

On the Proper Name for “Pompadour Bluff”

Mahmoud Shelton

Author of *Ancient Secrets of the Rogue Valley*

In his field notes, the heroic linguist and ethnologist John Peabody Harrington identifies the Takelma place name Lathkawk as “the little red hill at Ashland,”¹ and more precisely the “red looking hill across (Bear) Creek from Ashland, close to Ashland.”² The only place matching this description is now somewhat embarrassingly called Pompadour Bluff. However, elsewhere in his notes Harrington uses the same name for Grizzly Peak that rises far above the town and is neither a hill nor “red looking.” This discrepancy derives from his dependence upon two distinct sources for his information. The former identification is linked to Frances Johnson, the incomparable source of Takelma traditional knowledge both for Harrington as well as for Sapir who preceded him. The association with Grizzly Peak, an association invariably adopted by subsequent academics,³ is based upon the report of Molly Orton. Orton, while affirming her close kinship with Johnson, traced her ancestry specifically to the Upland Takelma or Latgawa along the eastern flank of the Upper Bear Creek drainage. Given that Johnson’s ancestry was more closely associated with the Rogue River, it seems reasonable that Orton’s testimony would take precedence on the matter of Ashland’s traditional geography. Still, it is important to keep in mind that the Upper Bear Creek Valley is considered to have been disputed territory,⁴ and that the Latgawa territorial claim to this specific region is far from certain.

The Evidence

Molly Orton accompanied Harrington on a visit to Ashland in 1933 and so was able, for example, to provide important information concerning the traditional significance of the “poison lake” now known as Jackson Wellsprings. Concerning the location of another poison lake near Grizzly Peak, however, she was uncertain, but insisted on its relevance as the “lake that killed Steven.”⁵ In keeping with this example, most of Orton’s recollections about the Ashland area relate to the society of the immigrants. For example, her identification of a cemetery between Phoenix and Ashland concerned not a Native burial ground but rather an “old white man graveyard.”⁶ She mentions a “cold medicine spring that Americans used to drink as medicinal water,”⁷ but

¹ JPH 808

² JPH 809

³ Cf. Jeff LaLande, *From Abbott Butte to Zimmerman Burn: A Place-name History and Gazetteer of the of the Rogue River National Forest*, Medford, 2001, page 9.

⁴ Cf. Dennis J. Gray, *The Takelma and Their Athabascan Neighbors: A New Ethnographic Synthesis for the Upper Rogue River Area of Southwestern Oregon*, University of Oregon Anthropological Papers number 37, 1987, pages 16-21. No mention is made, for example, of the village that preceded the Ashland plaza and has been associated with the Shasta people.

⁵ JPH 721-2

⁶ JPH 753

⁷ JPH 719

seemed to have no knowledge of the traditional use of the chain of mineral springs that so distinguishes the Upper Bear Creek drainage.⁸ For his part, Harrington was obviously unfamiliar with the geography of Ashland, and so relied on directions he received by stopping at a local drug store. Following a conversation with the store clerk, Harrington sought out a natural sandstone formation featuring what the informant called the “Horseshoe” and the “Rabbit,” but for Orton, “she had never heard of them or seen them.”⁹ Around Ashland, she proved to be more familiar with an old circus ground.¹⁰

Indeed, in Harrington’s efforts with Orton around Ashland, it was often difficult to connect the topography with her Native memory and so make simple identifications.¹¹ Harrington notes clearly, however, that “Lathkawak = Grizzly Peak.”¹² Lathkawak literally “means front of person,”¹³ and it is in this sense that Orton apparently used the word, since anyone in Ashland looking up towards Grizzly Peak is “faced” by a distinctively rocky ridgeline. It is important to recognize that this ridge is not Grizzly Peak proper, but rather its western flank; its peak is actually hidden from view. Even modern visitors to Grizzly Peak ignore the actual summit in favor of the spur that is seen from the Bear Creek valley below. In other words, the term Lathkawak is here applied not to a peak but to a presently unnamed ridge that is only the “front” of the mountain; in fact, Harrington notes that once when Orton was regarding the wider ridgeline, she asserted that she “could call the whole thing Lathkawak.”¹⁴ What is more, there is the curious matter of Orton offering a Takelma translation of “Dead Indian Mountain” for Grizzly Peak; even if she did not insist on its importance, it further suggests that Grizzly Peak was not exclusively identified with the name “Lathkawak.”¹⁵

