

Big Hole

Official Park Guide

Big Hole National Battlefield Montana

National Park Service U.S. Department of the Interior



Cover: "Nez Perce Escape from the Big Hole," painted by John F. Clymer.

In the summer of 1877 five bands of Nez Perce Indians—about 800 people, including 125 warriors—began a 1,300 mile journey from northeastern Oregon and central Idaho over the Bitterroot Mountains and through the Montana Territory. Though they were herding more than 2,000 horses and carrying whatever possessions they could manage, the Nez Perce made this long and difficult trek in less than four months—not because they were eager to reach their destination, but because they were being chased by United States Army troops under Gen. Oliver O. Howard with orders to place them on a reservation. The Nez Perce had hoped to elude the Army but they were forced to stop and face their pursuers several times. One of the major encounters of this epic odyssey, the battle with the most loss of life, took place in the Big Hole

Valley of southwestern Montana. The Battle of the Big Hole was a tragic turning point of what came to be called the Nez Perce War of 1877.

The Nez Perce arrived in the lush Big Hole Valley on the morning of August 7, and their principal leader, Chief Looking Glass, chose an old camp site at which to stop and set up their tipis. Believing that they were far enough ahead of Howard's soldiers to be out of danger, Looking Glass did not post guards. Unknown to the Nez Perce, a second military force—Col. John Gibbon and 162 men of the 7th U.S. Infantry out of Fort Shaw and four other western Montana forts—had joined the chase and was advancing up the Bitterroot Valley toward them.

Gibbon's scouts spotted the Nez Perce tipis on the afternoon of August 8. Before dawn on the 9th, most of the soldiers and 34 civilian volun-

teers were forming a skirmish line on the west bank of the North Fork of the Big Hole River, within about 200 yards of the Nez Perce camp. Here they would wait tensely for first light, when they would attack. The attack started prematurely, however, when a lone Nez Perce, out to check his horses, stumbled onto the concealed soldiers and volunteers and was shot and killed. When the troops crossed the river and fired into the village, some of the Nez Perce scattered quickly while others were slow to awaken. In the confusion of the faint pre-dawn light, men, women, and children were shot indiscriminately. The soldiers soon occupied the south end of the camp, while the Nez Perce warriors, urged on by Chiefs Looking Glass and White Bird, quickly took up sniper positions. Their deadly shooting eventually forced Gibbon's men to retreat back across the river to a point of pines projecting from Battle Mountain. The troops

dug in and were pinned down for the next 24 hours. The soldiers suffered many casualties.

During the attack, some of Gibbon's men had been struggling to haul a 12-pound mountain howitzer through the dense lodge-pole pine forest. They managed to place it on the hillside above the siege area just as the soldiers were digging in. The crew fired two rounds before a group of Nez Perce horsemen galloped forward, captured the gun and dismantled it, and rolled the wheels down the hill.

As the siege continued, some of the Nez Perce warriors began withdrawing to help Chief Joseph and others care for the injured, bury the dead, gather their horses, and break camp. Others

remained to keep the soldiers under fire while the bands headed south, leaving much of their belongings behind. Finally, in the early morning of the second day of fighting—August 10—the remaining warriors fired parting shots and left to join their people. The battle was over.

General Howard's troops arrived the next day and found Gibbon wounded and his command out of action. In a military sense, the Nez Perce had won the battle, but the "victory" was a hollow one. Sixty to ninety members of the tribe had been killed, only about thirty of whom were warriors; the rest were women, children, and

old people. The Nez Perce now realized the war was not over, that they must flee for their lives. Eventually they decided to go to Canada and join Sitting Bull.

The military's losses were also high, with 29 dead and 40 wounded, but they knew that they had greatly damaged the fighting ability of the Nez Perce. Furthermore, the 7th Infantry had not retreated, as other units of the army that fought the Nez Perce had been forced to do. Subsequently, seven enlisted men were awarded the Congressional Medal of Honor, and those officers who survived received brevet promotions. But the horrors of what they had seen at the Battle of the Big Hole would haunt them for the rest of their lives.



1 This colorful coat, given to 2d Lt. Lowell Jerome by Chief Joseph, is said to be one of the jackets worn by Chief Joseph at the Battle of the Bear Paw. 2 Army fatigue blouses of this 1872 pattern are believed to have been worn by some of the enlisted men of the 7th Infantry during the Battle of the Big Hole. 3 This Model 1873 Rice trowel bayonet was discovered on the battlefield during archeological investigations in 1991. It was an experimental device designed to serve also as a hatchet and entrenching tool, which is how it was used at the Battle of the Big Hole. Colonel Gibbon later claimed that "if it hadn't been for them, none of us... would have lived to tell the tale."



