

## Palisades Tahoe and the Washoe People

Two mountains, thirty-four lifts, and over two-hundred and seventy trails. These are a small part of the endless adventures promised on your visit to Palisades Tahoe. Located in the Olympic Valley of Northern California, this ski resort is visited by snow-lovers and heat enthusiasts alike. Offering several thousand acres for snowboarding and skiing in the winter as well as a gourmet dining experience and live entertainment in the summer. It is a staple visit for Northern California residents as well as an unforgettable attraction for people who are willing to travel. Named after the most sought-out attractions for winter visitors, Palisades reflects the greatness of the resort's surrounding areas and asserts its predominant role in the community of the Olympic Valley. The resort was opened in 1949, made famous in 1960 for hosting the Winter Olympics, and is now making headlines one more time after changing its name. Palisades Tahoe was originally named after a derogatory term adopted by White settlers to refer to Indigenous Women. After a push from the local community as well as understanding from the current Palisades administration, its name was changed officially in September of 2021.

Palisades Tahoe is recognized by ski and snowboarding lovers as the place to be when the snow allows it. This resort has established itself as a staple in the community of the Olympic Valley. Challenging the notion that California is all beaches and sun, Alexander Cushing was determined to open a ski resort in the Olympic Valley. He was a New York lawyer and socialite who brought with him to the West Coast a myriad of political power and knowledge. After coming into possession of more than a thousand acres in 1949, Alexander Cushing opened what was then known as the S\* Valley Development Company which allowed ski lovers to enjoy "the world's largest double chairlift" (Web Archive, 2018). In order to advertise the new ski resort, Cushing thought it would be a good idea to bid Palisades Tahoe host the 1960 winter Olympics. What started as an opportunity for publicity later became a reality when Cushing's resort was chosen as the host. His political connections helped him persuade the US Olympic committee and later his own personal experience and lobbying awarded Palisades as the host as decided by the International Committee (Martin, 2006). The 1960 Winter Olympics were the first ones to be televised which afforded Palisades prestige and positioned it as a major establishment where even Olympic sports could be hosted. In 2011, after a variety of changes in ownership, Palisades Tahoe was merged with its neighboring ski resort Alpine Meadows under the defunct name of S\*

Valley Alpine Meadows. According to the Palisades Tahoe website, the naming of the resort was merely a reflection of the valley in which it is situated and was not intended with derogatory connotations (Palisades Tahoe, 2021).

History is important when trying to understand a place and its characteristics. The history of the Olympic Valley is tied to the history of the Wašiw People. Commonly known today as the Washoe, they are a Native American Tribe residing in the Great Basin area. According to their creation story, the goddess Nentašu claimed the area surrounding Lake Tahoe “meant to be” for the Wašiw. This tribe was comprised of a variety of “bands” depending on their location in their territory. These bands were made up of local groups whose core unit is families. Even though the bands slightly differ from each other, ultimately they make up the whole tribe. (Washoe Tribe of California and Nevada, 2020).

Like many other Indigenous populations, the Washoe were displaced after the gold rush brought people from many different places, including the East Coast, to California. It is with the settlers from the East Coast that the s-slur is introduced to the West Coast. The use of this word is common among Algonquian-speaking Native peoples as it is simply a term used to refer to a woman. Unfortunately, there are other connotations given to this word after White settlers began coming into contact with Native peoples. In the Iroquoian Indian language Mohawk, the word ‘otsikwaw’ refers to female genitalia. There are those who argue that the word is not offensive as it only refers to a woman, but this is only in the Algonquian language. For Iroquoian tribes, it represents a co-opting and denigration of Native women. Professor Henrietta Mann of Montana suggests that fur traders of the East Coast shortened the word otsikwaw into what is known as the s-slur and used it to refer to a Native woman “who provides sexual satisfaction to White men” (O’Brien, 2005).

When looking at the history in the name of the Valley, the general consensus is that during the migration brought about by the Gold Rush, Washoe men were hunting therefore when East Coast settlers arrived, they encountered only women and children. Since these settlers already had the slur in their vocabulary, they used it to describe the Valley. Since this is where the resort was located, Alexander Cushing named the resort after it. There are other suggestions as to how the Valley got its name, but no matter what they are the reality is that the word is misogynistic and derogatory for Native women.

