Celebrating

PALOUSE COUNTRY

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A History of the Landscape in Text and Images

30th Anniversary Edition

Richard D. Scheuerman and John Clement
Foreword by Alexander C. McGregor

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The Washington State University Pullman campus is located on the homelands of the Niimíipuu (Nez Perce) Tribe and the Palus people. We acknowledge their presence here since time immemorial and recognize their continuing connection to the land, to the water, and to their ancestors. WSU Press is committed to publishing works that foster a deeper understanding of the Pacific Northwest and the contributions of its Native peoples.

Cover image: John Clement, *Sunrise Glory*, near Spangle, Washington
Frontispiece: John Clement, *Steptoe Wheat*, looking north from Steptoe Butte
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Dedication

For John Clement and Alex McGregor,
longtime companions in many Palouse Country adventures—
from yesteryear's Hooper footraces to recent treks along our favorite river

Palouse River Fall south of Elberton, Washington

facing page

Kamiak Butte Morning

north of
Pullman, Washington

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Foreword

Alexander C. McGregor

"In the far Northwest of the United States lies an unusual land," historical geographer Donald Meinig wrote more than a half century ago. "So sharply is it set apart from its surroundings that it can be recognized immediately, at a mere glance." Rolling hills of grain, the rippling fields of green on a spring day, the stark rugged canyons incised through layer after layer of basalt, exposed by massive Ice Age floods that scoured them, and the gnarled black locust trees surrounding homesteads and barns of an earlier time.

Richard Scheuerman, John Clement, and I have felt the powerful pull of this land throughout our working careers. "The Three Amigos," we call ourselves, and we've pitched in together to celebrate this land across the decades. Dick's ancestors, of Russian-German stock, made the long trek here generations after pledges made by Catherine the Great to encourage settlement on the Volga steppes were forgotten. He grew up near what had been "the Palouse Colony," where many other families of the same heritage got their starts. As an educator and historian, Dick's contributions to our historical knowledge of the region have been dramatic—in particular his studies of the Snake River-Palouse tribe, the emigrants attracted to this land from around the globe, and the agricultural panoramas captured with artists over many generations have broadened our knowledge of the lives of people on the land.

John Clement has been capturing images of the Palouse (and beyond) for many years, traversing hills and valleys through lightning storms, blizzards, and dust, whatever it takes to illustrate its dramatic panoramas. Among his finest, in my view, are images of pioneer churches isolated in rural fields and bracing for a storm (Freeze Church near Potlatch, Idaho and Egypt Lutheran north of Davenport, Washington) or of old farm equipment and barns no longer called to duty on adjacent acres but reminding us of families before who once cared for them.

Every fall I have to make a tough judgment call. Which Clement photos are the most powerful for the Northwest Drylands calendar we will share with farmers across the Inland Northwest when the new year arrives? We have a good track record, not really because of my skill as judge but because John has so many gems from which to choose. Dick, John, and I have collaborated on speeches, articles, books, and events for many years. My roots run deep here too, dating back to territorial days when four desperately poor Scottish-Canadian brothers—my grandfather and three uncles—got their start herding sheep in the rugged Channeled Scablands. Like my friend Dick, I did my tour of duty studying the history of this land and its people in graduate school and have been sharing and learning ever since.

Both of us have had the opportunity to interview people who came to hew out a living on the land. As he puts it, "While the pioneering experiences of our first-generation relatives living throughout the region were as varied as the languages they spoke, a common theme framed the stories they told us children: 'The Palouse was a Promised Land for which we chosen ones living here should be profoundly grateful.'"

facing page

Hilly Harvest

west of
Colfax, Washington

There were many times of hardship along the way which must have stretched the gratitude thin at times—crops hit by freezing winds or drought, livestock isolated in snowbanks in "cow-killing" winters. My family was sued for trespass for grazing sheep on unfenced railroad ground, forced to lease and then buy land under court order—sometimes obstacles turned out to be opportunities. I once asked my cousin, Bill McGregor, long-time manager of our ranch, how early settlers persevered, putting down roots in an unfamiliar land. Three traits, he said, were key: unquenchable optimism, a wry self-deprecating sense of humor that helped them through the tough times, and a tenacity verging on stubbornness. Traits, he went on to say, that were useful then, are useful now, and will be useful in the future.

