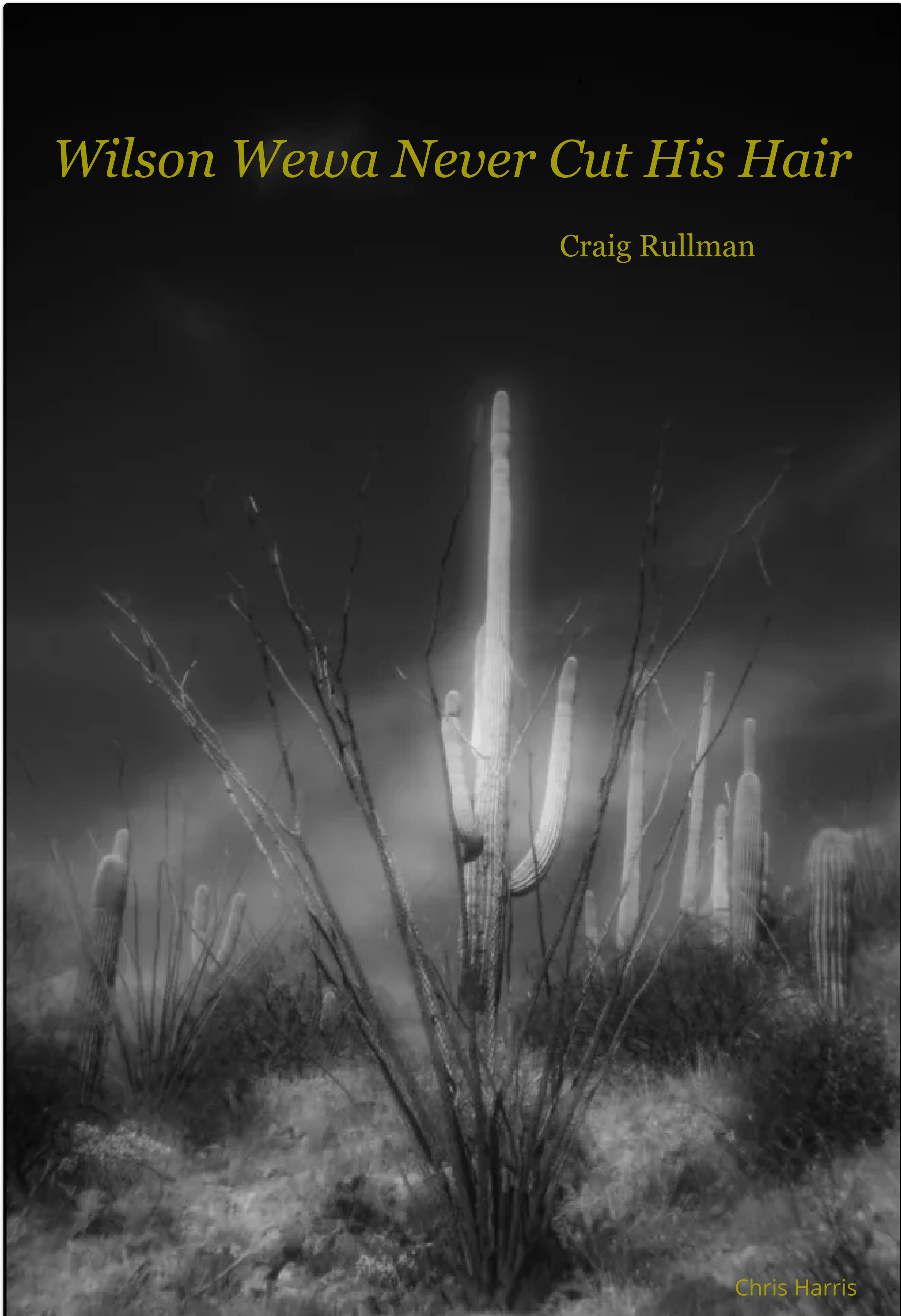
Wilson Wewa Never Cut His Hair
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On a clear day at Winter Ridge, high above the broad expanse of Summer Lake in south-central Oregon, travelers can stand on the precipice of a towering fault block and gaze deep into the desert at a formation called 5 Mile Point. This otherwise unremarkable rumple on the horizon is where Luther Cressman, widely considered a founder of Great Basin desert archaeology, began excavating the Paisley Caves. Today, the U.S. Forest Service maintains a tidy cabin up on Winter Ridge, at the place where John C. Fremont came out of the woods in the winter of 1843 and first beheld the breathtaking reach of the Great Basin. Then, as now, staring into that great geological distance induces a kind of frisson, a spiritual weightlessness, perhaps similar to that of astronomers who gaze through telescopes into the farthest regions of space, knowing that the deeper they look into the heavens the farther back in time they are travelling.

