

Nez Perce Camp



Big Hole National Battlefield



NATIONAL PARK SERVICE
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INTRODUCTION

Ahead is not just another walk—these are Honored Grounds. Here, Nez Perce fought for their human rights—the right to be allowed to live in freedom, in their traditional homeland, and in their own life style. Five bands of Non-Treaty Nez Perce battled U.S. army soldiers and volunteers here on August 9, 1877, and won the day on the battlefield. The cost of that victory, however, led to their surrender 57 days later at the Bear Paw Mountains of Montana. The Nez Perce were—and are today—a proud and honorable people. In addition to sacred tribal places in western Idaho, Washington and Oregon, this place is Honored Grounds. It symbolizes the character, strength, and spirit of the Nez Perce just as Independence Hall stands for the founding of our nation. It illustrates some of the price paid for westward expansion of the nation. Enter these grounds and try to understand the tribulation, strength, and determination of the Nez Perce.

Take the booklet to relate the events and the agony that occurred. Numbered paragraphy correspond with numbered posts along the side of the trail.

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Published by
GLACIER NATURAL
HISTORY ASSOCIATION

In cooperation with
NATIONAL PARK SERVICE
U.S. DEPARTMENT OF THE INTERIOR

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1 NEZ PERCE CAMP:

Late in the morning of Tuesday, August 7, 1877, fleeing Nez Perce arrived at this lush meadow and decided to camp for several days of much needed rest. They numbered about 800 men, women and children, riding and herding over 2,000 horses. Although renowned for their fighting abilities, one-third of the Nez Perce peoples chose to leave their homeland rather than fight the Army and settlers. The soldiers pursued, and a series of battles were fought as the Nez Perce retreated across Idaho and Montana. The Nez Perce wanted to talk and negotiate the differences, but first they wanted to find a place where the fighting would stop. Here, in the Big Hole basin, they thought was such a place. That night they put up their usual traveling shelters. The camp leader, Chief Looking Glass, directed the women to cut tipi poles and dig camas bulbs while the men went out to hunt.

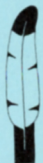
2 CAMP ACTIVITIES:

It was almost a festive occasion. It was a relief from the tension of hostilities. The war was over, or so they thought. They built a village of 89 tipis. It was time to recuperate and relax from the harried trip. In the afternoons

there were races. In the evening there were fun dances, games and conversation. This place offered grass, water, wild foods, game and even tipi poles. Warm August days with cool nights—what more could they want? They knew that General Howard was following them from Idaho, but he was far behind. Little did they suspect that Colonel John Gibbon was much closer with his force of the 7th U.S. Infantry (146 men) and 34 Citizen Volunteers from the Bitter Root Valley. The soldiers spotted the camp on the second day.

MARKER LEGEND

Markers designate known positions of participants.



FEATHER—NezPerce



BLUE HAT—Soldier



TAN HAT—Civilian Volunteer

3

PLAN OF ATTACK:

Gibbon planned a surprise attack for the morning of Thursday, August 9th. The plan was to drive all the Nez Perce out of the camp into the open flat on the right. Then, destroy the camp with the tipis, the food supplies and everything they owned. Thus impoverished, the Nez Perce were supposed to surrender or be killed. The soldiers assembled in a long line across the base of the bald hillside on the left and started to move through the willows to the river bank. At a signal, all were to fire three volleys and charge into the camp. The plans went wrong. Before all the soldiers were out of the willows, the first shot was fired at the far end of the camp and the battle began.

4

CAMP LAYOUT:

The tipis were set in random order, but the overall appearance was a large "V" spread widely at the open end. The middle of the camp was just beyond the loop in the trail. By any standards, either Indian or white, the Nez Perce were wealthy. They had gold from dealings with the Idaho settlers for their horses and cattle. Their tipis were all hide covered. As yet, these Nez Perce were not reduced to using canvas for tipi covers.

Before each lodge was staked the best riding horse of the family herd. The rest of the horses grazed on the other end of the meadow, in the swards in the willows, and on the bald hillside.