Working together over the years we have told of pioneer farmers—their tools captured in John's images, their stories shared by Dick and me—and about the changing world in which farm families persevere, and sometimes prosper. Dick focuses on philosophy, artistic images of agriculture, cultural tensions and a passion for the land and its people. My focus has been upon reaching out on behalf of those families, dedicated stewards of 96% of our agricultural lands, to tell legislators and urban neighbors of their achievements and the vital role they play. It's a tough trade in which the biggest rewards are not financial. Ask any farmer what matters most—and we've all known many over the years on this land—and you are likely to hear three responses: the pride in benefitting from agricultural science and their own hard work in seeing that the land will be in better shape than it was when they began their tour of stewardship. The satisfaction of producing healthy, hearty meals for people around the nation and the globe. A great place to raise the next generation.

You'll find here powerful stories of the ethnic origins of settlers on the land based upon prior books Scheuerman has written, including the Snake River-Palouse Indians (*River Song*), the Russian-German pioneers (*Hardship to Homeland*, with Clifford Trafzer), a history of Inland Northwest agriculture (*Harvest Heritage*, with me), and three popular editions of *Palouse Country: A Land and Its People* (with John Clement).

This, the thirtieth-year anniversary edition, titled *Celebrating Palouse Country*, features historical photographs and artwork. It represents an important contribution towards a fuller understanding of the region's First Peoples. Devastated by diseases and warfare before the arrival of large groups of immigrants, the native Palouse Indians had "maintained an intimate relationship with the land." A great-grandson of one of the immigrant families, Scheuerman shares his love of the land, a thorough knowledge of conditions in the distant lands from which many Palouse immigrants came, and an appreciation for the diverse peoples who came to settle on the rolling prairie.

Living conditions were primitive in the early years and farm tools makeshift at best—such as the crude harrows cut of hawthorn bushes and tied to long poles designed by German families of Spokane County. Dick skillfully weaves the stories of these families and immigrant groups together with the overall fabric of the pioneering process, describing their search for available farm-ground, methods of land acquisition, development of towns, and changes in farming practices as settlers advanced from hand broadcasting seed and subsistence crops toward commercial production in their new homeland.

The process of Euro-American settlement was largely completed around World War I, although considerable property along the Snake River remained under Native American title through the provisions of the Indian Homestead Act. My great uncle, a state senator, helped one of the last residents of the village at the mouth of the Palouse, Sam Fisher, keep his land. The family worked hard to keep caves with artifacts a secret until Washington State College archaeologists had funding to study them. By then the Palouse had become "settled up" and was becoming known for "producing more wheat per acre any other place its size in the world."

While the enclaves of foreign-born immigrants became amalgamated in time with the broader population, a rich heritage of distinctive cultural ties is still reflected in the communities, churches, and social activities of the Palouse. This thirty-year commemorative edition is a gem—Dick's articulate and interesting story of the diverse people who came to call the Palouse home and John Clement's striking images of an unusual land. An important, and powerfully told and illustrated, contribution to our understanding of the history of the Inland Pacific Northwest. As I heard a friend tell someone about *The Palouse Country* before the WSU Press came out with this anniversary edition: "If you can find it, buy it!" Sage advice. And now easier to find!

Steptoe Lupine

Steptoe Butte, Washington

Preface

> "The fur trade is the principal branch of business at present in the country situated between the Rocky Mountains and the Pacific Ocean. On the banks of the Columbia river, however, where the soil and climate are favourable to cultivation, we are directing our attention to agriculture on a large scale, and there is every prospect that we shall soon be able to establish important branches of export trade from thence in the articles of wool, tallow, hides, tobacco, and grain of various kinds."
>
> —Hudson's Bay Company Governor George Simpson, 1837

Agricultural opportunity in the Pacific Northwest was a frequent topic of consideration by Meriwether Lewis and William Clark and by the region's earliest nineteenth-century European-American explorers. Lewis and Clark's contemporaries David Thompson and Jacques Raphael ("Jaco") Finlay inaugurated transcontinental travel by canoe, foot, and horseback from Hudson's Bay in the East to the Pacific Ocean on what would become known as the Columbia Express, and the famed astronomer-geographer and his Chippewa Indian guide found time to plant cereal grains in 1808, although they did not thrive. That spring they established Kootenae House, the North West Company's first trading post west of the Rockies near present-day Invermere, British Columbia.

Within a quarter-century, intrepid American and British traders were operating a string of bustling frontier "Columbia Department" outposts stretching from Ft. St. James on Stuart Lake on the western slope of the Canadian Rockies, south to Ft. Nez Percés near the junction of the Columbia and Snake rivers, and west to Ft. Nisqually on Puget Sound. In these and other places, the early fur traders and their Indian hosts generally lived together amicably, as the two cultures had learned to coexist before the onslaught of settlers and soldiers. Furs and salmon were bartered for metal, cloth, and glass trade goods, and early in their experience together, residents of both the Columbia Plateau and Coastal Lowlands began cultivating the soil to give rise to Northwest farming culture.