Over two seasons on the desert Cressman would make discoveries that pushed the story of human habitation in the Great Basin even further into the past. Added to the bones of Ice Age horses and camels and stone artifacts dated to 14,000 years ago, the Paisley Caves yielded human coprolites. In "The Early Peopling of the Great Basin," authors Bryan Hockett, Ted Goebel, and Kelly Graf write that the coprolites – using accelerator mass spectroscopy – were dated to some 14,300 years ago. And still more intriguing, "DNA analysis suggests that the person who used the Paisley caves for a latrine so long ago had recently eaten bison meat – at least some evidence that ancient Great Basin residents preyed on big game."

I had recently been up to Winter Ridge, following Fremont's footsteps and journal entries on an expedition along the western edges of the Great Basin, and was deeply engaged in studies of desert history when an opportunity came to meet with the Paiute elder Wilson Wewa, whose ancestry is a long loop back to the people who once inhabited the Paisley Caves. Wewa was in Sisters, Oregon, to deliver a talk on his recently published book, *Legends of the Northern Paiute*, and agreed to meet for breakfast at my favorite roadside diner.

At 62, Wewa is tall, broad, and soft-spoken. He wears his hair in tight braids that fall down over his chest, and an amulet of brightly colored beadwork covers his heart. From his home on the Warm Springs Reservation in north-central Oregon, Wilson serves as a spiritual leader, an oral historian for the Paiute tribal council, and director of the Native Wellness program. He has served as the Cultural Heritage director for the Pyramid Lake Reservation in Nevada, and he travels regularly to Washington D.C. to meet with officials in the continuing effort to improve conditions for his people. He has lectured on

native history at the University of Oregon, and is an acknowledged expert in Great Basin ethno-botany.

What makes Wilson Wewa remarkable isn't just his curriculum vitae, or his tireless efforts to maintain and carry on the ways of his people. What makes him a living a treasure is that Wilson Wewa is the last enrolled member of the Northern Paiute tribe who is fluent in the language. He is the only man on earth who still knows, and can still sing, the ancient burial songs of his people.

When sitting down for a meal with someone like Wilson Wewa, history becomes a palpable thing. It forms in the air like a cloud you can almost touch, and it would be easy to fall into any number of cultural and conversational traps. That's true because cognitive dissonance is an inescapable element of the conversation. We must, in one hand, hold the Paiute origin story of Oregon's Fort Rock, formed in a battle between Coyote and The Giant, and in the other hand, a Wal-Mart Supercenter in the Carson Valley. We must weigh the Paiute legend of Newberry Crater against the manmade pit of the Marigold Mine near Battle Mountain. We must see, at the same time, the ancient sandals of Lovelock Cave and the cyanide baths of American Flats, the petroglyphs at Willow Creek and the nuclear mushroom clouds over the Mercury Test Site. These simultaneous desert truths are where our cultural sine waves cross in real time, where languages and visions collide, and sometimes—and almost exclusively upon the natives—with tragic consequences.

Because the Paiute people were the original residents of the country where I was raised, their story is intimately woven into my own. For millennia, it was the Paiutes, following the sequence of ripening plants–from cattails in the spring to pine nuts in the fall–or the migration of great herds of antelope and deer, who made their seasonal camps on ground that would later become my family's homestead. As a boy growing up in the Honey Lake Valley of northeastern California, it was not uncommon to unearth metates and grinding stones while digging postholes, to find arrowheads after a rain, or to plow up a Clovis spearpoint in a spring field. These artifacts, left behind by a once vibrant culture on a living landscape, created a kind of spiritual portal, and it was through them that I first heard the voices of the old ones talking to me. This was tantalizing stuff for an impressionable young mind, a powerful seduction that has drawn me inexorably toward the language of the desert and its people.