Courtesy Washington State University, McWhorter Collection

4 This buffalo drinking horn belonged to Wounded Head (Husis Owyee), a Nez Perce warrior who derived his name from the wound he received in the battle. Wounded Head carved a notch in the horn for each Nez Perce he found dead at the Big Hole. His figures were 10 women, 21 children, and 32 men, for a total of 63. 5 This drawing of the Battle of the Big Hole was done by Peopeo Tholekt, the Nez Perce warrior who buried Gibbon's howitzer after it had been captured and dismantled. Peopeo made the sketch for historian L. V. McWhorter in the early 1900s.



Col. John Gibbon, a decorated Civil War veteran and commander of the 7th U.S. Infantry, suffered a leg wound in the battle. He applauded the Nez Perce's stand at the Big Hole, calling it "a gallant struggle."

Chief Looking Glass, an experienced warrior familiar with the buffalo country of Montana, was chosen to lead the Nez Perce at the start of their flight. He was later killed at the Battle of the Bear Paw.

T. C. Sherrill was one of the 34 civilian volunteers from the Bitterroot Valley who fought in the Battle of the Big Hole. He became the first caretaker of Big Hole battlefield, under the U.S. Forest Service, serving from 1914 through 1916.

Big Hole National Battlefield Today

Touring the Park

Big Hole National Battlefield memorializes the Nez Perce men, women, and children, the soldiers of the 7th U.S. Infantry, and the Bitterroot Volunteers who clashed at the Battle of the Big Hole. It began as a military reserve in 1883 and then became a national monument in 1910. It was designated a national battlefield in 1963.

Stop first at the visitor center, which overlooks the battlefield. An 18-minute video program and a museum of photographs, quotations, and personal belongings of some of the battle participants and non-combatants provide orientation to the park and its story. There is also a sales and information desk. The visitor center is open daily from 8 a.m. to 5 p.m., with extended hours in the summer. It is closed

Thanksgiving, Christmas, and New Year's Day.

Trails begin at the lower parking lot and lead to several points of interest:

Nez Perce Camp The battle began here when soldiers surprised the sleeping Nez Perce. Like other tribal places in Idaho, Washington, and Oregon, this area is Sacred Ground. It symbolizes the strength and spirit of the Nez Perce, and serves as a reminder of their heavy losses in their struggle for freedom. A guide booklet to the Nez Perce Camp is available along the trail.

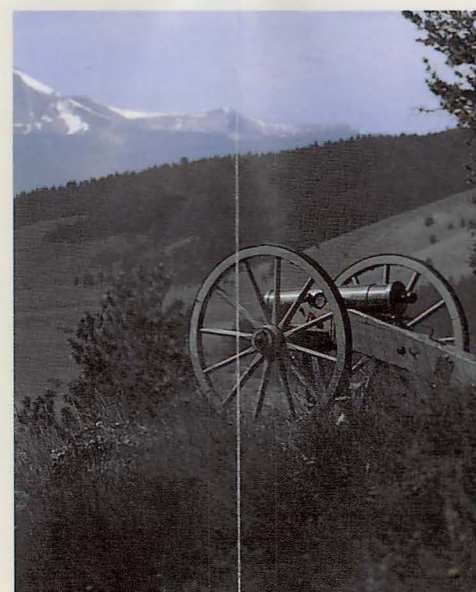
Siege Area The soldiers were besieged here for nearly 24 hours. The trenches they dug still remain. They remind us of the desperate struggle the soldiers waged here to survive and of the Nez



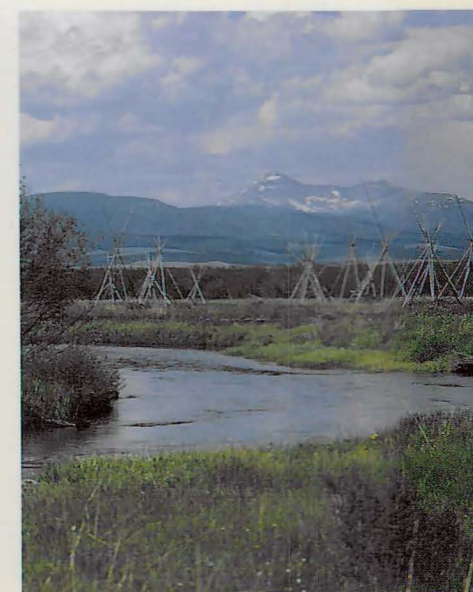
Perce efforts to pin down the soldiers while their families escaped. A guide booklet to the Siege Area is available along the trail.

