BIG HOLE

NATIONAL BATTLEFIELD, MONTANA

Big Hole National Battlefield preserves part of the major scene of battle along the route of the epic retreat, from present-day Idaho toward the Canadian border, of five desperately fleeing Nez Perce Indian bands during the summer of 1877. Here on August 9 and 10, 1877, occurred one of the more dramatic and tragic episodes during the long struggle in the United States to confine the Indians to the ever-diminishing reservations and to force them off the land wanted by whites.

The flight of the Nez Perce Indians from Idaho had been marked by their desire to escape peaceably from the pursuing U.S. Army forces and to reach Canada with as little trouble as possible with the whites en route. While the Nez Perce recovered from the surprise dawn attack upon their village at the Big Hole River by Colonel Gibbon, who commanded the pursuing troops, the loss of warriors, lodges, and supplies was a serious handicap to their retreat. Embittered, they pressed forward south and east, passed through part of Yellowstone National Park, then swung northward to Bearpaw Mountain, within a few miles of the Canadian border, where they finally surrendered on October 5, 1877. Thus ended one of the most spectacular "retreats" in American history and one of the more valiant, though futile, attempts of the Indians to escape from an imposed white man's civilization.

Today, in the battlefield area, remains of shallow, grass-grown trenches and many battle-scarred trees are to be found in a natural setting strikingly similar to that of 1877. Through this mute evidence may be recalled one of the fiercer aspects of that chapter of our history represented by 19th-century Indian warfare. The monument, begun as a memorial to the soldiers who gave their lives here, has become also a memorial to the fortitude of the Indians.

Background of the Nez Perce War

Originally, the Nez Perce Indians were distinguished by their friendship toward the whites. In 1855, they agreed to accept a reservation on their ancestral lands in the Wallowa Valley of the Oregon Territory, and, in 1863, a majority of the tribe acceded to a reduction in the size of the reservation. Some refused to be bound by the latter agreement and became known as the "Non-Treaty" Nez Perces. Young Joseph, whose band claimed the Wallowa Valley, was their best-known leader. Most of the Nez Perces accepted reservation life, but the "Non-Treaty" groups continued their seminomadic habits. Good deportment won them public sympathy and support, but the pressure of the advancing settlements led to friction which threatened the peace. A Government commission appointed to hear the case of these Indians decided against them.

The Campaign of 1877

The removal of the "Non-Treaty" Nez Perce bands to the Lapwai Reservation in the Idaho Territory was entrusted to Gen. O. O. Howard in May 1877. The Indians were given 30 days to remove to the reservation. Compliance with this ultimatum was progressing when hostilities were precipitated by young warriors who murdered settlers near Mount Idaho, on June 13 and 14. At White Bird Canyon, Idaho Territory, on June 17, the Indians inflicted serious loss on a military force sent to reestablish order. Successful in other skirmishes, the Indians extricated themselves from a numerically superior force in the Battle of the Clearwater, in the Idaho Territory, on July 11 and 12. Unwilling to capitulate, the warring bands decided to flee to the buffalo country of the Montana Territory by way of Lolo Pass.

The "Non-Treaty" groups on the warpath, which now numbered possibly 700 or more, including women and children, found their entry into the Montana Territory blocked by a small military force. Rather than surrender their arms and horses, they bypassed the fortifications, proceeded leisurely up the Bitterroot Valley, and reached the Big Hole prairie without conflict on August 7.

The Battle of the Big Hole, August 9 and 10, 1877

Col. John Gibbon, commanding the United States troops in the Montana Territory, hurried to overtake the fugitives. He was joined by 34 citizen volunteers. On August 8, the Indian camp was located. That evening, after a cold repast, the troops rested until nearly 11 o'clock. Then the command, 182 strong, moved forward. For 5 miles they proceeded in the starlight to a point from which could be seen the flickering campfires of the Indians, almost a mile ahead, near where the Trail and Ruby Creeks unite to form the north fork of the Big Hole River. The barking of dogs could be heard clearly. Steathily the force advanced through the wooded point jutting down into the valley (where the present National Monument is situated). Beyond this point the troops passed in among the Indians' ponies grazing on the mountainside. Near the base of the bluff along which the force advanced, a trail is still to be found. About 2 a.m. the command was extended in a line opposite the Indian camp, only a few hundred yards away and separated from it by the river.