5 CHIEF RED ECHO:

A Palouse Chief, he had brought a few Palouse families along. The Nez Perce were very friendly with several of the much smaller neighboring tribes and often served as their protectors. The result was intermarriage and sometimes very strong alliances. In all the years of contact with whites since Lewis and Clark, the Nez Perce tried to work out similar relationships with them but failed. A number of settlers seemed to respond only with acts that caused anguish and death. A settler was never injured in return until the Nez Perce War began.

6 ATTACK AND SCATTERING:

Although the first shots came from the far end of the camp, the first charging soldiers (Company D and K) came through the willows along a front several hundred yards long beginning at the sharp bend in the river. There was supposed to be another force charging this end of the camp, but they were still stumbling through the willows. Not all the

Nez Perce awoke with the first shot, some not even with the first pelting of the three volleys. Emerging from the tipis, the warriors knew what they had to do. There were a few rifles in the camp, and very little ammunition. The camp had about 250 males of all ages, but only about 125 warriors.

Unsure of the direction of the attack, the Nez Perce saw soldiers emerging from the willows at the bend. Women, children and old men sought shelter. Those nearest the river went into the water, some hiding in the overhanging willows and others squatting in the water with only heads showing. Most of those from the tipis farthest from the river looked for ground depressions. Some went to the open area and slopes to the right, but many went to the middle area between the tipis. Casualties were heavy among the non-combatants.

7 CHIEF LOOKING GLASS:

He had achieved his office and reputation as a warrior. Nothing compelled a man to be a warrior. However, in battle, each band had one man who served as leader. There was no overall single leader. Thus Looking Glass took charge of warriors from his band and later participated in the siege across the way in the woods.

8**THE FIRST MAN****KILLED:** Na-tal-le-kin

was an old man with failing eyesight. One of five men out early to check the horse herds, he was the only one to ride a horse; it had better eyesight in the predawn. The other men were alerted that something strange was in the willows and had turned back to give a warning. But not Natallekin, who rode into Lt. Bradley's forces as he crossed the river at the far end of the camp. Instead of letting the old man pass their hiding places, three citizen volunteers opened fire and killed the old Nez Perce, and started the battle.

**9****THE CHARGE****FALTERS:** Lt.

Bradley was in charge of a makeshift company of some volunteers and some soldiers. With the first shot, his men fired the three volleys preplanned as the signal for attack, even though they were still in the willows. Only four men charged, of which Lt. Bradley and volunteer Morrow were killed. Thus the downstream (northern) end of the camp was never invaded by the attackers, and the noncombatant Nez Perce fled easily. Warriors and attackers both turned and moved to the center of the camp where hand-to-hand combat had begun.

10**CHIEF WHITE BIRD:**

An old warrior in his 70's White Bird knew what to do. His resonant and booming voice was heard over the battle, "Brave men fight to protect women and children! Now is the time to fight!" Other voices were heard to call men to action. It took the soldiers only 20 minutes to occupy the entire southern half of the camp. Now, with the call for resistance, the tide was turning. With every shot from the willows or from the distant bank, a soldier was hit, Gibbon had committed his reserve forces and was now in the middle of the camp. He too was wounded. Two companies were ordered to form lines and sweep through the willows and clear the snipers, but to

no avail. Gibbon soon ordered a retreat to the pines. At this stage of the battle there were probably no more than 20 Nez Perce with rifles and each had less than five or six bullets. As the soldiers retreated, Nez Perce armed themselves from the dead or from lost equipment.

11 WAH-LI-TITS AND WIFE: An example of the Nez Perce determination for survival and freedom occurred here. Young Wahlitits and his pregnant wife had a tipi just upstream from the river bend. With the first shots they ran to the depression ahead. He urged his wife to flee, but she quickly returned to his side. A shot missed him and hit the wife in the shoulder. Wahlitits shot one of the first charging soldiers. In turn, a soldier nearer the river shot and killed Wahlitits. The wife then picked up the rifle and killed the soldier who shot her husband. She in turn was killed.