Howitzer Capture Site The steep walk up to the site where Nez Perce warriors captured Gibbon's howitzer takes about 20 minutes and provides a spectacular view of the battlefield and the Big Hole Valley.

Nez Perce (Nee-Me-Poo) National Historic Trail follows the route of the Nez Perce War. The 1,170-mile trail begins at Joseph, Ore., travels through Big Hole National Battlefield, and ends at the Bear Paw Battlefield, Mont. Several of the Nez Perce War sites are preserved and interpreted by Nez Perce National Historical Park, the U.S. Forest Service, and other agencies.



Howitzer capture site.



Site of Nez Perce Camp.

About Your Visit

Big Hole National Battlefield is 10 miles west of Wisdom, Mont., on Mont. 43. From Butte, Mont., take I-15 southwest to Divide, then to Wisdom on Mont. 43; from the west, Mont. 43 intersects US 93 at the State line, between Salmon, Idaho, and Hamilton, Mont. From Dillon, take I-15 south three miles to the Wisdom exit, then to Wisdom on Highway 278, then west on Mont. 43.

There are picnic tables at the lower parking lot. No camping or overnight facilities are provided in the park, but several campgrounds are nearby.

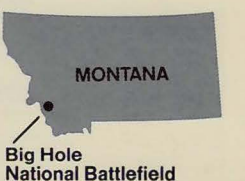
Fishing is permitted in the national battlefield and the national forest as provided by Montana law. Hunting and fishing on private land is by permission only. No hunting is allowed within the na-

tional battlefield. Montana laws apply in the adjacent national forest.

A gas station, grocery store, restaurants, and lodgings—although limited—can be found in nearby Wisdom. There are more complete services in Butte or Dillon, Mont. to the east, and Hamilton, Mont. or Salmon, Idaho, to the west.

For Your Protection Coyote, deer, elk, moose, and other animals native to the park are harmless at a distance, but can be dangerous if startled or approached too closely. 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. The park is open to cross-country skiing, but be prepared for severe winter weather conditions.

Administration Big Hole National Battlefield is administered by the National Park Service, U.S. Department of the Interior. Address all inquiries to the superintendent, P.O. Box 237, Wisdom, MT 59761, or phone (406) 689-3155.



Big Hole National Battlefield

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 and cattle on the valley grasslands, gathered edible roots on the prairies, fished for salmon, and hunted buffalo east of the 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 young warriors, seeking revenge, 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 cavalymen 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 the Clearwater River where they fought for two days with neither side winning. Finally the Nez Perce withdrew, leaving behind many of their supplies and tips.

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.

