

The Battle of the Big Hole on August 9 and 10, 1877, was a turning point of the Nez Perce War—a 4-month war in which U.S. Army forces tried to place one third of the Nez Perce tribe on a reservation. A brief account of the war—from its start in White Bird Canyon in Idaho to its dramatic end in the Bear Paw Mountains of Montana—is on the other side of the folder.

The Battle of the Big Hole

Shortly before dawn on August 9, 1877, about 800 Nez Perce Indians, including 125 warriors, were suddenly awakened by gunfire as they slept in their tipi encampment along the east bank of the Big Hole River. Col. John Gibbon of the U.S. 7th Infantry with a force of 182 men had succeeded in sneaking up on and attacking the unwary Nez Perce, who for 2 months had been attempting to evade pursuing U.S. Army forces.

The Nez Perce tipis had been spotted by Gibbon's advance party the day before, and the troops camped that night about 8 kilometers (5 miles) away. Gibbon's plans were to leave his supply wagons and howitzer in reserve, divide his force into four commands, form a simple skirmish line, and attack the Indian camp at dawn. About 11 p.m., August 8, the Army forces quietly left their camp and advanced toward their objective, working their way along the base of Battle Mountain toward the west bank of the Big Hole River. They infiltrated through the willows and swamp, and by about 2 a.m. had formed a skirmish line along the bank of the river within earshot of the Indian camp. Here they waited tensely for first light, when they would attack. One command formed the left flank and was to attack from downstream, another the center, and the third the right flank upstream. The fourth command was kept as a reserve. The howitzer and supply wagons, with about 20 men, were to join the battle later in the day.

4 CAPTURE OF THE HOWITZER

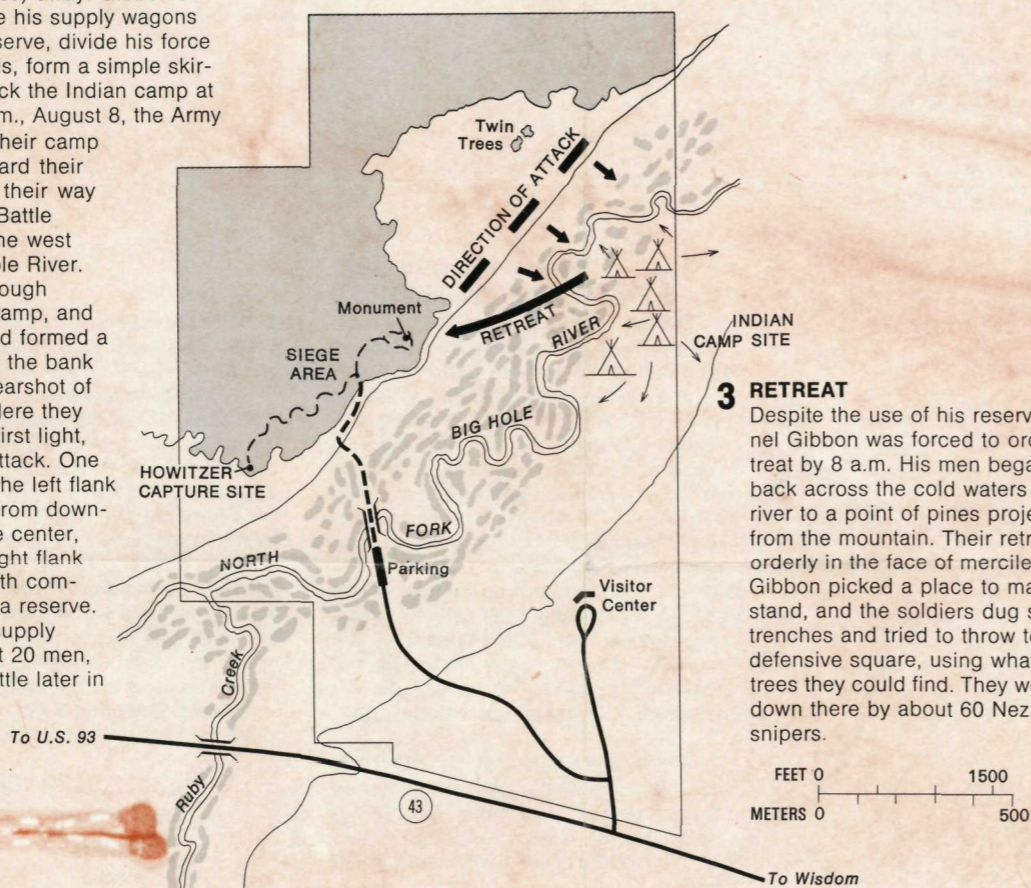
In the meantime, the soldiers in charge of the howitzer had been struggling all morning in mountainous terrain to move their weapon close enough for use. Finally, about noon, they placed it on the ridge above the siege area. But the Indians attacked, captured the gun, and rolled it down the hill. Along with the howitzer, the Nez Perce captured a pack mule which was carrying 2,000 rounds of rifle ammunition.



