



# The Flight of the Nez Perce

**...through the  
Bitterroot Valley – 1877**



United States  
Department of  
Agriculture

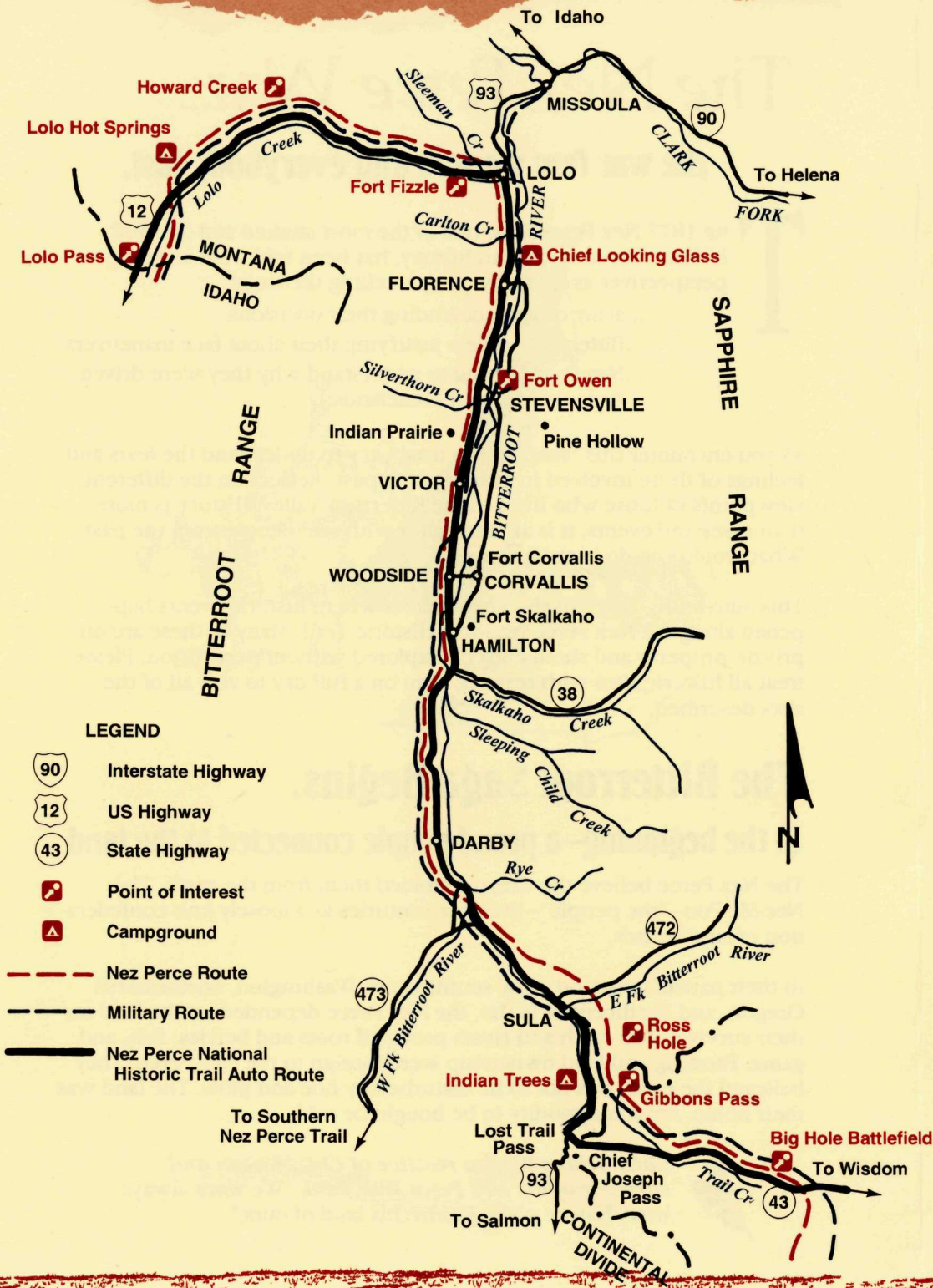


Forest  
Service

Bitterroot  
National  
Forest



# 1877 Flight of the Nez Perce ...through the Bitterroot Valley



- July 24 - Two companies of the 7th Infantry with Captain Rawn, supported by over 150 citizen volunteers, construct log barricade across Lolo Creek (Fort Fizzle). Many Bitterroot Valley women and children were sent to Fort Owen, MT, or the two hastily constructed forts near Corvallis and Skalkaho (Grantsdale).
- July 28 - Nez Perce by-pass Fort Fizzle, camp on McClain Ranch north of Carlton Creek.
- July 29 - Nez Perce camp near Silverthorn Creek, west of Stevensville, MT.
- July 30 - Nez Perce trade in Stevensville.
- August 1 - Nez Perce at Corvallis, MT.
- August 3 - Colonel Gibbon and 7th Infantry reach Fort Missoula.
- August 4 - Nez Perce camp near junction of East and West Forks of the Bitterroot River. Gibbon camp north of Pine Hollow, southwest of Stevensville.
- August 5 - Nez Perce camp above Ross' Hole (near Indian Trees Campground). Gibbon at Sleeping Child Creek. Catlin and volunteers agree to join him.
- August 6 - Nez Perce camp on Trail Creek. Gibbon makes "dry camp" south of Rye Creek on way up the hills leading to Ross' Hole. General Howard at Lolo Hot Springs.
- August 7 - Nez Perce camp along Big Hole River. Gibbon at foot of Continental Divide. Lieutenant Bradley sent ahead with volunteers to scout. Howard 22 miles east of Lolo Hot Springs.
- August 8 - Nez Perce in camp at Big Hole. Gibbon crosses crest of Continental Divide parks wagons and deploys his command, just a few miles from the Nez Perce camp. Howard enters the Bitterroot Valley, camps north of Pine Hollow.
- August 9 - Following a late evening march and morning assault on the sleeping Nez Perce village, Gibbon and Nez Perce engaged in the Big Hole Battle. Howard near mouth of Rye Creek.
- August 10- Howard and fastest cavalry to Trail Creek after 53 mile trek. Infantry above Stevensville.
- August 11- Howard and men reach Gibbon at 10 a.m.
- August 12- Remaining cavalry reached Big Hole.





# The Nez Perce War...

**the war few wanted and everybody lost.**

**T**he 1877 Nez Perce War, one of the most studied and debated Indian wars in American history, has been told from as many perspectives as there are people telling the story...

...army officers defending their decisions.

