

# BIG HOLE NATIONAL BATTLEFIELD MONTANA

But 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 Nez Perce brushed aside and eluded fresh military forces in pushing on south and east before turning north to Canada.

By September 30, at Bearpaw Mountain, in the northern part of Montana Territory, the Nez Perce were nearing their long-sought refuge across the international boundary. 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, and their resistance forced the soldiers to settle down to a siege. The Nez Perce held out for five days. On October 5, Chief Joseph surrendered with the moving statement that, "From where the sun now stands I will fight no more forever." Later he explained: "My people needed rest—we wanted peace."

## ABOUT YOUR VISIT

A visitor center is open daily. Exhibits of the battle, including the howitzer captured by the Nez Perce and a battle diorama, help to interpret the scene. A self-guiding trail leads through the siege area and to the howitzer-capture site.

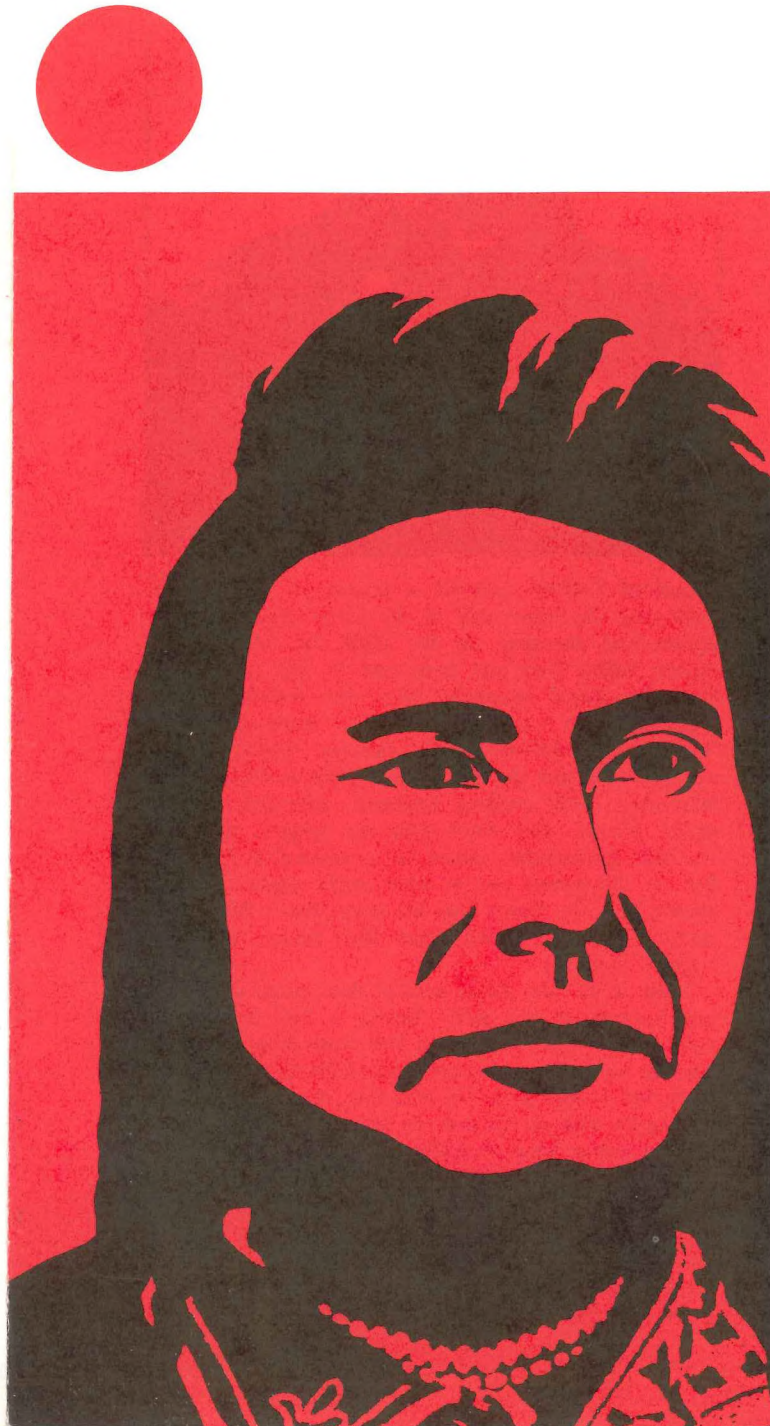
## ADMINISTRATION

Big Hole National Battlefield established on June 23, 1910, is administered by the National Park Service, U.S. Department of the Interior. A park ranger is stationed at the area to assist visitors. Inquiries should be addressed to Big Hole National Battlefield, Wisdom, MT 59761.

