

Big Hole

National Battlefield
Wisdom, Montana
(406) 689-3155

THE BITTERROOT CIVILIAN VOLUNTEERS

The Bitterroot Valley is named for the beautiful, pink blossomed *Lewisa rediviva*, commonly called bitterroot. This flower also gives its name to the nearby river and mountain range. The valley was the traditional home of the Salish people for many centuries. In the 1870s, the Salish were removed to a reservation north of Missoula, Montana.



Bitterroot (*Lewisa rediviva* Pursh)

Pioneer settlement began in the valley in 1841 with the establishment of St. Mary's Mission by Father DeSmet near Stevensville. John Owen built a civilian trading fort there in 1850; it later became a trading post where early settlers procured supplies and gathered for protection. By the mid 1860s, many settlers had moved into the Bitterroot Valley.

The mild climate and rich soil made the area suitable for farming and ranching. Potatoes, oats, and wheat were commonly grown. These crops, along with beef and dairy products, were sold in the area and to residents of the mining town of Bannack to the southeast. The Bitterroot Valley later became world famous for its red McIntosh apples.

THE NEZ PERCE WAR

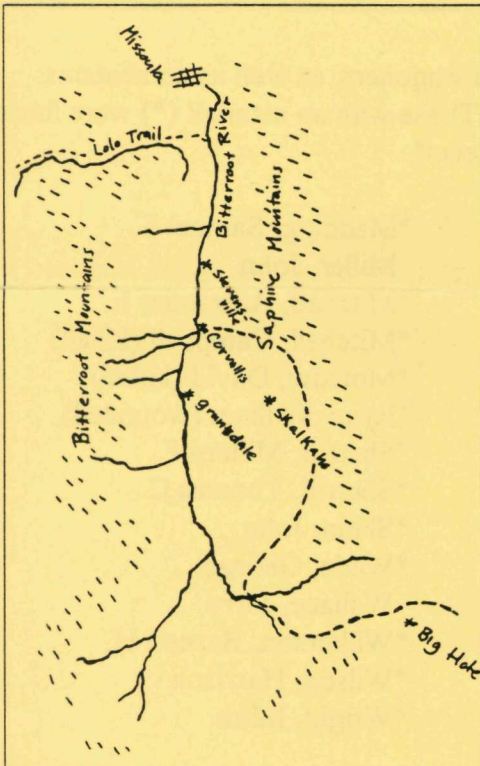
In July, 1877, word reached the valley that the Nez Perce were coming to Montana Territory by way of the Lolo Trail. Exaggerated accounts of killing, looting, and burning reached the settlers, causing concern. Valley residents repaired the abandoned Fort Owen and moved their families into its protective enclosure. A make-shift fort was constructed at Skalkaho and a company of civilian volunteers formed. At Lolo Pass a barricade was constructed. This "fort" was manned by soldiers from the new fort at Missoula and several volunteers from the Bitterroot Valley. The Nez Perce simply bypassed the fortification, which soon came to be known as Fort Fizzle, and arrived in the valley in late July. They traded with the settlers and paid for their purchases with gold. Their passage through the valley caused few incidents between the Nez Perce and the settlers. Continuing south and east, the Nez Perce left the valley and were camped along the North Fork of the Big Hole River on August 7th, 1877. Colonel John Gibbon, commander of the U.S. Army's 7th Infantry, followed the Nez Perce through the Bitterroot Valley in late July. Approximately 34 citizen volunteers joined the army as they headed for the Big Hole Valley in pursuit of the Nez Perce.

THE VOLUNTEERS

The volunteers chose Civil War Veteran John Catlin to be their leader. Catlin had moved West after the war and ran a hotel and livery business in Stevensville.

His war experience and reputation within the community made him a logical choice. "Captain" John Catlin wrote:

"It was my men who fired the first shots; it was one of my men who in the dead hour of the night, without food or blanket, carried the dispatches to Deer Lodge; it was my men who fought side by side with soldiers and shared danger alike; yet Col. Gibbon failed to make special mention of them in his report".





BILLY EDWARDS

Captain Catlin's charge who left "in the dead hour of the night" for Deer Lodge was Billy Edwards. Edwards came from England in 1865 to homestead on Rye Creek in the Bitterroot Valley. After the Nez Perce came through, Billy joined the volunteers. While the soldiers were besieged on the night of August 9, Colonel Gibbon sent Edwards to Deer Lodge for help. He traveled afoot, without supplies, and arrived three days later at the Sam Scott home where he related the news of the battle to anxious residents. It is for this three day trek that Billy is best remembered. Edwards later returned to the Big Hole Valley to prospect for gold. His story ends with his apparent murder in 1890, when his body was found floating in the Bitterroot River. Billy Edwards is buried in the cemetery at Grantsdale, Montana.

THE SHERRILL BROTHERS

Two brothers, Tom and Millard "Bunch" Sherrill were among the volunteers to see action on that August morning. Bunch was the quieter and more conservative of the two; Tom was the "storyteller". Both wrote accounts of the battle, giving some interesting details of events in the siege area on the night of August 9th, 1877. The Sherrills were characterized as "two young men who went in for fun and came out satisfied for life with that kind of amusement." Tom Sherrill was the first caretaker at the battlefield in the early 1900's and was remembered for his interesting tours of the area. It was said: "Mr. Tom liked to tell a good story".

Each volunteer had a story to tell and played a role in the Nez Perce War of 1877. Several of the volunteers wrote personal accounts of the battle, which have a place in telling the Big Hole Battle story. Volunteer Campbell Mitchell is said to have fired the first shot, but he and four other volunteers did not live to relate their experiences. The Nez Perce War of 1877 was the first time that militia had been called up in the Montana Territory. Civilians responded to the perceived threat to defend their families and homes; much later they were paid two dollars per day for their services. The men who fought here as volunteers later became the foundation for the Montana National Guard.

THE BITTERROOT VOLUNTEER ROSTER

The civilians involved in the Battle of the Big Hole included scouts, couriers, and wagoners, as well as combatants. Below is a listing of known civilian participants compiled from various sources. Those with an asterisk (*) were found in more than one account and make up the core known as the "Bitterroot Volunteers".

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|---------------------------|-----------------------------|------------------------------|
| *Armstrong, John (killed) | *Edwards, William H. | *Madding, Samuel S. |
| *Baker, Jacob (wounded) | *Elliott, Lynde C. (killed) | Miller, John |
| Bear, Jack | Gird, August K. | *Mitchell, Alexander E. |
| Blodgett, Joseph | *Hart, Charles B. | *Mitchell, Campbell (killed) |
| *Buck, Amos | *Heldt, Fred | *Morrow, David (killed) |
| *Burch, Vincent | Herron, Samuel J. | *Ryan, William (wounded) |
| *Catlin, John B. | Hubbard, George | *Sherrill, Millard F. |
| *Chaffin, Anthony | *Hull, Joseph | *Sherrill, Thomas C. |
| Chaffin, John S. | *Johnson, Luther | *Shinn, John |
| *Chaffin, Newton J. | Judd, Oscar | *Wade, George |
| *Chaffin, Samuel O. | Kirkendall, Hugh | Wallace, Jerry |
| *Chaffin, William | *Leifer, Otto (wounded) | *Wilkerson, Barnett H. |
| *Clark, Oscar | *Lent, Eugene | *Wilson, Harrison |
| *Cooper, Riley B. | *Lockwood, Alvin (killed) | *Wright, Mike |
| Davis, Isaac N. | *Lockwood, Myron (wounded) | |
| *Dunham, Samuel | | |