This military movement was entirely undetected by the Indians. For more than 2 hours, within earshot of the camp, the troops waited tensely in the crisp August air. When dawn strengthened the outlines of the 89 tepees of the camp, the troops were ordered down into the willow bottom along the river. An Indian seeking the horse herd approached the left of the line, and the rifle shot that killed him was the signal for the attack. Firing rapidly, the shouting attackers plunged across the river and assaulted the sleeping camp. Its dazed occupants fled. Those instinctively seeking the protection of the dense brush or the riverbank rushed into the path of the advancing troops. Others fled in the opposite direction. In the melee, women and children were not distinguished from warriors. Within 20 minutes, the camp appeared to be in possession of the attackers, and its destruction was ordered. But the Indians were not beaten. Recovering from their shock, they made the soldiers' position untenable. Shots came from all directions—from "the brush, the creek-bank, the open prairie, and the distant hills."

Colonel Gibbon ordered a retreat to the wooded point near the upper end of the camp. Recrossing the stream and charging up the bluff, the troops took shelter behind logs and trees and in rifle pits hastily dug with trowel bayonets. Here they heard wails of grief, rage, and horror from the Indians who found friends and relatives in the carnage. Warriors were exhorted to renew the attack. Some braves distinguished themselves with reckless boldness, attacking the besieged troops, who were also the targets of sharpshooters strategically placed at considerable distances. But no disciplined sorties were made against the besieged. Once the Indians fired the grass, but a shift in the direction of the wind kept this threat from the soldiers' position.

Most of the Indians packed their camp equipment and hurried off the field, leaving a few warriors to continue the siege until dawn of the next morning. Desultory firing continued into the night. Then couriers successfully left the soldiers' lines; however, it was dusk the next day, August 10, before the supply wagons with bedding and food reached the troops. Losses of the attacking troops consisted of 29 killed and 40 wounded, two of the latter fatally. Officials reported 89 slain Indians found on the battlefield or nearby. Among them more than 50 were said to have been women and children. Many more must have been wounded.

This battle brought to the "Non-Treaty" Nez Perce Indians the realization that "all hands were against them" and embittered them toward the white man. Nevertheless, they released unharmed two women captured with tourist parties in Yellowstone National Park. The relentless chase by U.S. Army forces and the desperate retreat of Chief Joseph did not end at the Big Hole. Showing remarkable endurance, the Indians brushed aside and eluded fresh military forces in pushing on to the south and east before turning north into Canada.

By September 30, at Bearpaw Mountain, in the northern part of the Montana Territory, the Indians were nearing their long-sought refuge across the international boundary line. On that morning they were surprised by the sudden approach of a U.S. Army force under Col. Nelson A. Miles. The chiefs again rallied their weary followers. Their resistance forced the soldiers to settle down to a siege. In its sixth day, on October 5, Chief Joseph surrendered with this pathetic statement: "From where the sun now stands, I will fight no more, forever." Later he explained: "My people needed rest—we wanted peace."

Col. John Gibbon, commanding troops and citizens in the Battle of the Big Hole. Courtesy National Archives.

Chief Joseph, one of the leaders of the "Non-Treaty" Nez Perce Indians. Smithsonian Institution.

Big Hole Battlefield

About Your Visit

From June 15 to September 15 a park ranger is stationed at the monument. A museum displays relics of the frontier era, among them the howitzer captured by the Indians in the battle of August 9. A self-guiding foot trail leads through the siege area and to the howitzer-capture site.

Administration

Big Hole National Battlefield, established in 1910 under the War Department, was transferred in 1933 to the National Park Service, U.S. Department of the Interior. The battlefield now contains 360 acres.

The superintendent of Yellowstone National Park, Wyo., 83020, is in charge of the battlefield.

THE DEPARTMENT OF THE INTERIOR—the Nation's principal natural resource agency—has a special obligation to assure that our expendable resources are conserved, that our renewable resources are managed to produce optimum benefits, and that all resources contribute to the progress and prosperity of the United States, now and in the future.

