

The Nez Perce War



The Battle of the Bear's Paw, from a sketch by a Harper's Weekly artist.

A Long Journey to Surrender

The traditional homeland of the Nez Perce was that place where Oregon, Washington, and Idaho meet. Mistakenly called Nez Perce (pierced nose) by French-Canadian trappers, these powerful, wealthy, semi-nomadic people grazed horses on the valley grasslands, gathered edible roots on the prairies, fished for salmon, and hunted buffalo east of the Bitterroot Mountains.

In the mid-1800s, calling it their "Manifest Destiny," settlers, stockmen, and gold miners began moving onto Nez Perce lands. Desiring peace, the tribe agreed to a treaty in 1855 that confined them to a spacious reservation that included much of their ancestral land. The treaty promised that non-Indians could live on the reservation only with the Nez Perce's consent.

But gold was discovered on the reservation in 1860. Settlers and miners, wanting more of the Nez Perce's land, forced a new treaty in 1863 that reduced the reservation to one-tenth its original size. Those chiefs whose lands lay within the diminished reservation reluctantly signed the treaty, but those whose lands fell outside the new reservation boundary (about a third of the

tribe) refused. The five bands who refused to participate became known as the "non-treaty" Nez Perce.

The non-treaty bands remained in their homeland for several years. In 1877, however, increasing demands for settlement and mining caused the Indian Bureau to order all Nez Perce bands to move onto the smaller reservation. Gen. Oliver O. Howard was instructed to make sure the order was obeyed. In mid-May Howard issued an ultimatum that the Nez Perce must be on the reservation within 30 days.

Chief Joseph, one of the non-treaty spokesmen, probably reflected the general reaction of most of the non-treaty Nez Perce when he asked for more time. "I cannot get ready to move in 30 days," he said. "Our stock is scattered and Snake River is very high. Let us wait until fall, then the river will be low." General Howard refused the appeal and threatened to use force if the deadline was not met.

Reluctantly, the non-treaty chiefs persuaded their people to obey the ultimatum. They rounded up

as much of their far-ranging livestock as they could, took all the possessions they could pack, struggled across the swollen Snake and Salmon rivers, and made their way to a camp within a few miles of the reservation. The Nez Perce had almost met the 30-day deadline when, on June 15, three vengeful young warriors attacked several white settlers who earlier had cheated or killed members of their families. Other warriors soon joined them, killing 17 settlers in two days of raids. Fearing retaliation, most of the non-treaty Nez Perce fled to White Bird Canyon, where they could defend against a surprise attack.

When General Howard learned of the killings, he sent a force of 99 cavalrymen and 11 civilian volunteers to quell the uprising. At White Bird Canyon on June 17 the troopers were routed by a poorly armed and smaller group of warriors and suffered heavy losses.

During the following month, the Nez Perce attempted to avoid the army, their journey marked by small encounters and skirmishes. General Howard summoned troops from up and down the West Coast to begin an encircling movement

to trap the elusive Nez Perce. Then on July 11 Howard's forces met the Nez Perce near Clearwater River where they fought for two days with neither side winning. Finally the Nez Perce withdrew, leaving behind many of their supplies and tipis.

It was now clear to the non-treaty Nez Perce that they could not escape from the army in Idaho Territory. In council, the five bands agreed to follow the leadership of Chief Looking Glass, who persuaded them to leave their homelands and head east to Montana and join their allies the Crow in buffalo country. They would follow the Lolo Trail, which Nez Perce hunters had used for centuries. The Nez Perce wished only to find a place where the army would leave them alone and where they would be far enough from settlements to avoid further clashes.

By early August, the non-treaties had crossed the Lolo Trail and reached the Bitterroot Valley in Montana. They decided they were now among friendly settlers, and General Howard was far behind. But a second force, under Col. John Gibbon, who commanded the 7th U.S. Infantry

in the western part of Montana Territory, had been ordered to join the pursuit of the Nez Perce. Chief Looking Glass, unaware of Gibbon's forces, slowed the pace of travel even though some of the chiefs and warriors urged haste. The result: disastrous losses at the Battle of the Big Hole.