National Archives

1 ATTACK

When a lone Nez Perce left the Indian village, apparently to check the horses grazing on the slopes behind the troops, he headed straight toward the concealed skirmish line. Shots were fired at him, and the attack was started prematurely. The troops plunged across the river and fired point blank at the drowsy Indians stumbling out of their tipis. In the faint, pre-dawn light, men, women, and children were shot indiscriminately.



5 SIEGE

Colonel Gibbon's men, with several dead on the field and many wounded, were besieged that day and night and all through the next day, without food and water or the means to care for their wounded.

As the siege continued, Nez Perce warriors began withdrawing to help Chief Joseph gather the tribe, care for the injured and dead, herd the horses together, and break camp. A few snipers remained to keep the soldiers under cover while the main body of the tribe moved off southward, leaving most of their tipi frames behind.

Finally, in the evening of the second day of fighting—August 10—the warriors fired parting shots and left to join their people. The Battle of the Big Hole was over.

EPILOGUE

General Howard's troops arrived a few hours later and found Gibbon's command out of action. The Nez Perce had successfully evaded the Army again, but this time the encounter had broken their spirit. Their losses of men and goods, to say nothing of their personal family losses, and the realization that they would be pursued no matter where they went in the American West, left them little hope.

Here at the Big Hole, the Indians won the battle, but the Army was on its way to winning the war. Two months later the Nez Perce were to surrender in the Bear Paw Mountains.

2 COUNTERATTACK

Stunned as they were, the Nez Perce warriors rallied. They scattered to the willows along the river and to the woods to the east. Urged on by Chief Looking Glass and Chief White Bird, they quickly took up sniper positions. Downstream, the Army's left flank was turned, leaving the center and upstream flank exposed and vulnerable to fire from the side and rear.

3 RETREAT

Despite the use of his reserves, Colonel Gibbon was forced to order a retreat by 8 a.m. His men began wading back across the cold waters of the river to a point of pines projecting from the mountain. Their retreat was orderly in the face of merciless gunfire. Gibbon picked a place to make a stand, and the soldiers dug shallow trenches and tried to throw together a defensive square, using what downed trees they could find. They were pinned down there by about 60 Nez Perce snipers.

WHAT TO SEE AND DO

VISITOR CENTER
Stop first at the visitor center for basic orientation through an audio-visual program and exhibits, including the original mountain howitzer from the battle. National Park Service employees there will help you plan your visit.

TOURING THE BATTLEFIELD
A short drive to the lower parking area connects with a foot trail to the Siege Area and the Howitzer Capture Site.

SIEGE AREA
Within this wooded area, the soldiers were besieged for more than 36 hours starting at 8 a.m. on August 9, 1877.

HOWITZER CAPTURE SITE
Take the trail up the hill to the site where the soldiers positioned the mountain howitzer and where it was then captured by the Nez Perce. The walk takes about 20 minutes.

PICNICKING AND CAMPING
There are several picnic tables in the Battle Area near the lower parking area. No camping or overnight facilities are provided in the park, but several campgrounds are nearby. Ask at the visitor center for details.

FISHING AND HUNTING
You can fish within the national battlefield and the national forest as provided by Montana law.