12 RAINBOW, WARRIOR: Perhaps the most famous Nez Perce warrior, Rainbow, had as his warmate another renowned warrior, Five Wounds. Their oath was that if one was killed in battle, the other would also die the same day. It happened. One of the very first to take up a defense, Rainbow ran to the little wash and hid under the



branches of the willow. A very tall soldier charged out of the willows in the dim light. Rainbow came out of the brush, aimed his rifle and pulled the trigger. It was a misfire. The soldier pulled his trigger at the same time and killed Rainbow. Another warrior grappled with the soldier in hand-to-hand combat until a third warrior came and shot the soldier in the side. The shot also broke the arm of the wrestling warrior. The story of Rainbow's warmate, Five Wounds, is completed in the Siege Area.

13 RESERVE FORCES ARRIVE: With the first shots downstream, Gibbon knew his plan was in trouble.

He and his Adjutant were astride horses on the lower part of the bald area of the mountainside, the only soldiers not on foot. Quickly he committed the reserve forces (Companies F and I) and proceeded forward himself. The reserve companies came to the river just at the sharp bend. At the same time, Companies A and G were coming out of the willows at the very end of the camp. These soldiers were coming up behind the unarmed Nez Perce sheltering in the river and in the willows. The character of each soldier was tested. Some shot at or killed any Nez Perce they saw. But in case after case, surviving

Nez Perce told of soldiers challenging them but when they were identified as women and children they were left alone. There were many Nez Perce casualties along the river, but only a few soldiers caused them.

14 ARMY CASUALTIES: Arriving a few minutes after the first shot, the four companies assigned the upstream half of the camp charged in an orderly fashion. Trumpeter Gallagher was killed here. Sgt. Stortz was killed just as he crossed the river. Corporal O'Connor and Privates Broetz and Mantz were killed as they charged the camp. On the far side of this group of soldiers Captain Logan died. It was also here at the river that Colonel Gibbon was shot in the back pocket. He retreated to the river to wash his wounds. In the ordered withdrawal, Company I was assigned the job of forming a line facing downstream while the others retreated. Finally Captain Rawn ordered his men to leave. As they were leaving, Corporal McCaffrey was shot. His friends, Corporal Loynes and Sgt. Hogan carried him a few steps when Sgt. Hogan was also shot. Both were dead when Loynes departed in a hail of bullets to join the others.

15**BURNING AND
WRECKING TIPIS:**

After the first charge, soldiers quickly occupied the camp but not all the tipis were empty. Some of the Nez Perce were hard to awaken or had been advised by their men to lie under the buffalo robes. Following orders, the soldiers started to burn the tipis but the dew-covered hides did not burn easily and smoked badly. Only eight lodges were burned. Soldiers entered the tipis, and, in one tipi the soldiers shot the women and children. In another tipi, a soldier was killed. There were many dead horses by each of the lodges. Some soldiers threw ropes over the top of tipis and pulled them over while other soldiers were ready to kill any occupants. By now the deadly sniping began, giving soldiers other things to occupy their attention. The rest of the lodges were untouched.

16**CHIEF JOSEPH:**

Joseph's lodge was near the river. Not a warrior, he was a counselor and spokesman for the people. When other plans failed, Joseph was sought for general guidance. As the attack began, he came out of the tipi with a child in his arms. Encountering warriors, he demanded a gun. Told they were scarce, he was ordered by a warrior to seek shelter. Soon Joseph was on a

horse and rounding up the horse herd to get them away from the soldiers. Later, he managed to bring them back to camp after the soldiers were in retreat. The remainder of the morning he organized the care of the wounded, burial of the dead, packing and moving camp. By noon, the survivors left the area up Bloody Gulch, to the right. Only 60 warriors stayed behind to pin down the soldiers in the Siege Area in the wooded section across the river.

17**CHIEF OLLOKOT:**

Ollokot was Joseph's younger brother. He was also a chief and the leading warrior of Joseph's band. He was into battle quickly and took a major part in the siege that followed. Ollokot was one of the last of the warriors to leave the area late on the next day, August 10th. He was a dynamic and respected leader. In Joseph's famous surrender speech at Bear Paw, the passage, "... he whom the young men follow is dead ...," refers to the death of Ollokot at Bear Paw.

18**DEATH—CITIZEN
VOLUNTEER:**

After the soldiers retreated, some Nez Perce captured a citizen volunteer, Campbell Mitchell. He was brought to this place for questioning. In addition to the men who were restraining him, there were a

number of Nez Perce around him talking about the questions they wanted answered. Mitchell struggled, and, in defiance, kicked a woman. In a moment a warrior shot him. He was the second volunteer casualty on this side of the river.