As the Nation's principal conservation agency, the Department of the Interior has basic responsibilities for water, fish, wildlife, mineral, land, park, and recreational resources. Indian and Territorial affairs are other major concerns of "America's Department of Natural Resources." The Department works to assure the wisest choice in managing all our resources so each will make its full contribution to a better United States—now and in the future.

NATIONAL PARK SERVICE

U.S. DEPARTMENT of the INTERIOR



**Chief Joseph answered Colonel Miles:**  
Tell General Howard I know his heart.  
What he told me before I have in my heart.  
I am tired of fighting. Our chiefs are killed.  
Looking Glass is dead. Too-hul-hul-sote is dead.  
The old men are all dead.  
It is the young men who say yes or no.  
He who led on the young men is dead.  
It is cold and we have no blankets.  
The little children are freezing to death.  
My people, some of them,  
have run away to the hills,  
and have no blankets, no food;  
no one knows where they are—  
perhaps freezing to death.  
I want to have time to look for my children  
and see how many of them I can find.  
Maybe I shall find them among the dead.  
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.

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 in 1877. Here occurred one of the more dramatic and tragic episodes during the long struggle to confine the Indians to ever-diminishing reservations.

The flight of the Nez Perce 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 anyone on the way. While the Nez Perce recovered from the surprise dawn attack upon their village at the Big Hole River by troops under Col. John Gibbon, 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 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 a foreign 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 is a memorial to both the soldiers who gave their lives here and the fortitude of the Nez Perce.

## BACKGROUND OF NEZ PERCE WAR

Originally, the Nez Perce 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 Percés. Young Chief Joseph, whose band claimed the Wallowa Valley, was their best-known leader. Most of the Nez Percés accepted reservation life, but the "Non-Treaty" groups continued their semi-nomadic 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 to the Lapwai Reservation in 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 Nez Perce

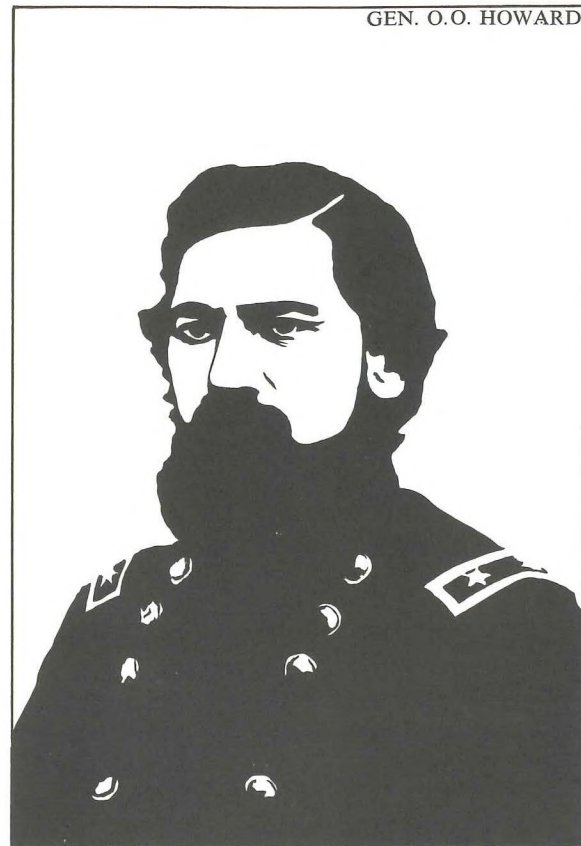


inflicted serious loss on a military force sent to reestablish order. Successful in other skirmishes, the Nez Perce extricated themselves from a numerically superior force in the Battle of the Clearwater, in Idaho Territory, on July 11 and 12. Unwilling to surrender, the warring bands fled to the buffalo country of Montana Territory by way of Lolo Pass.