My great-grandfather, Andrew Sunwold, provides a tenuous personal link to the West's frontier trading and farming past. After emigrating from Norway in 1881, he lived first along the Missouri River near old Ft. Mandan of Lewis and Clark fame in Dakota Territory. Hidden among the dense prairie grasses were countless buffalo bones, which could be sold in town for $5 a wagonload. He also procured seasonal but hazardous employment as a "woodhawk," cutting timber for steamboats that plied the river from Bismarck to the westernmost terminus of Missouri River traffic at Ft. Benton in Montana Territory. The American Fur Company

facing page

Dying 'n Drying

looking southeast
from Steptoe Butte

outpost was the eastern terminus for the fabled Mullan Road, the primary immigrant route to Washington Territory before the advent of the Northern Pacific Railroad along its course. This was the path he followed, as he eventually acquired land for his two sons to establish farms near the rural Palouse Country hamlet of Fairfield, close to the Washington-Idaho border.

About two miles west of my boyhood home north of Endicott, Washington, several clapboard houses remained clustered together at a remote location on the Palouse River known locally as the "Palouse Colony." My paternal grandfather, Karl Scheuerman, made sure we knew that this was the first home for our family group in the Pacific Northwest. His parents, Henry (H.B.) and Mary Scheuerman, were among the region's *Russland-Deutschen*, or Germans from Russia. They were people of the soil who for generations had sown their grain and gathered harvests in a progression that led from the Hessian countryside and Volga steppe to the Palouse prairies. H. B. and his family had arrived in 1891 and lived with earlier colonists on this fertile bottomland until arrangements could be made to acquire land nearby.

Some of our favorite family photographs depict the everyday scenes of Northwest pioneer farm life. One shows Great-Grandma Sunwold feeding her agitated flock of Plymouth Rock chickens; another casts Uncle Art Sunwold in a sea of stiff club wheat on his farm near Waverly. While the pioneering experiences of our first-generation relatives living on the Palouse were as varied as the foreign languages they spoke in my youth, a common theme framed the stories they told us children: The Northwest was a Promised Land and we should be grateful for our blessings here and work hard to ensure a secure future for our families. Having eked out a hardscrabble existence in the Colorado Rockies, on stony Norwegian slopes, and in politically unstable Russia; they seemed in a position to know the beneficial prospects of sacrifice.

Great-Grandma Sunwold, c. 1900.
Scheuerman Family Collection

Grandpa Scheuerman knew his land intimately. He and my father taught us to distinguish the swales, saddles, and other unique topographic features and soil conditions of the Palouse meaningful to a farmer. As with rural families everywhere, many features on the landscape hold special significance. We learned such names and locations as the Huvaluck (Hessian dialect for "Oathole"—a notoriously steep horseshoe basin), "Barley Hill," and "Three-Finger Draw." Grandpa would recount the experiences of the first Volga German immigrants to the region who had labored for years to turn the tawny, knee-high bunchgrass and plant the Turkey Red wheat that their Mennonite countrymen had brought from Russia. Grandpa knew of their exploits firsthand and understood that other groups had shared in these pioneering experiences. He spoke wistfully of the days his father had traded flour and fruit on the river in exchange for Indian salmon.

Our tiny half-section farm clung precariously to economic vitality by the thrift and uncanny ability of my father to keep second-hand machinery running indefinitely with sufficient supplies of baling wire, canvas, and "Rock-Hard"—a gritty, gray goop that turned to stone moments out of the can and was guaranteed to plug any hole in sheet metal. Grandpa loved to visit the ranch long after his retirement, especially during August's sweltering hot "thrashing weather," as he called it, a desire entirely lost on adolescent bondservants. We would sit in a black Ford grain truck that we had polished before harvest, perched for view as Dad reaped some of the finest crops around with a growling mechanical dinosaur of speckled red skin that slowly ate its way through rolling seas of wheat. The high yields produced year after year reflected an agrarian sense in both men that had been passed down over centuries.