No hunting is allowed within the national battlefield; Montana laws apply in the adjacent national forest. Fishing and hunting on private land is by permission only.

YOUR TRIP HOW TO GET THERE
Big Hole National Battlefield is 19.2 kilometers (12 miles) west of Wisdom, Mont., on Mont. 43. From Butte, Mont., take Interstate 15 south-west to Divide, then to Wisdom on Mont. 43; from the west, Mont. 43 intersects U.S. 93 at the State line, between Salmon, Idaho, and Hamilton, Mont.

SERVICES
Facilities such as gasoline stations, grocery stores, restaurants, and lodging—although limited—can be found in Wisdom, Mont. There are more complete services in Butte, Mont., to the northeast, and Hamilton, Mont., or Salmon, Idaho, to the west.



Some 26 years after the battle, Chief Joseph posed for this photograph in Washington, D.C., where he had journeyed to seek, in vain, the return of the non-treaty Nez Perce to a part of their homeland.

Smithsonian Office of Anthropology, Bureau of American Ethnology Collection

ADMINISTRATION

Big Hole National Battlefield, established on June 23, 1910, is administered by the National Park Service, U.S. Department of the Interior. A superintendent, whose address is P.O. Box 237, Wisdom, MT 59761, is in immediate charge.

As the Nation's principal conservation agency, the Department of the Interior has responsibility for most of our nationally owned public lands and natural resources. This includes fostering the wisest use of our land and water resources, protecting our fish and wildlife, preserving the environmental and cultural values of our national parks and historical places, and providing for the enjoyment of life through outdoor recreation. The Department assesses our energy and mineral resources and works to assure that their development is in the best interests of all our people. The Department also has a major responsibility for American Indian reservation communities and for people who live in Island Territories under U.S. administration.

FOR YOUR PROTECTION

Animals native to the park are harmless at a distance, but they are dangerous when startled or approached too closely. Visitors sometimes see coyote, deer, elk, or moose. Always keep a safe distance.

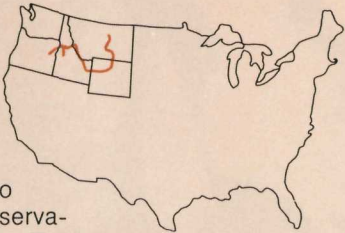
Pets must be under physical control at all times; they are not allowed on trails or in the visitor center.

National Park Service U.S. DEPARTMENT OF THE INTERIOR

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A LONG JOURNEY TO SURRENDER

In the summer of 1877 a small group of Nez Perce Indians began a journey along this route from the tip of western Oregon, through the Idaho Territory, and over the Bitterroot Mountains into Montana Territory, stopping finally at Bear Paw Mountain just south of Canada. Five Nez Perce bands were involved in this venture—about 800 people, including 125 warriors—and they were herding more than 2,000 horses and carrying whatever possessions they could manage. Yet they made this long and difficult trek in less than 4 months—for they were fleeing from the U.S. Army, which was under orders to place them on a reservation in western Idaho Territory.



Although these Indians hoped to escape from the Army peaceably, they were forced to stop and face their pursuers nearly a dozen times. In the Big Hole Valley the two forces met in one of the major battles of this epic journey, a journey now called the Nez Perce Indian War of 1877.

By tracing the events that led up to their retreat and those that happened along the way another tragic episode unfolds in that long struggle to confine the Indians to ever-diminishing reservations.

WASHINGTON

OREGON

1 1855 THE FIRST TREATY

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, possibly because a few Indian women were wearing nose ornaments, these peaceful, semi-nomadic people grazed horses on the valley grasslands, gathered edible roots and bulbs on the prairies, fished the streams, and hunted buffalo east of the mountains.

But in the mid-1800s, settlers, stockmen, and gold miners began moving into their lands. Desiring peace, the Nez Perce agreed to a treaty in 1855 that confined them to a reservation. They were content with this agreement; the reservation included much of their ancestral land, and the treaty promised that non-Indians could live on the reservation only with the Indians' consent.