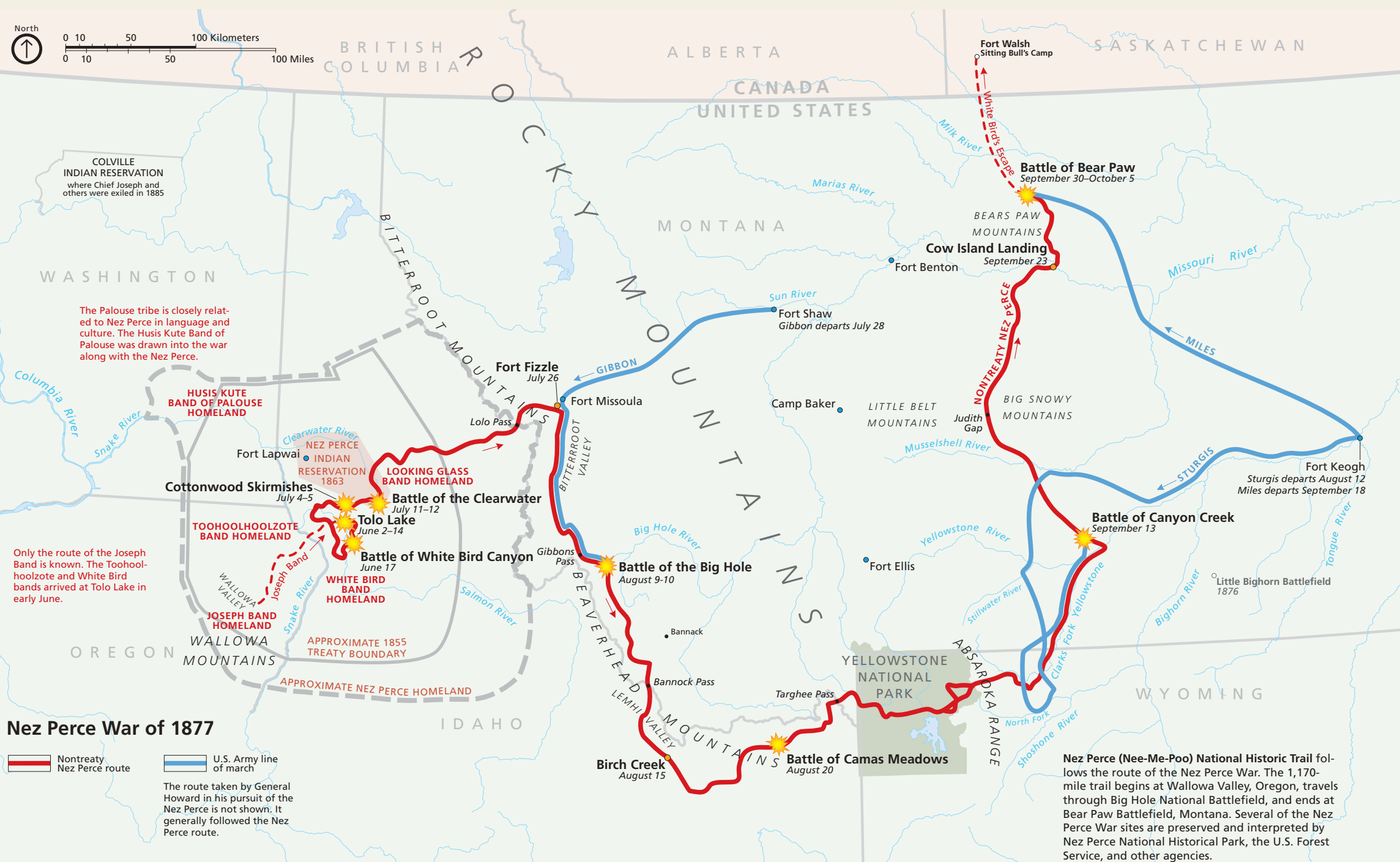
After the Big Hole, the Nez Perce, now under Lean Elk's leadership, headed south to Shoshone country where they hoped to pick up warriors to replace those lost in the battle. Some young warriors began raiding ranches along the way. The Nez Perce again defeated Howard's men at Camas Meadow, Idaho, then headed through Yellowstone National Park. Col. Samuel D. Sturgis' 7th Cavalry tried unsuccessfully to block their path at Clark's Fork Canyon. On September 13 the Nez Perce defeated Sturgis' troopers at Canyon Creek. When the Nez Perce reached Crow country they found that their old allies could not help them, and knew that they must now try to join Sitting Bull in Canada.

Finally, on September 30, near the Bear Paw Mountains of Montana, just 40 miles south of

the Canadian border, the Nez Perce were surprised by army troops under the command of Col. Nelson A. Miles. The chiefs rallied their followers, but after five days of fighting and intermittent negotiations, and the deaths of four chiefs (including Looking Glass, who had replaced Lean Elk as leader), Chief Joseph surrendered to Miles. They had traveled almost 1,170 miles.

Of the nearly 800 non-treaty Nez Perce who had started the trek, only 431 remained to surrender. Of the rest, some had been killed in battles enroute, over 200 had succeeded in reaching Canada, and some were hiding in the hills. In the end, it was the loss of fighting men, as well as the emotional blow at the Big Hole, that broke the Nez Perce's power to resist.

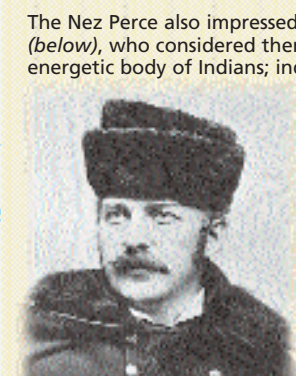
The Nez Perce War was a result of cultural conflicts. As the United States expanded westward the settlers felt it was their "Manifest Destiny" to take the land. The Nez Perce hoped only to preserve theirs. The war seemed unavoidable. It is a dramatic example of the price paid in human lives for the westward expansion of our nation.



"I Will Fight No More Forever"



General of the Army William T. Sherman called the Nez Perce War of 1877: "one of the most extraordinary Indian wars of which there is a record. The Indians . . . displayed a courage and skill that elicited universal praise; they abstained from scalping, let captive women go free, did not commit indiscriminate murder of peaceful families . . . and fought with almost scientific skill . . ."



The Nez Perce also impressed Col. Nelson Miles (below), who considered them "a very bright and energetic body of Indians; indeed, the most intelligent that I had ever seen. Exceedingly self-reliant, each man seemed to be able to do his own thinking, and to be purely democratic and independent in his own ideas and purposes." He also believed Chief Joseph (top) the ablest Indian on the continent.



When the Nez Perce finally surrendered, it was more from exhaustion trying to elude forces under Gen. Oliver O. Howard (above) than from defeat. Their desperation is echoed in the words Chief Joseph reportedly spoke to Colonel Miles: "Hear me, my chiefs, I am tired; my heart is sick and sad. From where the sun now stands I will fight no more forever"



Scenes from the Nez Perce surrender, Harper's Weekly, 1877.