Places like Ft. Benton and the Palouse Colony remain significant locations in the American West. Through able living history interpreters Ken Robinson at Ft. Benton and Ft. Nisqually's Mike McGuire, one can still experience the summertime atmosphere of bustling trade and colonist centers where five-point trade blankets and blue Russian cobalt trade beads were exchanged for beaver pelts and bear skins. We can only imagine the settings of other places like Ft. Colville, Ft. Okanogan, and Ft. Nez Perces that now rest beneath the reservoirs of Columbia River dams. Fortunately, the remarkable paintings of nineteenth-century American and Canadian artists like John Mix Stanley, Gustavus Sohon, John Alden, and Paul Kane vividly depict their original appearance.

I have long been drawn to the story of these places and the First Peoples and fur trade families who knew them in part because of what Kentucky folklorist Jay Anderson calls "living history time travel." The experience helps us to examine critically the value of technological change and to make choices to promote wisdom, healthy living, and respect among peoples. Without romanticizing previous lifestyles, there is something to be learned about the value of hard work and wholesome living of that era. Stories of Christmas and Harvest Home celebrations and gatherings devoid of commercialism offer insights into personal and social wellbeing that address the challenges of twenty-first century future shock through understandings akin to what T. S. Eliot terms "felt-truth," or the informed balance of knowledge, wonder, and empathy.

Change can be beneficial when living within the sustainable constraints of the natural world. The frontier era shows how conflict with other cultures has often arisen when such limitations are ignored in the name of short-term commercial gain or perceived higher needs. Northwest Plateau and Coastal Indian leaders like Kamiakin of the Yakamas and Nisqually leader Leschi welcomed Christian missionaries and adopted agricultural and pastoral innovations like the raising of grains, crop irrigation, and selective breeding of livestock. Spiritual leaders (*twáti* , "shamans," or "medicine men") like the Snake River Dreamer Thomash and teachers (*iyáṅča*) like the Wanapum prophet Smohalla spoke of the family of all

mankind and accepted technological progress within the limits of moral obligations to the natural world. Appreciation and application of these lessons for healthier living can be fostered through understandings of the frontier experience.

This book is the result of efforts by individuals throughout the Palouse Country to better understand, celebrate, and perpetuate a special heritage. Palouse area communities evidence a vibrancy and pride in such annual events as Tekoa's Slippery Gulch Days, Pullman's National Lentil Festival, Endicott's Fourth of July Celebration, the St. John Fair and Horse Show, and the Coeur d'Alene Tribal Memorial Warriors Horse Ride from Plummer to Rosalia; active church fellowships, and support for local school sports teams, Future Farmers of America (FFA) programs, and marching bands. The "university cities" of Pullman, Moscow, and Cheney offer cultural and educational opportunities not often accessible to a rural populace and provide repositories for research by those interested in a deeper awareness of our legacy and responsibility as residents of the Palouse. Volunteers work throughout the year to perpetuate the region's cultural and natural heritage through the Palouse Empire Threshing Bee Association, Palouse Folklore Society, Palouse-Clearwater Environmental Institute, county fairs, and quilting circles. Listed in the bibliography are individuals from many of these places and organizations who have shared their stories with me over the years to make this book possible.

We thank John Brown of the WSU College of Agricultural, Human, and Natural Resource Sciences (CAHNRS) for organizing the 2010 E. Paul Catts Memorial Lecture, which provided an opportunity for us to gather and present information on Palouse Country history for the first time. We also thank Kristie Kirkpatrick, Cindy Wigen, and Peggy Bryan of the Whitman County Library in Colfax; and Steve Perisho and Cindy Strong of Seattle Pacific University Library. Useful materials were also made available through Charles Mutchler of Eastern Washington University's Kennedy Library; Charles Webbert at the University of Idaho (UI) Library; Ed Nelson and Doug Olson at the Eastern Washington State Historical Society, Spokane; and Laila Miletic-Vejzovic, Trevor Bond, and Patsy Tate at Washington State University's Holland Library.

The historical photographs featured in this work are from the R. Raymond Hutchison Studio Image Collection in Holland Library's Manuscripts, Archives, and Special Collections at WSU (HSIC, MASC). This remarkable assemblage of 200,000 images documents the visual history of the Palouse Country as recorded throughout the lifetime of pioneer photographer R. R. Hutchison (1887-1967) who established studios in Endicott, LaCrosse, and Pullman, Washington, and Moscow, Idaho. Hutchison's commercial interests were secondary to his lifelong passion for documenting the heritage and scenic beauty of the Palouse during the years of its transition from the homestead to early modern eras. While just a boy on the family farm near Endicott, he carried his first Brownie on recreational trips to the Palouse River and into the fields surrounding the Hutchison home to photograph men, women, and children working throughout the farm year—cultivating and harvesting, butchering, thinning apples and canning fruit, and countless other ordinary tasks that he understood to be significant in the life of rural families.