2 1863 THE SECOND TREATY

Settlers and miners, wanting more of the Nez Perce land, forced a new treaty in 1863, which reduced the spacious Nez Perce reservation to one-fourth its original size. Those chiefs whose lands lay within the diminished reservation signed; however, a third of the Nez Perce lived outside the new boundaries and refused to participate in the talks or to sign the new treaty.

Furthermore, they declared that no other Nez Perce could sign for them, because they had never recognized a single leader or council who could speak for the entire tribe. These Indians who refused to participate are known as the "non-treaty" Nez Perce.

5 July 11 and 12, 1877 CLEARWATER

During the following month, the Indians moved east from White Bird Canyon, their journey marked by only minor encounters and skirmishes involving individuals and scouting parties.

General Howard, under increasing criticism from local residents and from newspapers throughout the country, summoned troops from up and down the West Coast to

4 June 17, 1877 WHITE BIRD CANYON

General Howard had indeed sent a force to quell the uprising, but it was beaten by the poorly armed and smaller band of non-treaty warriors. Flanked on all sides, the U.S. Army force was routed and suffered heavy losses.

3 1877 CAPITULATION AND CONFLICT

The non-treaty bands remained in their homeland for several years. Increasing demands for settlement and mining continued, however, and in 1877 political pressure forced the Indian Bureau to order the various bands of Nez Perce to move onto the smaller reservation. The Army command of General O. O. Howard was ordered to support the local Indian agent. At first, the Indians questioned Howard's authority to tell them where to live. He was adamant, however, and in mid-May 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 in saying:

"My people have always been friends of white men. Why are you in such a hurry? I cannot get ready to move in 30 days. Our stock is scattered and Snake River is very high. Let us wait until fall, then the river will be low."

The appeal was unheeded, and General Howard threatened to use force if necessary:

"The soldiers will be there to drive you onto the reservation, and all your cattle and horses outside the reservation at that time will fall into the hands of the white man."

Somehow the non-treaty chiefs persuaded their people to obey the ultimatum. They rounded up as many of their far-ranging livestock as they could, took all the possessions they could pack,

6 EXODUS

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 turn their backs on their homeland and head east to join the Crow Tribe in buffalo country. They would follow the Lolo Trail, which Nez Perce hunters had used for centuries, and join the Crows in Montana Territory. 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.

Chief Joseph's important task in this effort was to shepherd the Nez Perce

begin an encircling movement to trap the elusive Nez Perce.

Then on July 11, Howard's forces met the Nez Perce near the Clearwater River, and they fought for two days with neither side winning. Finally, the Nez Perce withdrew, once again evading capture by a much stronger force.

7 August 9 and 10, 1877 BATTLE AT THE BIG HOLE

On the western side of the Big Hole Valley, Ruby Creek joins Trail Creek to form the north fork of the Big Hole River; the steep slopes of Battle Mountain merge with the willow-dotted marsh that stretches to the river bed. But the east bank of the valley is grassy, and when the Indians arrived there on the morning of August 7, for the first time since leaving Clearwater, they could set up their tipis. They cut trees to replace lost or worn-out poles and put up 89 tipis. When camp work was done, they played games, sang, danced, and told stories long into the night. Looking Glass, believing that they were at last out of danger, did not post guards. Life was almost normal again.

But by the next afternoon, August 8, Colonel Gibbon's advance party had found the Nez Perce camp. Shortly before dawn on August 9, Gibbon's men, joined by civilian volunteers, crept

struggled across the flooded Snake River, and made their way to a camp within a few kilometers of the reservation.

Though reluctantly, the Nez Perce had almost met the 30-day deadline when, on June 15, three young warriors seeking revenge attacked a group of white settlers who earlier had cheated or killed older members of their families. Four settlers were killed. Believing that the Army surely would retaliate for these rash acts, most of the non-treaty Nez Perce fled to White Bird Canyon.

In recalling the event two years later, Chief Joseph said:

"I said in my heart that, rather than have war I would give up my country . . . I would give up everything rather than have the blood of white men upon the hands of my people. . . . I blame my young men and I blame the white man. . . . My friends among the white men have blamed me for the war. I am not to blame. When my young men began the killing my heart was hurt. Although I did not justify them, I remembered all the insults I had endured, and my blood was on fire. Still I would have taken my people to the buffalo country without fighting, if possible."