Unfortunately, the normalization of derogatory terms used against minorities is something this country is very much acquainted with. For Alexander Cushing, it made sense to name his resort a slur because the Valley it was located in was also called that same slur. Many years after the resort opened its doors, the administration began reevaluating the name. The Palisades Tahoe website credits the “momentum of recognition and accountability [seen] around the country in 2020” as the spark that ignited the change in the name along with “extensive research into the etymology and history of the term” (Palisades Tahoe, 2021). This can be assumed to allege to the summer of 2020 in the wake of the murder of George Floyd who died after a police officer knelt on his neck for more than nine minutes. After this incident, the American people took to the streets to demand police accountability (Taddonio, 2021). The website also makes references to the stereotype of the Princess and the s-word to help people better understand why the use of this word must be discontinued. This stereotype is one of many used to push Native peoples into a more Euro-centric lifestyle. The idea is that a Native American woman is an s-word as she is in her Native American culture, she is inferior to the White woman because of her heritage. Once this woman marries a white man, she can then become a princess (Coward, 2014). It is only through her association with whiteness that she can gain the status of a person. When discussing this stereotype people tend to reference Pocahontas as she embodies what has been called the “Virgin-Whore paradox, where the Indian princess has to maintain her purity while used as a prostitute to cover men’s desires” which is similar to the “princess and the s-word stereotype (Pfeiffer, n.d.). In both of these, Native women are not seen as women unless they have any sort of closeness to the white man while simultaneously suffering at his hand one way or another. Given the stereotype and the connotations the word holds, it is sensible for Palisades Tahoe to list these as the reason behind the change in name.

The administration of Palisades Tahoe decided to leave the stereotypes and derogatory terms behind and embrace what their resort has to offer. President of Palisades Tahoe Dee Byrne wrote in her letter that the new name is a “representation of the freedom and progression born of these peaks” referring to the two mountains inhabited within the land of the resort (Palisades Tahoe, 2021). It is undeniable that the scenery surrounding Palisades can easily take anybody’s breath away. Surrounded by two majestic mountains, the Olympic Valley and the Alpine Meadows bring visitors in the cold months to scratch their ski or snowboarding itch. This new name is in honor of these mountains and the terrains surrounding them. Palisades Tahoe is a

much more appropriate name for such a remarkable resort. Housing two distinct mountain ranges that attracted the Olympics, Palisades Tahoe has been established in the Olympic Valley community as a landmark feature. With the change in name came a change in logo. This consists of two blue mountains to the left representing the main attractions of Palisades or “the waters of Lake Tahoe” which actually make up the plumage of an eagle (Palisades Tahoe, 2021). This animal was chosen as a symbol of protection and freedom, important to both Palisades Tahoe and the Washoe People. Additionally, there are flat parts on the top of the eagle and the beak resembles a cliff which has its intentionality in mirroring Palisades’ topography. Finally, the eagle and mountains are positioned in a wave-like form to represent California’s beachy ambiance. To go from a word used to degrade Native American women and stereotype them as less than other women, more specifically White women, to honoring the land in which the resort stands on and the scenery around it is undoubtedly a step in the right direction.

It is imperative that the people affected are involved in all levels of the process. When it came to the new name, the Palisades administration made it seem like their decision was taken with their resort in mind and not the Washoe. What many people would have in mind in a case like this, where there were original inhabitants of this land with their own way of life, would be to adopt a name that was previously held. Since the resort was named after the valley it resides in, it would have been logical to look at the original name of it. Unfortunately, this is not what Palisades opted for. Instead, they chose to represent the landscape and the surrounding area. It is difficult to find information on what the original name was. The Washoe call the Sierra Valley “Mutsim yagada det deyi”, which could have served as inspiration for a new name had there been more consideration for Indigenous people and not only the resort (Nevers, 2009). The fight to ban the s-word from names is not exclusive to Palisades Tahoe. Native American groups have been calling to completely ban the name s-word Valley and have made suggestions such as Yokutch Valley and Nuum. As reported by the LA Times, “Roman Rain Tree... of the Dunlap Band of Mono Indians, is leading a campaign to change the name of the land where his ancestors lived for generations from [S\*] Valley to Nuum Valley”. He’s suggested this name specifically because it translates to “the people” in the Mono language. (Seidman, 2022).

The change in name of a ski resort may not seem like an important one to people, but it is part of a bigger cause happening around the country which Indigenous peoples have been calling

for. After being sworn into office in 2021, Secretary of the Interior Deb Haaland banned the use of the s-word from federal lands, acknowledging its origin as an “offensive ethnic, racial, and sexist slur” (Chappell, 2021). The removal of such a word is especially important when the fact that this word targets Indigenous women specifically is taken into account. There is a disproportionate rate of sexual assault when it comes to Native American women. It is expected that “more than half of Indigenous Women [will] experience sexual violence” in their lifetime (Bartley, 2021). There is a disparity between the rates at which Native American women are affected by murder and sexual assault when compared to women of other ethnicities. The issue of Missing and Murdered Indigenous Women, Girls, and Two-spirit individuals (sometimes abbreviated to MMIWG2S) is a crisis of many aspects. It is a crisis of data with underreporting and under logging cases, it is a crisis of Native women’s right to not live in fear for their fixed Identity as Native, and a crisis of care (Lucchesi & Echo-Hawk, n.d.). This is an issue that needs to be taken seriously and addressed appropriately, and yet according to the Lucchesi and Echo-Hawk study done in 71 urban areas of the United States, out of 506 cases identified, 98 were labeled as “unknown status” as opposed to murdered or missing. (Lucchesi & Echo-Hawk, n.d.). This is the reality that Native women have to deal with. That of uncertainty and persecution in their everyday lives. This is why the change in name of Palisade Tahoe represents something bigger than just a resort. By changing the name, it is acknowledged that there was something wrong to begin with; that there was a disservice done specifically to Native Women.