With growing expertise and improved equipment, he expanded his interests to portraiture and the enormous wide-framed pictures of Palouse Country threshing outfits, family reunions, church conferences, and other special events identified by the small, white-lettered epigraph "Photo by Hutchison" known to residents throughout the region. In the 1920s he founded the Inland Empire Professional Photographers Association and became an unofficial photographer of university events and personalities at both WSU and UI where his camera captured hundreds of sporting events, construction

projects, and celebrity visits. Individuals with rare and fragile pictures taken across the Palouse in the settlement era would often turn to Hutchison for copies and restoration work and he would retain negatives for his own files. Given the length of his career in one area, the quality and prodigious output of his work that was safeguarded for decades, R. R. Hutchison bequeathed the people of the Palouse one of the finest regional photographic collections in existence anywhere.

Historians whose works have greatly benefited our research include Donald Meinig, David Stratton, Keith Petersen, Fr. Thomas Connolly, SJ, Jack Nisbet, Dennis Solbrack, and the late Walter Gary, Glen Adams, and Verle Kaiser. Special thanks go to Linda Bathgate, Editor-in-Chief at Washington State University Press, who first suggested this special edition, and to Director Ed Sala, Kerry Darnall, and Caryn Lawton for a most valued publishing partnership over the years.

Richard D. Scheuerman
Richland, Washington

R. Raymond Hutchison, 1936.
Hutchison Studio Photographs Collection, 1910–1973, Manuscripts, Archives, and Special Collections, Washington State University Libraries.

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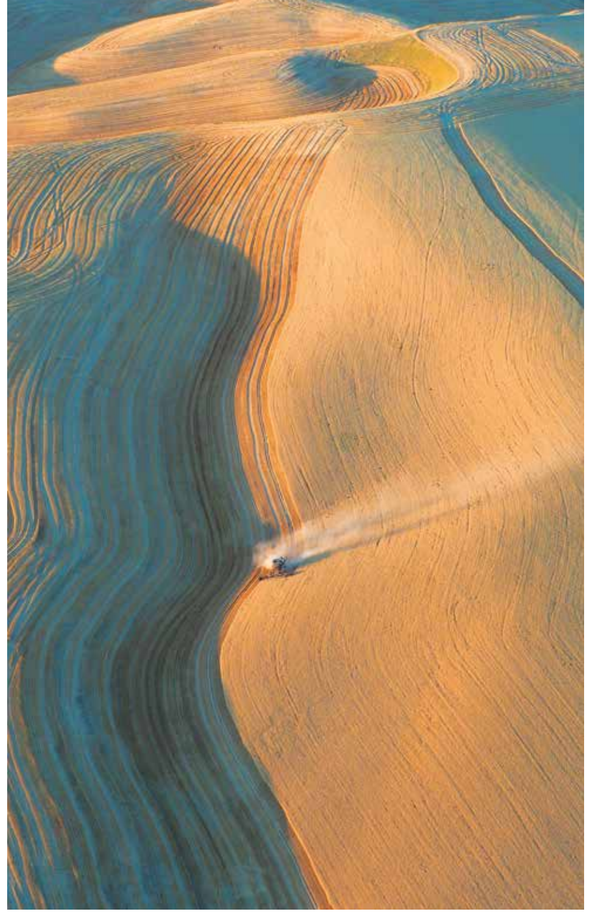
Mader Farm Sunrise

east of
Uniontown,
Washington



Harvest Lines

Palouse Land Designs II

near LaCrosse, Washington

facing page

Big Sky Over Steptoe

CHAPTER I

Place and First Peoples

Looming above the panoramic Palouse near the heart of the region stands a promontory revered by the region's First Peoples and known today as Steptoe Butte. To the native Snake River-Palouse Indians, it was *Yamúštas* ("Elk Mountain"), a sacred high place of spirit quests and the home of mythic Elk. (The meaning of its ancient Coeur d'Alene Salish name, *S'ymtítɛ'*, is lost to antiquity.) An honored figure in tribal folklore, Elk was said to have found sanctuary during the time of the Animal People in the cleft of the butte's eastern face. In the ancient time, a great flood covered the land and Yámúštas became an island. After the waters subsided, the Creator brought forth the animals, fishes, roots, and berries.[1] The area's first European-American explorers dubbed Steptoe Butte "Pyramid Peak" for its resemblance to Egypt's great monument to Cheops. The formation served like a mariner's landmark in a maelstrom of earthen waves that crested with wind-pulsed native wheatgrasses and fescues. Viewed from above, the undulating Palouse is a vast labyrinth of whorls and swirls that resemble a deific thumbprint.