"I could see no other way to avoid war. We moved over to White Bird Creek 16 miles away, and there encamped, intending to collect our stock before leaving; but the soldiers attacked us and the first battle was fought."

dependents along the way; his hope was to bring them back home again when things settled down.

By early August, the Indians had crossed the mountains and reached the Bitterroot Valley in Montana. They were among friendly Montana 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 entered the valley in pursuit.

Chief Looking Glass, unaware of Gibbon's forces, slowed the pace of travel even though some of the chiefs and warriors urged haste.

9 October 5, 1877 SURRENDER AT BEAR PAW MOUNTAIN

Finally, on September 30, in the Bear Paw Mountains of Montana, just 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, they finally surrendered to Miles—more from exhaustion than from defeat.

Of the 800 non-treaty Nez Perce who had started the trek to Canada, some had been killed in battles or skirmishes en route, some had succeeded in reaching Canada, some were hiding in the hills, and others had found sanctuary with other tribes. Only 480 were left to surrender, and they had traveled almost 2,720 kilometers (1,700 miles) only to be stopped 48 kilometers (30 miles) short

through the darkness to the west bank of the Big Hole River, preparing for a surprise attack on the Nez Perce camp. The attack began prematurely, and the attackers crossed the river firing on the sleeping Nez Perce, some of whom scattered quickly while others were slow to awaken. The soldiers soon occupied the camp, but the Nez Perce warriors found sniping positions and with deadly accurate shooting forced Gibbon's men back across the river. There the soldiers dug in and were pinned down all that day and night and the next day. Under this protection, Chief Joseph gathered his people together and hurriedly led them southward. Once more they were on the move trying to avoid conflict.

8 AFTERMATH OF BIG HOLE

The Nez Perce had escaped again, and in a military sense had won the battle. In many ways, however, the "victory" was devastating. They had lost approximately 40 women, children, and old people in the early morning attack, and about 30 warriors in the fighting—staggering losses to such a small band. Even more shattering was the final realization that the Army was not going to leave them in peace.

Chief Looking Glass, the day-to-day leader, had refused to put out sentries, and Colonel Gibbon was thus able to make the surprise attack. After the battle, the council of chiefs gave leadership to Chief Lean Elk, who urged a hasty retreat. The Nez Perce now decided to go to Canada and join Sitting Bull—an idea that had been considered and rejected earlier, when the Indians still had hope of returning to their homeland.

of sanctuary. In the end, it was the loss of fighting men, as well as the emotional blow at Big Hole, that broke the Nez Perce power to resist.

Their desperation is echoed in the statement of Chief Joseph to 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 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."

In contrast, the Army was elated after the Battle of Big Hole. The command was trying to make up for the disastrous loss of Custer and his 7th Cavalry at the Little Bighorn in June the year before. The Army was hungry for a victory of any kind. The military counted 29 dead and 40 wounded, but they knew that they had inflicted great damage to the fighting ability of the Nez Perce. The strategy of encircling the Nez Perce with various commands approaching from different directions was working. Furthermore, the 7th Infantry had not been forced to retreat as other units of infantry and cavalry had been in the past. Because the infantry held its ground and fought valiantly, seven enlisted men were awarded the Congressional Medal of Honor, and those officers who survived received brevet promotions. Unfortunately for the Army, Gibbon's command was out of action. General Howard continued the chase.

After Big Hole, the harried Nez Perce had a few skirmishes with the Army. Following Indian hunting trails, they headed toward Yellowstone National Park. To the south was Shoshone country where they hoped to pick up warriors to replace those lost at the Big Hole. Then they visited the Crow Nation to seek help and possible allies. But they were rejected by both the Shoshone and the Crow, who wished to avoid trouble with the Army.

MONTANA

Missouri River

Big Hole River

Salmon River

IDAHO

Snake River

Snake River

Musselshell River

Yellowstone River

Fork

Bighorn River

YELLOWSTONE NATIONAL PARK

Clark's

River

Bighorn

WYOMING