In traditional Paiute culture, much like our own, it remains rude to jump right into business, and because I wanted to honor that notion, and also Wilson's status as a venerated leader, I brought along some elk meat as a friendship offering. Wilson took the frozen meat, wrapped up in an old Bi-Mart bag, without a word, and we settled into a corner booth with Bob Seger singing *Roll Me Away* on Spotify.

While our waitress poured out coffee we got to know each other. We talked about our travels, our families, the strange patterns of this winter's weather, and how we had slept. It was an easy and natural loop, a kind of dance turning always inward to the middle. In an unexpected turn we also knew someone in common, a Paiute saddlemaker from Schurz, Nevada, who builds his saddles just down the road from the cemetery

where Wovoka, the Paiute Messiah, is buried. Wewa is agnostic on the subject of Wovoka, who is tied—Wilson thinks inaccurately—to the Ghost Dance religion, whose adherents, most notably the Lakota, believed that by performing certain rituals and dancing they might resurrect the bison that had vanished from the plains, and so too the life they had once known. The Ghost Dance religion ended violently with the massacre of 300 men, women, and children by the 7th Cavalry at Wounded Knee in 1890.

"What Wovoka taught was the Round Dance," Wilson told me. "It fizzled at Warm Springs. It fizzled in Burns. It fizzled everywhere it went with my people. He was more of a common man who the whites made into someone important. He's a little bit like Trump," Wewa said, smiling. "You get a title and then you go for it."

Perhaps because our interview was oriented around sharing a meal, I wanted to ask Wilson about his expertise in native foods, and we talked about the almost miraculous recovery—due in large part to the efforts of Paiutes at the Pyramid Lake and Summit Lake reservations—of the Lahontan Cutthroat Trout, which had played such an integral role in the life of Great Basin peoples.

In January of 1844, when Fremont camped at the mouth of the Truckee River near present day Wadsworth, Nevada, he was offered fish by Paiutes gathered there to harvest the spawning runs of Lahontan Cutthroat Trout. He wrote:

An Indian brought in a large fish to trade, which we had the inexpressible satisfaction to find was a salmon trout; we gathered round him eagerly. The Indians were amused with our delight, and immediately brought in numbers, so that the camp was soon stocked. Their flavor was excellent—superior, in fact, to that of any fish I have ever known. They were of extraordinary size—about as large as the Columbia river salmon–generally from two to four feet in length … They doubtless formed the subsistence of these people, who hold the fishery in exclusive possession.

Fremont was right: the Lahontan Cutthroat did form a large portion of the Paiute subsistence, at least for the people of Pyramid Lake. But what he could not have known was that in less than 100 years Lahontan Cutthroat would be nearly wiped from the earth. Estimates suggest that between 1860 and 1920 nearly 1 million pounds of Lahontan Cutthroat were annually hauled out of Great Basin lakes and streams. By 1905 the Derby Dam below Reno had wrecked the spawning runs, by 1930 Lahontan Cutthroat could no longer be found in Lake Tahoe, and by 1943 the Pyramid Lake Cutthroat were extinct.

This separation of people from their traditional food source was only a harbinger of troubles to follow, another broken link in the cultural chain that Wilson Wewa is working hard to mend. His grandmother, born in 1882, taught him the foods of the desert. Each year they would follow the seasons through central and eastern Oregon in the manner of the ancient ones, from Warm Springs to Shaniko, from Burns to Prineville and on to Paulina, digging camas roots, collecting berries, hunting deer, antelope, and elk. It was on these travels, and in these camps, that Wilson began to absorb the history of his people, and to learn the language.

But the old ways, like the language, are fast disappearing. “Native foods have become sacred meals,” Wilson told me, tucking into a plate of French toast. “Most of the land used to be open to us, but now we’ve been locked out of our own store. The places have all been fenced off and if we go out there we are trespassing.” He sat with that thought for a while before adding: “But I can still crawl under the wires.”

An even deeper concern weights on him. “Paiutes believe,” Wewa said, “that if we forget about our foods, they will know they are forgotten and stop growing there. Today I can walk with my grandsons and point out foods. What they see is dried up grass. What I see is a living.”