Before the sextant and plow demarcated and denuded these fertile swells, they were seasonally transformed from soft springtime viridian hues with wildflowered splashes of bluebells, flaming Indian paintbrush, and bright yellow arrowleaf balsamroot into summer and fall's muted green-brown pastels mixed in the bunchgrass billows. The butte continues to serve as a landmark Palouse portal to Native Americans today. On several occasions while in the company of Palouse-Nez Perces returning to Lapwai from the Colville Reservation or with Coeur d' Alenes headed east from Warm Springs, I have heard elders say, "When I see Steptoe Butte, I know that I am home."

With its summit at 3,612 feet often shrouded in purling clouds, the butte is the highest and most ancient formation in the Palouse hills. Its ascendance preceded the plateau lava flows by eons and it is composed of billion-year-old sandpaper-orange quartzite related geologically to the eastern upland shore of Precambrian metamorphic strata twenty miles beyond in the foothills of northwestern Idaho's rugged cordillera. I still look with awe at a chip from the summit given to me as a paperweight. Formations similar to Steptoe Butte create an inland atoll within this restless sea of grains and grasses, of which Steptoe is the westernmost in a chain of prominents that includes Stratton, Granite, and Kamiak Buttes and Moscow and Tekoa Mountains. A timeless sentinel cloaked in beige and ochred beauty, Steptoe Butte's vista provides evidence of the surrounding terrain's geologic origins and a point from which to view the twisted course of the Palouse River that unites its varied landscapes.

The Palouse region covers that part of Eastern Washington and Northern Idaho in the Palouse River basin as well as adjacent lands characterized by a rolling terrain of fertile loess soils. This area covers approximately 4,000 square miles and

lies largely in Washington's Whitman and Spokane Counties, substantial portions of Adams, Columbia, and Garfield Counties, and in Idaho's Latah and Benewah Counties. Nearly seventy percent of the land is arable, composed of deep deposits of rich but fragile topsoil. These cover immense layers of brown-black basalt, composed of fine-grained pyroxene and plagioclase. This bedrock shield is up to 10,000 feet thick, resulting from successive lava flows through fissures across the Columbia Plateau during the late Miocene Epoch between six and seventeen million years ago. Before the Cascade uplift, this vast area of land received as much as fifty inches of annual rainfall to host a mixed forest of conifers, maples, water tupelo, and oak similar to America's southeastern bald cypress swamps of today.

The Palouse Country is bounded by the Snake, Tucannon, and Clearwater Rivers on the south and Idaho's imposing Bitterroot and Clearwater Mountains to the east. The evergreen forests of these eastern uplands extend across the northern half of Spokane County along a line roughly corresponding to the deepest penetration of the great Pleistocene glaciers to form the region's northern limit. The Cheney-Palouse lobe of the Channeled Scablands comprises the region's western boundary, which extends from the timber line near Tyler, Washington, south to the mouth of the Palouse River. Annual rainfall increases from an average of fourteen inches in the western Palouse prairies to eighteen inches in the central Palouse hills and up to twenty-two inches in the foothills of the eastern mountains. This pattern corresponds to a rise in elevation from 1,200 feet in the southwest corner of the Palouse prairie to the fringe of the Clearwater Palouse Range at 2,800 feet, almost exactly one inch of precipitation for every hundred feet of elevation. Variations in soil fertility, developed over ages due to increasing rainfall eastward, led to climax vegetation associated with the Palouse's three climatic life zones: Upper Sonoran in the western Palouse, Arid Transition across the central Palouse hills, and Canadian in the eastern mountain uplands.

The Palouse Country Today

The name "Palouse" is likely from *Palús*, the Snake River-Palouse tribal Sahaptin word for the rock monolith prominent in regional mythology that was located near the confluence of the Palouse and Snake Rivers. The term combines the Palouse Sahaptin prefix *pa-* ("placed upright") with the root *–lú* ("be in water") which is combined with the diminutive suffix *–s*. "Palouse" in modern conventional spelling first appears in the 1855 Yakama Treaty, following references to "Peloose" in 1846 by Horatio Hale with Charles Wilkes' U. S. Exploring Expedition, and Isaac Stevens' "Pelouse" in an 1854 report to the Office of Indian Affairs. Early independent variations of the name may also be associated with the village of *Palótap* which was located on the northwest side of the Snake River west of present-day Colton. Although apparently unoccupied at the time of the Lewis & Clark Expedition, its phonetic may relate to their use of the terms "Pallotepallows" and "Palloatpallah."