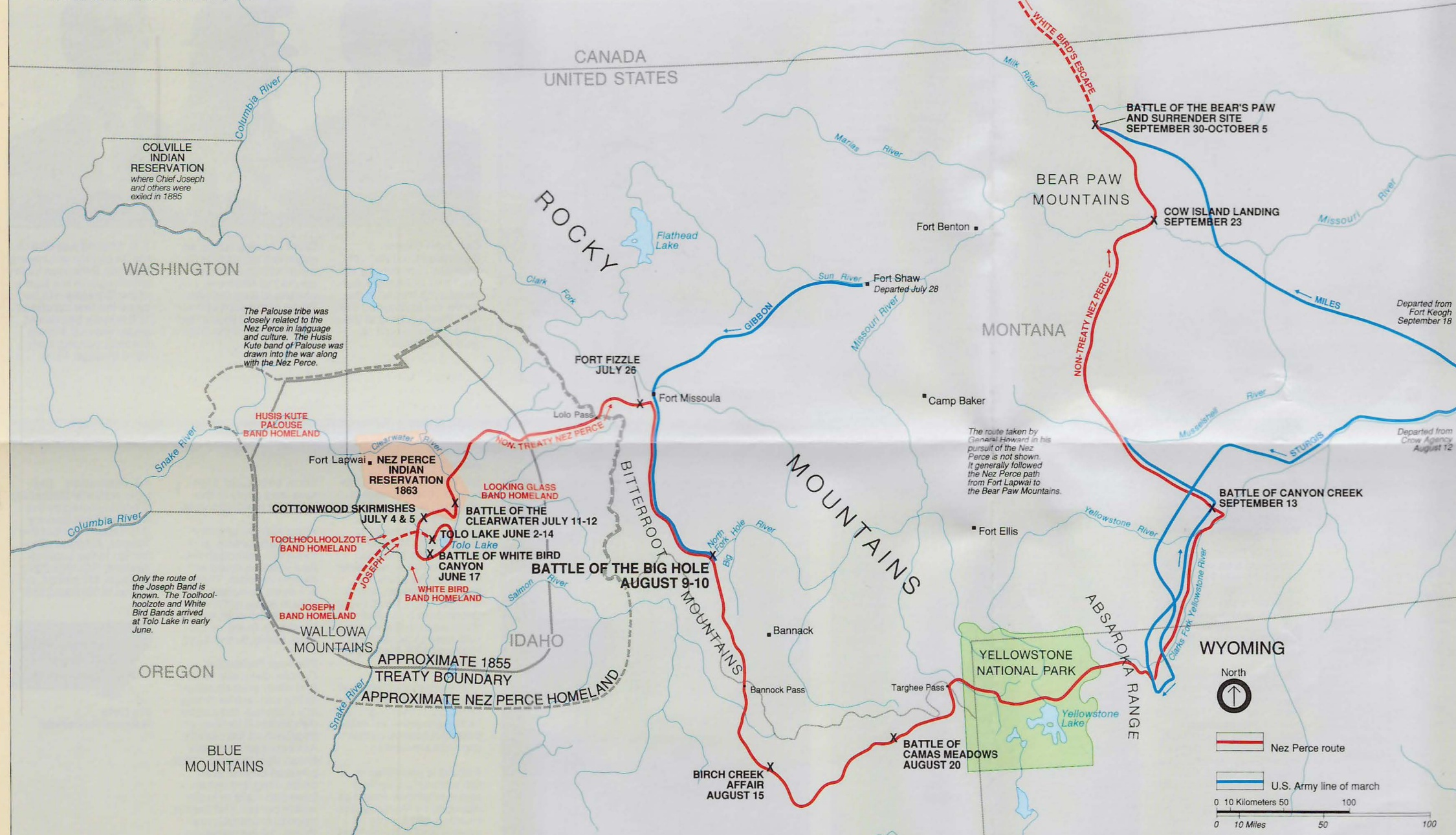
Finally, on September 30, near the Bear Paw

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 1,300 miles.

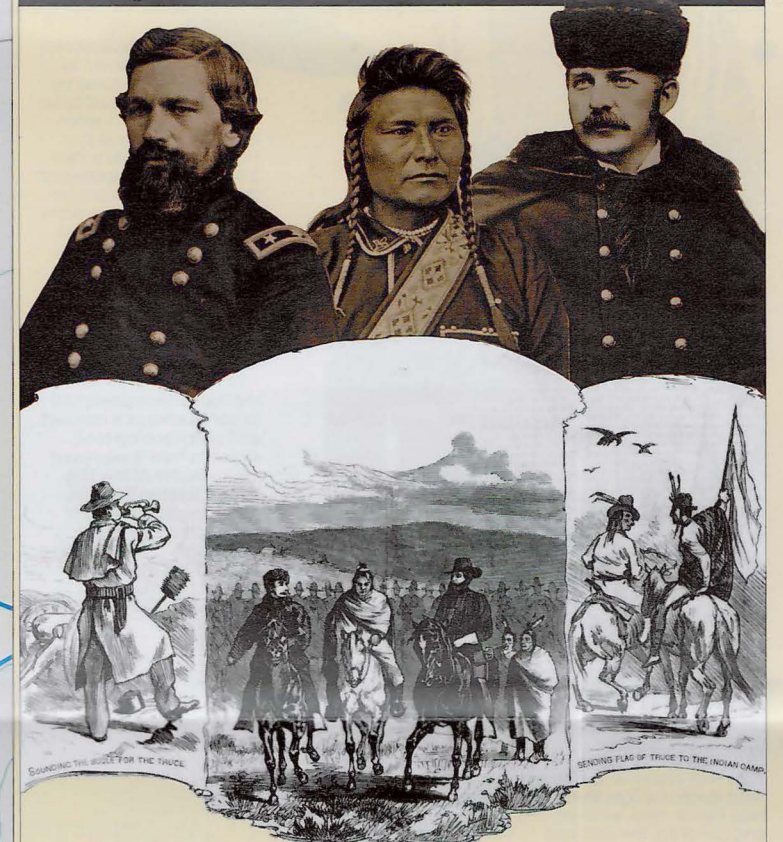
Of the nearly 800 non-treaty Nez Perce who had started the trek, only 431 remained to surrender. Of the rest, some had been killed in battles enroute, over 200 had succeeded in reaching Canada, and some were hiding in the hills. In the end, it was the loss of fighting men, as well as the emotional blow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

The Nez Perce War of 1877



"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 (top, right), 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, center) 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 (top, left) 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."

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