It may be worse than that. Jim Patterson, emeritus professor of anthropology at Eastern Oregon University, wrote of the Paiute: “Much of their 20th century history is a story of poverty, disease and degradation. In the first two decades of the past century many were forced to eat garbage scavenged in Burns.” And Beatrice Whiting, in Paiute Sorcery, wrote: “Some of the men and women found work in the brewery which was the first flourishing industry in the town (of Burns) and were being paid by being allowed to tap off as much beer as they could drink at the end of the day.” Edward Curtis, the famed photographer of native peoples, thought Paiutes not “noble-looking” enough to photograph.

So it is hardly a wonder that one of the great challenges Wewa faces, as he works to preserve the knowledge accumulated by his people over 400 human generations in the Great Basin, is the declining interest of Paiute youth in preserving their cultural heritage. “In the old days,” he said, “It was the responsibility of the young people to seek out the people who had the knowledge. In that way, they would say ‘he’s interested, or she’s interested.’ Today it is backwards. Our knowledge isn’t important anymore. They don’t want the responsibility of walking that life, as a servant of the people. They are squeezing all the Indian out of our children.”

Wilson was one of those who sought the knowledge, and after the remains of ancient Paiutes were exposed by drought at Harney Lake, in eastern Oregon, he sought to learn the burial songs.

“An old man came to the repatriation ceremony,” Wewa told me. “He prayed in the old way, in the old sense, and it brought my dad to tears. That’s when I first wanted him to teach me how to pray in the language and learn the songs he used.”

Much later, Wilson set out from Warm Springs on a pivotal trip to McDermitt, Nevada, where the elder who knew the songs lived without running water, power, or telephones. Wewa stopped in Winnemucca to buy a cassette recorder and a tape, and finally arrived in McDermitt–on the remote Oregon-Nevada border–where he found the old man sitting outside a woodshed under a kerosene lantern. The old man looked up at him. “I’ve been waiting for you to get here,” he said.

The recordings Wilson made of those songs were lost when the tape was mistakenly erased, and Wilson now carries them only in his heart. But he carries them for all of us, native and non-native, because language holds incredible power to shape both what, and how, we perceive, think, and feel. It is certain that the Numic language, evolving over many thousands of years of life in the Great Basin, interprets and articulates the things of the desert in ways that English, a Germanic language born in the dark forests of northern Europe, simply cannot manage. So that when the language is gone so too will be entire ways of seeing, and thinking, and understanding. Entire concepts, born out of the desert, will be erased forever, like the recording Wilson made of those burial songs.

Limited by the evolution of our own tongue in a different environment, one can't help but wonder what we might be missing when we stand high on Winter Ridge, peering into the desert and the ancient past. To a much larger degree than may at first be obvious, the capacity of our language—how we see things, and what we call them—may even determine the way we live on the land that we inhabit. And if that is true then our language may also predict the end result—like the people who never bothered to learn a language of the desert, and so fished the Lahontan Cutthroat into near extinction.

"The white peoples' penchant for giving names," Wewa told me, "is to say 'this belongs to us'. Our people were content to observe them, and refer to them as other people."

I no long live in the deeper corners of the Great Basin, where the old ones first whispered in my ear. But I return often, circling back through my own narrative loop, if only to blow a kiss in the direction of my memories. And I think now, after decades of collecting the pieces of that narrative, like pottery shards in a dry wash, that to know the language we must live with the desert in close quarters. We should have seen a grandfather cottonwood on the edge of a dry lake, struck by lightning, and burning in a cold spring rain. We should have heard the death agonies of an old honyocker's barn giving up in a windstorm, its upright beams snapping like femurs, and the roof collapsing in a moonless dark. We should know something of the blinding snows in a bad winter, the sound of a meadowlark singing on a cedar fencepost at sunrise, and the cant of light on a wall of petroglyphs in fall. We should hear it in the yip of coyote pups, muffled by *pogonip*, and feel it in the warm mud bubbling between our toes in a steaming hot spring. We should know our story in the cold dry breath of an abandoned mineshaft, the taste of iron and alkali in a glass of water, and we should hear it in the wind as it whistles in the neck of an old blue bottle sticking out of the dirt. If we can tune our hearts to the desert this way, with the considerable discipline and focus required to see clearly over great time and great distance, we might better understand what Barry Lopez meant when he wrote: "The perceptions of any people wash over the land like a flood, leaving ideas hung up in the brush, like pieces of damp paper to be collected and deciphered. No one can tell the whole story."

