he pioneered the technique of chip inlay. I beat myself up a little after we got home that I didn't just fork up and buy a piece when we were in New Mexico. The guy's dead. He's not making any more bracelets.

The thought I might die and never see my old silver and turquoise bracelet again haunted me. I hadn't laid eyes on it in 17 years. But it was seven months before I brought up the subject of the bracelet to my best friend. I asked if her daughter still had it and she said she would ask. Her daughter lives very far away, although close to her mother, my friend. Four years ago, I moved across the country. To my amazement I went to the mailbox about a week later and there was a package. Inside was the bracelet.

Miracles do happen. I've got one on my wrist to prove it.

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