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NATIONAL PARK SERVICE

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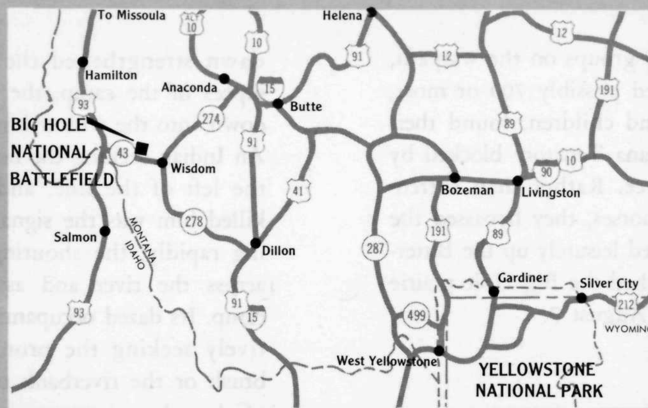

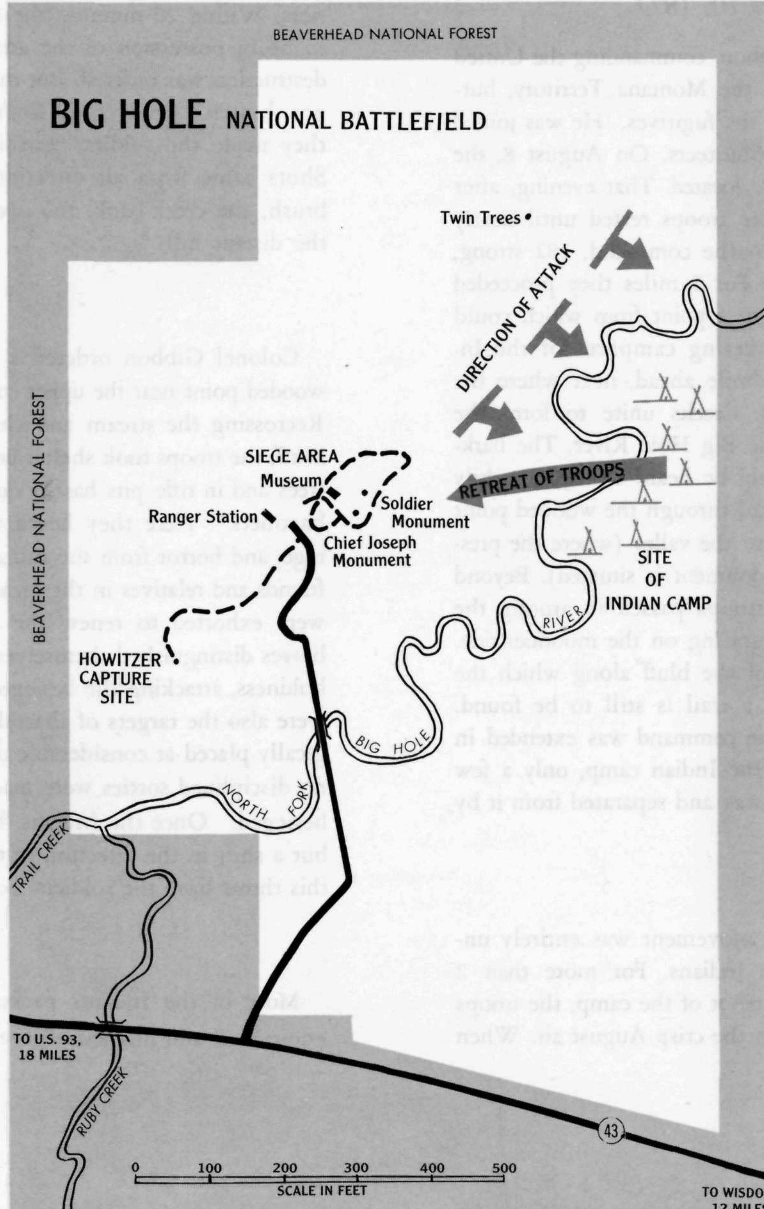

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