19

CHIEF LEAN ELK:

Chief Lean Elk and a band of a dozen families had joined the fleeing Non-Treaty Nez Perce near Lolo Pass. He became camp leader after the battle of Big Hole, replacing Chief Looking Glass whose leadership failed to protect the camp. Chief Looking Glass had refused to put out sentinels or to scout the back trail. As the new camp leader, Chief Lean Elk stressed time and distance and moved the Nez Perce over much ground in a short time.

20

JUDGEMENT: As you leave these **Honored Grounds**, judge not the men or the event too harshly. Consider

the causes and attitudes which started the chain of events to this tragic episode in our history. Participants on both sides proved brave and true to their beliefs. Clearly the Nez Perce won the battle by turning certain defeat into victory, but at a high cost. Between 63 and 90 Nez Perce were killed on this field. Nearly everyone in camp lost a relative or a friend. Thirty warriors were lost, a drastic reduction of the fighting force which had numbered about 125 warriors. Henceforth, the Nez Perce would have to be on the defensive. The attacking military force lost 20 men from their original attack strength of 132 men. Military discipline and training kept their losses down.

The siege area trail tells the remaining story of the Battle of the Big Hole. Return to the parking lot and cross the bridge.

Be sure to take advantage of the additional programs and exhibits at the Visitor Center before you leave.



EPILOGUE By Phil George, Nez Perce

Phil George is a Nez Perce poet, writer, dancer, teacher, actor. A Vietnam veteran, he has won national recognition in his war dancing and traditional Indian literature. Phil grew up simultaneously on the Colville and Nez Perce Reservations: three of his great grandparents came from Wallowa Valley in Oregon.

One hundred years after the Nez Perce War of 1877, Phil George shares some thoughts and feelings of the Nez Perce peoples. His feelings are expressed in "Whip Man," which refers to a Nez Perce cultural institution.

WHIP MAN

The old man with silver braids
Borrowed from the setting sun
Tinges of red, orange, yellow —
And flushed his copper-colored face
In peaceful pastels of a new dawn.

Whip Man, although almost blind,
Had eyes as free, as wild as appaloosas.
100 winters and with visions beyond the moon,
He could see tomorrow's tomorrow.

On his quill-woven willow whip were
Breath Plumes, sinew secured.
Whip Man made children dance.
Balanced within the circle —
Disciplined in the ways of generations past.

He departed the dances one night.
In sleep his breath stopped.
They found him in his tepee, cold.
Some say he died.

Others waited for Whip Man's return.
With three sets of Seven Drums
His people sang for three nights, two days.
Then Whip Man awoke —
In a trance. In tears.

He sang slow and easy — like the sound of
High mountain flowing waters.
Chanting — telling of the Next World
Where our ancestors now live in utopian freedom
of long ago.

Drummers gathered, dancers moved.
Old Ones watched in the shade.
In classic elegance people gathered in clouds.
Whip Man's whip touched the knees of
Wide-eyed, open-mouthed children:

Take care of your past.
Take care.
Your past, take care.
You, you take care of your past.
Your past.
Our past.
Their past.
Take care of your past.
Take care of your past.
Take care of your past.

In 1877, the Nez Perce Indians were near the apex of one of the most brilliant, dynamic and intelligent cultures of primitive North America.

Within a few short years all that was almost destroyed. Call it U.S. Imperialism, Manifest Destiny, whatever. But isn't America beyond that now? Let us continue to exchange things of beauty — like acknowledgement and respect for each other's religion; have mutual understandings, and, most of all honor the traditional rights of what the real America is supposed to stand for. Perhaps a Whip Man was killed here at Big Hole. Now, we all must take care of our past. Only then can we know where future generations might be headed.

The Nez Perce in the two Nespelem Longhouses, the Nez Perce at the community centers at Kamiah and at Lapwai, my friends at the Nez Perce National Historical Park Sites, and the personnel at the Big Hole and Bear Paw Battlefields are doing a commendable job of taking care of our past.

