



# Ethnography at its Finest

By Tina Wynecoop

Imagine that my house is on fire. In it are things that speak of generations of my family. I have forty seconds to think and act on what I should try to save. How can I move quickly, thoroughly and intelligently to collect that which will soon become irretrievable?

To me, Professor John Ross's ethnography, *The Spokan Indians*, is what was pulled from the "house," the collective memory of the life-ways of our region's aboriginal people. Those forty seconds in which to preserve the essence of its inhabitants are symbolic of the forty years the author spent listening, gaining trust, gathering for safe-keeping, and finally putting on record for posterity all the Spokan information that was humanly possible to collect by an outsider.

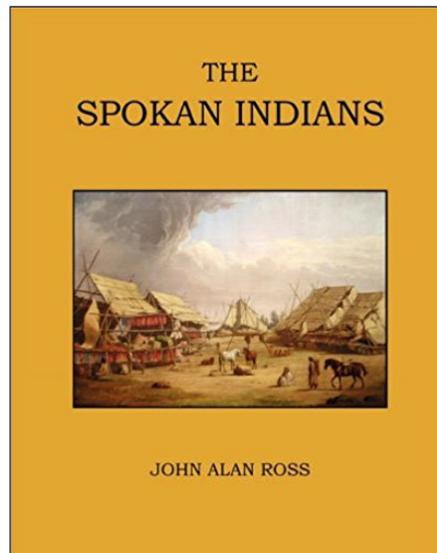
The "fire" is now out. The history, language, economy and the spiritual and familial structure of the building remain, though precariously. What Ross has given the reader is a testimony to a magnificent people, a cultural group inhabiting the common ground with everything that once completely surrounded and sustained

them. What could be saved has been. Four decades were not time enough to gather from the elders their collective knowledge and connections with the way things were, before contact with an aggressive new culture began to erode what had been in place for millennia.

Ross's ethnography of the Spokans is a magnificent compendium of memories cached between two covers. Its bibliography and appendices are extensive and invaluable.

The chapters are arranged so that the reader can delve in depth on a particular subject.

The extensive index in the back of the book



magnifies the scholarly Table of Contents (the index proves more accurate in the digital edition than in the hard copy) in thoroughness, and both are a researcher's dream resources. They invite the reader and tribe to inspect and gather valuable information from this storehouse of memories and life-ways by leading/guiding in an organized way.

Beyond the table and index and appendices, the body of work

itself has been enriched, strengthened and woven into a complete and seamless book by Professor Ross's son, Michael, who stands quietly in the shadows as its editor and publisher.

This book is far shorter than it could be. Its nine hundred pages can only hint about the lives of an extraordinary indigenous culture. Yet it is a living testimony, a tribute to Indians who were well aware that the fires of cultural fragmentation and assimilation would soon try to incinerate traditional ways and the remembrance of them.

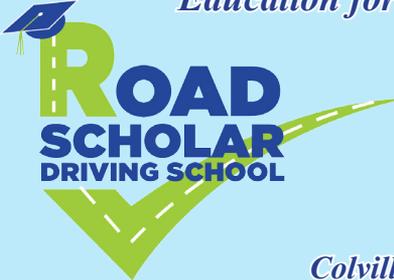
Deepest thanks to those who entrusted their "belongings" to John Alan Ross. And heartfelt gratitude to the author whose forty years among the Spokans resulted in this comprehensive book about an original people. The house remains.

Recently a workbook assignment was given to the sixth grade class at Wellpinit School. It included this question: "What are three major regions in which Native Americans lived?" Grant, tribal member, age ten, answered: "We still live here."

*A multidisciplinary perspective on the 2011 ethnography The Spokan Indians with a response from the author may be found in the Journal of Northwest Anthropology, Spring 2013, Vol. 47, No. 1, pp. 71-90.)*

*Tina Wynecoop lives on the southern edge of Half Moon Prairie, a landscape that is a family member of that sisterhood of prairies: Wild Rose Prairie, Orchard Prairie, Orchard Bluff, Green Bluff, Five Mile Prairie and Manitou Prairie, and Paradise Prairie.*

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