Wilson Wewa doesn't carry the whole story either, even as he stands upright under the weight of 14,000 years of history.

"The old ones understood that the individual is nothing," Wilson said. "The tribe is everything. There are stories of mothers smothering their children when the people were

under attack, so they wouldn't give up the hiding places." As we finished our breakfast and the conversation unwound to its inevitable end, Bob Seger having given way to Guns 'N Roses, I found myself sitting with more questions than answers. Perhaps it was unrealistic to think I would find them. Wilson doesn't have them either. He works hard, each day, simply to find anyone willing to sit and listen to the stories of his people.

When his father was dying of cancer, he called Wilson into the room and sat him down. It is a Paiute tradition to cut off one's hair in a show of mourning when a loved one has passed. Knowing that death was close, his father asked Wilson not to do it. "He used to travel with me when I would talk to people," Wilson said. "He saw the power of the language when I spoke to them, and how people would pay closer attention to me. My braids are part of that. Don't cut your hair, he told me."

Wilson Wewa never cut his hair. The great-great-grandson of Chief Paulina, he wears his braids proudly and travels tirelessly to deliver his message in the language of his people. I asked him how he could stand up to the pressure of carrying so much history, just one man against time. "Our songs and our language, for people like me, when I pass away, become ethereal. They remain. I've driven down the road through the Great Basin and started singing songs that haven't been heard since old times. But people who've seen me at a Round Dance, or playing hand game, will say, 'I haven't heard that song in years', and they will tell me about it. Our songs don't leave, they just wait for some unsuspecting person that they feel sorry for, or take pride in, and they give them back to carry on. But the more we stop believing in things like that, the more they will disappear forever."

It was time to go. The diner was filling up, the clatter of dishes and conversations were rushing into the small silences, my notebook was full, and maybe Wilson was getting tired. "This has been a good visit," he said.

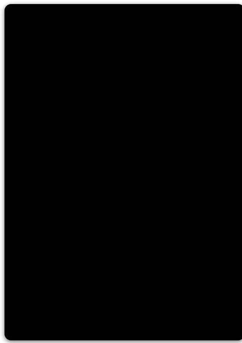
But I had been sitting for a long time with a question that I needed answered. It was a question that looped back to my own childhood on the desert, when I first heard the voices of the old ones while exploring the creek bed on our family homestead. I have almost never talked about the voices–brushes with the paranormal are frowned upon in my culture–but if there was anyone on earth to ask, it was Wilson. So I did.

It was a hot summer day, I told him, and I was down near the beaver dam on Baxter Creek, my shirt off in the sun, imagining some world where I lived like the ancient ones. And then I heard their voices in the willows. I heard them loudly, "As clear as I can hear you now," I told Wilson.

He sat for a while looking out the window. A very light snow was falling in the street. "If you are out in the sagebrush and the junipers and you hear the people talking," he said, "Don't be afraid of it. They will give you something." And that was all. No validation, no correction, and not a hint of doubt that what I had told him was true.

I have heard those voices many times since that first day down in the creek bed, while deep in the northern Black Rock country where I once lived and worked, and again in

the dead center of Nevada, on a rainy day near Duckwater. I know that Wilson is right, that if you are not afraid, and if you listen long enough, the voices of the ancient ones will give you something. And perhaps what they have given me, in some small way, is permission to enter the desert narrative, and a language to share it with others.



Craig Rullman is an award-winning journalist and weekly columnist for *The Nugget Newspaper* in Sisters, Oregon. Craig is a graduate of the University of Nevada, as well as Northern Arizona University, and for several years was a working cowboy on the deserts of Arizona, California, and Nevada. His first book, *The Bunkhouse Chronicles: Field Notes from the Figure 8 Ranch* was published by Smoke Creek Press in May, 2019.