The involvement of the Washoe People is a step in the right direction towards stewardship and autonomy. Oftentimes, institutions will take measures to try to bring reparations to Indigenous peoples without actually consulting them which can cause more harm than good. According to the Palisades Tahoe website, the Washoe Tribe worked closely with the resort to push for this change in name. More specifically it features quotes from Darrel Cruz, the Washoe Tribe Historic Preservation Officer, highlighting the relationship between the Palisades Tahoe administration and the Washoe Tribe. Additionally, Palisades Tahoe has begun efforts to include the Washoe Tribe into the resort, recognizing that Olympic Valley is their ancestral home. These efforts include ensuring “mountain accessibility for present and future Washoe generations” and providing the Washoe People with a platform to inform non-Native people about Washoe history, traditions, and customs. This includes a “Washoe Cultural Tour series” which allows for people to adopt an Indigenous perspective when enjoying the mountains of Palisades Tahoe along with a

speech from Cruz to inform the public. Furthermore, the resort will install a permanent exhibit featuring “tribal artifacts” so people can further understand the Washoe way of life (Palisades Tahoe, 2021). All of these efforts are supposed to give some sort of authority back to the Indigenous peoples of the Olympic Valley. These actions when done working closely with the Native peoples can achieve their purpose, otherwise, they’d be performative stunts. There is a long way to go when it comes to the authority of Indigenous peoples and the places they were displaced from. Inviting them into the conversation and making space for them to have input in certain decisions is the first step towards more access and reparations for Indigenous peoples.

There are different steps that may be taken to acknowledge the harm done to Indigenous peoples on behalf of the United States. A common way to do this is to give land acknowledgments. These are statements of recognition in which it is acknowledged that specific Indigenous peoples are the rightful stewards of the land non-Native people now inhabit. Palisades Tahoe also adopted a land acknowledgment on their website as part of their efforts to recognize the Washoe Tribe and uplift them. Land Acknowledgments are facilitated by the website <https://native-land.ca/> where people can enter their address and find what Native Land they are occupying and use it to acknowledge the specific tribe it belongs to. Some argue that land acknowledgments are empty words and fail to acknowledge the complexity behind the real history of the displacement of Indigenous peoples (Kaur, 2021). In Palisades case, it is doing more than just a land acknowledgment by providing the Washoe Cultural Tour Series and closely collaborating with the Washoe tribe, but more can be done. There is a movement called “Land Back” spearheaded by Indigenous Peoples. They aim to “get Indigenous Lands back into Indigenous hands” (LANDBACK, 2021). There are different issues that can come between an institution like Palisades Tahoe and completing the requests of Land Back, yet there is a way for it to be done. Land Back does not mean that the land is returned to Indigenous Peoples and everybody else has to leave. The sentiment has different meanings for different Native peoples, but at the end of the day, it is a way for Indigenous peoples to be in charge of the land that was once (and still rightfully is) theirs. It means restoring Indigenous stewardship and management of territories and recognition and honoring of treaties.

Palisades Tahoe offers a variety of services year-round. The ski resort invites people to enjoy the beautiful scenery of the surrounding area of Sierra Nevada. The resort’s founder,

Alexander Cushing lobbied for Palisades Tahoe to be the host of the 1960 Winter Olympics and was successful in doing so. This resort became well established in the community of the Olympic Valley as it demonstrated the California slopes were worthy of Olympic games. Throughout all of these accomplishments, the resort dawned a name that was used to refer to Indigenous Women in a discriminatory manner. Written as the s-word in this paper for the purpose of not furthering the use of such a derogatory word, the name was adopted after the Valley it is located in, s-word valley. The origin of this word came about with the migration of people from the East Coast where the word was used to refer to Native American women who would engage in sexual activities with white men. Taken from the Iroquois language, the word means “female genitalia” and was used to refer to women as their anatomy only with degrading purposes. The Washoe people were displaced from their ancestral territory with this influx of people and now reside within the sidelines of Palisades Tahoe. They encouraged the name change given the resort is a community staple. The resort administration worked closely with the Washoe Tribe and is now implementing more programs to further the access of Washoe Tribe members to the mountains housed within Palisades Tahoe as well as a Tour for Washoe People to provide insight into their way of life to Palisades Tahoe visitors. These actions, along with a land acknowledgment, are good starting points to restoring stewardship for the Washoe Tribe. The LANDBACK movement offers some other requests that can accomplish their goal of giving land back to its rightful owners. Names hold history and connection to the place they serve, changing the name of Palisades Tahoe is just one of the steps that can be taken to correct the history of the Olympic Valley.

Taking into account the suggestions made by Dr. Brinkley and the peer reviews, I added more information about the Washoe people in order to give more historical information as well as more insight into their original names for the place the resort now occupies. I also fixed the many grammatical errors present all throughout the paper as well as the continuity flaws. Additionally, I restructured some of the paragraphs to allow for less repetition and a smoother flow of information. Finally, I made slight adjustments in order to include more information on the history of the places and names instead of the resort name change.

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