The "Non-Treaty" groups on the move, which now numbered possibly 700 or more, including women and children, found their entry into 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 on August 7 reached Big Hole prairie without conflict.

#### BATTLE OF THE BIG HOLE

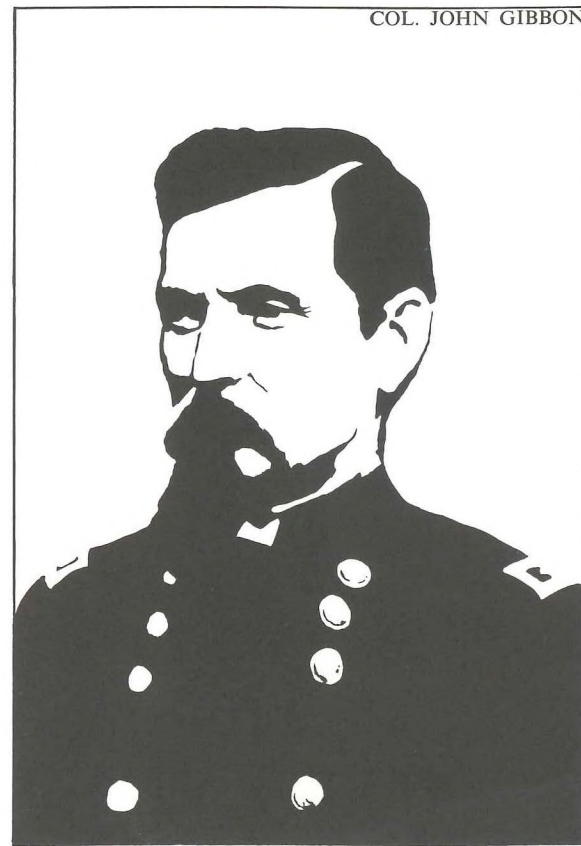
Colonel Gibbon, commanding the U.S. troops in Montana Territory, hurried to overtake the fugitives. He was joined by 34 citizen volunteers. On August 8, the Nez Perce camp was located. That evening, after a cold repast, the troops rested until nearly 11 o'clock. Then the command, 182 strong, moved forward. For 5 miles they proceeded in the starlight to a point from which the flickering campfires of the Indians could be seen, almost a mile ahead, near where the Trail and Ruby Creeks join to form the north fork of the Big Hole River. The barking of dogs could be heard clearly. Stealthily the force advanced through a wooded point



GEN. O.O. HOWARD

jutting down into the valley. Beyond this point the troops passed among the Nez Perce ponies grazing on the mountainside. (Near the base of the bluff along which the force advanced, a trail can still be found.) About 2 a.m. the command was extended in a line opposite the Nez Perce camp, only a few hundred yards away and separated from it by the river.

This military movement was undetected by the Nez Perce. For more than 2 hours the troops waited tensely in the crisp August air and within earshot of the camp. When dawn strengthened the outlines of the 89 tepees of the camp, the troops were ordered down into the willow bottom along the river. A Nez Perce approached the left of the line seeking the horse herd, and the rifle shot that killed him was the signal for the attack. Firing rapidly, the shouting attackers plunged across the shallow river to assault the camp. Its occupants fled. Some Nez Perce instinctively sought the protection of the dense brush of the riverbank and 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 the possession of the attackers, and its destruction was ordered. But the Nez Perce 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."



COL. JOHN GIBBON

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 Nez Perce 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. The Nez Perce fired the grass, but a shift in the direction of the wind kept this threat from the soldiers' position.

Most of the Nez Perce packed their camp equipment and hurried off the field, leaving a few warriors to continue the siege until dawn. Desultory firing continued into the night. Then couriers successfully left the soldiers' lines, but it was dusk the next day, August 10, before the supply wagons reached the troops. Losses of the attacking troops were 29 killed and 40 wounded, two fatally. Officials reported 89 slain Nez Perce found on the battlefield or nearby. Many more must have been wounded.

This battle awakened the "Non-Treaty" Nez Perce to the belief that "all hands were against them." Although embittered, they released unharmed two women captured with tourist parties in Yellowstone National Park.