Any mountain obviously presents different aspects depending upon the position of the witness, so Grizzly Peak is not really unique in this regard. The hill known as Pompadour Bluff is known as a bluff precisely because the side seen by most people in the Ashland area is a cliff face. On the other hand, from behind it appears as a grassy and wooded but unremarkable hill. More than Grizzly Peak, then, it appears to have a “front” that faces people. The name “Lathkawak” is therefore eminently appropriate, which is, of course, why Frances Johnson used it. Composed of sandstone unlike Grizzly Peak, its identity as a “little red hill” is perfectly comprehensible. Rather awkwardly, Harrington notes on a map that Grizzly Peak appears “reddish at times,”¹⁶ but so will any rocky ridge that faces the setting Sun. Here, unfamiliar with the geography of Ashland and in the company of Molly Orton, Harrington seems to be attempting to reconcile two conflicting reports. With objective hindsight, however, we would do well to reconsider this evidence and, despite academic bias, defer to the authority of Frances Johnson. As far as Harrington’s judgment is concerned, it is worth mentioning that his final notes on the

⁸ Cf. *Ancient Secrets of the Rogue Valley*, Temple of Justice Books, 2022.

⁹ JPH 749. This is unfortunate since there are in the vicinity of this landform important signs of an ancient Native presence. This landform happens to belong to the same geologic formation that further south rises as Lathkawak.

¹⁰ JPH 751

¹¹ He writes, for example, that “this morning I feel that Pa’kaytkam may be Table Mountain” (JPH 712).

¹² JPH 728

¹³ Gray, *op. cit.* page 73.

¹⁴ JPH 716

¹⁵ JPH 752

¹⁶ *Ibid.*

matter appear near the end of his work on the Takelma, and there he cites Johnson and not Orton.¹⁷

The Choice

Remarkably, the meaning of this Takelma word is not unrelated to the significance of the bluff's current name; after all, the "pompadour" hairstyle is distinctive for its front. However, it must be insisted that its current name, deriving ultimately from French aristocracy but recalling more immediately the pop culture destitution of the 20th century, is no longer acceptable. The designation "Pompadour" is far from iconic, with virtually nothing named after it. The time has finally come to replace it with a better word from Native culture that happens to be relatively straightforward. The Takelma name Ti'lomikh has thankfully been restored to the village site along the Rogue River, though this word is less a replacement than an important reminder. Similarly, the name Taowhywee has become the official name of a lesser known hill in Ashland's vicinity. In the present case, several transcriptions are possible, from the rigorous Lath'kawkh to the variant Lathkawkh from Harrington's notes; for the sake of simplicity, Lathkawkh seems preferable. As for pronunciation, those familiar with the Takelma language should be consulted, but accuracy in this matter should not become an obstacle; after all, it is unlikely that many people know how to pronounce Ti'lomikh or Taowhywee, and Pompadour is not pronounced locally as the French would prefer.

The Southern Oregon Land Conservancy presently has the privilege of managing the landmark, and for years has advertised that "we hope to discover" its Native name. With privilege comes responsibility, and hope involves action if the truth is to be discovered. The Native name of this landmark is Lathkawkh, a name that despite academic presumption never corresponded to Grizzly Peak as a whole but has always served to designate the "little red hill at Ashland." Speeches including land acknowledgements are all well and good, but more permanent reminders are better. Once the Land Conservancy facilitates visits to the bluff as they have "envisioned," the proper name should help people remember to walk in harmony with those who no doubt respected the bluff for thousands of years.

¹⁷ JPH 808-9



The "front" of Lathkawk



View of the bluff from behind