The commonly repeated notion that the word "Palouse" was derived from the French term *pelouse*, meaning "greensward or lawn," has no basis in nineteenth-century accounts describing the region. The idea probably first appeared in print as an editor's footnote to a 1904 edition of the Lewis and Clark journals. French-speaking fur traders with the North West Company and others who first spied the rolling hills of pulsing grasses would have likely referred to it with the same French word for such a landscape that was lent to the English language—prairie. An early description of the Palouse hills—an account of the 1846 Warre-Vavasour expedition published in French—describes the region as "*une vaste prairie ondulante*"—a vast undulating *prairie*.

The Eastern Palouse Uplands

The Palouse River headwaters are born in the clear stony brooks of Idaho's Hoodoo and Clearwater mountains and are fed by tributaries emerging from the Thatuna Range located between the river's north and south forks. These eastern uplands are composed of the western buttes' parent belt quartzites and argillites that rose with the Rocky Mountains when the Cascade Range had not yet emerged above the Pacific waters. In the formative processes of this early Mesozoic Age of explosive Rocky Mountain strato-volcanoes, hot magmatic fluids under great pressure penetrated this younger earth's crust and brought certain metals in gaseous state nearer the surface to form soluble compounds like gold chloride and aluminum-iron silicate. In places where water penetrated to great depth, these compounds dissolved, mixed with the magma, and were forced through fissures with other solubles like silicon dioxide, or quartz, to create veins containing precious metals and almandine garnet crystals.

Where this petrographic drama transpired under ancient, weathered surfaces, as in the Hoodoos, these deposits were worn by water until soft yellow flakes, larger nuggets, and violet-red gemstones fell out into streams which usually held these heavy particles near their sources. As in other high places along the Pacific Slope, indications of this placer gold in North Idaho resulted in nineteenth century regional rushes as prospectors flocked to the rumored El Dorados. Dodecahedron-faced garnets and rainbow-colored "harlequin" opals have also been sought in the eastern Palouse as the region's only semi-precious stones.

The eastern Palouse hosts a complex forest habitat that begins several miles east of Steptoe Butte where scattered ponderosa pine grows among the ubiquitous native grasses along the Palouse River with willow browse and brambles of wild rose and flowering shrubs. Spotted timber gradually becomes a mixed forest as the moister climate eastward brings forth stands of Western larch, or tamarack—a deciduous conifer—

and Douglas fir. Pines were dominant on the southern exposures. Thickets of black mountain huckleberry, serviceberry, and buckbrush flourish in sunlit meadows where their leaves and mountain bunchgrass have fed creatures of horn and hoof for centuries. Witness to a thousand years of whitened furies and springtime Chinooks were stands of giant red cedar on Kamiak Butte and Moscow Mountain. The tallest trees in these ancient forests rose to heights of 250 feet and some remain in threatened huddles as the oldest living things in the region.

The nation's largest white pine forest—mixed with larch, Engelmann spruce, and other conifers—commences at about 3,000 feet and covers the upper elevations of the Clearwater Mountains with old growth several hundred years old and often over two hundred feet high. These areas provide summer habitat to several songbird species including yellow warblers and red-breasted nuthatches as well as the smaller ruby-crowned kinglets, pine siskins, and black-capped chickadees. Beneath their flight patterns grow delicate orchid-like pink lady slippers and yellowbells that favor the canopy shade. Pioneer Palouse residents hunted these sylvan uplands for wild game and exploited the region's forests as sources of lumber and fuel unavailable on the bunchgrass prairies.

Mineral Mountain (Skyline Drive), 1945
Hutchison Studio Photographs of Washington State University and Pullman, WA., 1910-1973 (PC 70)
Manuscripts, Archives, and Special Collections, Washington State University Libraries, Pullman, WA.

The Palouse Hills

When the undulant verdure of the central Palouse emerges from winter's chill, the snowdrifts viewed from Steptoe Butte highlight barchan pattern of hills aligned northwest by southeast with recurrent concave headwalls of northeast-facing exposure. These features indicate hills of loess, or windblown silt, deposited by ancient winds from the Pasco Basin into gigantic earthen dunes connected by twisting benches, amphitheaters, and saddles. The fine-grained sediments far to the southwest had accumulated under prehistoric Lake Lewis after its appearance during the late Pliocene nearly a million years ago. These waters stretched across the lower Columbia Basin until the early Pleistocene when changes in weather and surface uplift reduced the lake to massive piles of desiccated silt.

The lower elevations of Steptoe Butte and its metamorphic neighbors as well as the Palouse's irregular basaltic overlay became inundated with these displaced particles along with periodic dustings from Cascade volcanic ashfalls. Wafted gusts of primordial winds patiently formed the textured tiers of the region's fertile hills and sculpted a curving labyrinth of swales, ridges, and slopes unique to the Palouse. The occasional dust storms that today reduce the late summer sun to a gossamer balloon invariably blow from the same direction as these ancestral currents and give some indication of the suffocating swirls that visited the region for ages. Further evidence of this peculiar earthen displacement is found in the size of particulate grains in the Palouse Hills that range from the heavy, coarse sands of the Juniper Dunes Wilderness Area southwest of Kahlotus to the fine yellow subsoil silts of the eastern Palouse.[2]

Large prehistoric mammals lumbered throughout the hills, seeking seasonal forage along grassy bottomlands during the later Pleistocene. Camel, giant sloth, antelope, mastodon, bison, and bighorn sheep have been excavated at a dozen sites along the western tier of the Palouse Hills from Washtucna to Rosalia, and many are displayed at WSU's Conner Museum of Natural History. Images of bison and sheep appear in the red and yellow pictographs and chipped petroglyphs at Buffalo Eddy near Lewiston, which are believed to be hundreds of years old. In 1876, a fascinating array of four mammoth skeletons, a human skull, spear point, and other artifacts were unearthed south of Latah by Henry Coplen and his five sons, from which was assembled the largest skeleton of the mammoth species ever found in North America. Standing thirteen feet high at the shoulder and with fossilized ivory tusks curving ten feet in length, the popular attraction was shown at circuses throughout the West until it was eventually acquired by Chicago's Field Museum, where it serves today as one of its most popular exhibits.

The protected northeast crescents of the hills are shielded from the prevailing southwesterlies and lie silently in shadow throughout most winter days, limiting evaporation and allowing deep drifts to form, which often remain into spring. This phenomenon reoccurred over millennia, penetrating the headwall soils with greater moister to foster banks of prodigious prairie and accumulations of enriching humus. Variations in biotic growth created a palette of topsoil browns across each hill's fertile patina, with the three microenvironments including a steeper leeward side-hill and draw of black earth and greatest fertility, an exposed ridge of intermediate chestnut soil, and the more gentle but drier and lighter southwest-facing slope. As precipitation increases across the central Palouse, three principal topsoil types of increasing fertility similarly characterize the hills from east to west that are known progressively as the Walla Walla, Athena, and Palouse associations.

Blue bunch wheatgrass, blue bunchgrass, ryegrass, and other mixed prairie perennials predominated on the legendary rolling Palouse Hills, providing luxurious forage for deer, bison, antelope, and in recent times, the Native peoples' vast horse herds that had descended from Spanish stock brought to New Mexico and New Spain in the sixteenth century. Several of these native grassland species are being reintroduced to the Palouse through the 1985 Conservation Reserve Program that has idled vast tracts of western Palouse farmland which were once in production. The Palouse Indians referred to the wild Gramineae species simply as *wasku*, or forage grass. In early summer, the prairie base was a tufted universe of slender stalks, emerging petioles, and curling leaves inhabited by herbivorous nations of crickets, beetles, and grasshoppers. Equipped with tiny, serrated sickle jaws, these species were integral to the grassland's ecological renewal by their ingestion of vegetative growth and subsequent deposition of organic forms essential to plant nutrition.

Biblical numbers of wraithlike mayflies, midges, and damselflies still appear with the first warm days of spring to feed neotropical creatures of larger wing that nest in the Palouse during seasonal migrations including shimmering calliope and Rufus hummingbirds. Birds of prey like the prairie falcon and sparrow hawk that reside in the Palouse throughout the year also capture dragonflies, moths, and other large insects flying against lucent summer skies. Underground, the patient labor of earthworms—one extinct species nearly a foot long (*D. ameriicanas*: Magascolecidae) being unique to the Palouse—work diligently in the fibrous darkness to transform soil minerals into organics also usable by prairie flora. Their infinite twisting tunnels together with the penetrations of decaying roots kept the ground open to aeration and percolation.[3]

The Palouse from Kamiak Butte, 1934.
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Old Farm

east of
Colfax, Washington