...Bitterroot settlers justifying their about-face maneuvers.

...Nez Perce trying to understand why they were driven from their sacred homelands.

As you encounter this "snapshot in time", try to understand the fears and feelings of those involved in events of the past. Reflect on the different viewpoints of those who lived in the Bitterroot Valley. History is more than dates and events, it is an encounter with real people from the past. What would you do in their place?

This auto-tour guide will show you places where historic events happened along the Nez Perce National Historic Trail. Many of these are on private property and should not be explored without permission. Please treat all historic sites with respect. Plan on a full day to visit all of the sites described.

## The Bitterroot Saga Begins.

### In the beginning—a proud people connected to the land

The Nez Perce believe the Creator molded them from the earth. The Nee-Me-Poo—"the people"—lived for centuries as a loosely-knit confederation of small bands.

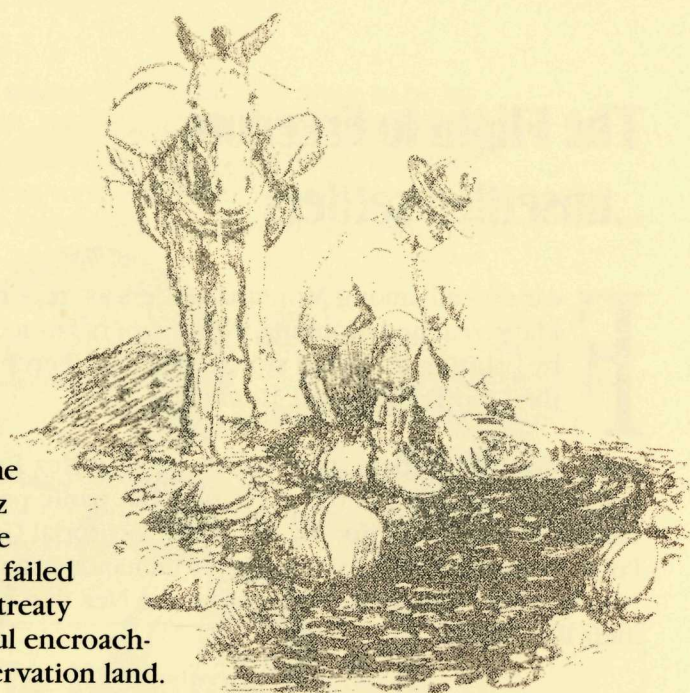
In their native homeland, now southeastern Washington, northeastern Oregon, and northcentral Idaho, the Nez Perce depended on the land for their survival. The earth and rivers provided roots and berries, fish, and game. Farming and land ownership were foreign to the Nez Perce. They believed the earth was not to be disturbed by hoe and plow. The land was their home, not a commodity to be bought or sold.



*Chief Yellow Wolf, a relative of Chief Joseph and survivor of the Nez Perce War, said, "We were always here. Nature placed us in this land of ours."*

## Disputes Intensify... war erupts

**I**n the mid 1800's, Indian-settler disputes intensified in the west. In the Nez Perce homeland, the federal government failed to enforce an 1855 treaty prohibiting unlawful encroachment on Indian reservation land.



Preceded by explorers, fur traders, miners and missionaries, others seeking the bounty of Idaho's natural resources swarmed into Nez Perce territory. As a result, in 1863, the seven-million acre Nez Perce Indian Reservation was reduced to an area 10% of its original size. During the 1870's, there was increasing pressure to force all non-treaty Nez Perce onto the reduced reservation. After a decade of mistreatment and abuse endured by the Nez Perce, five Nez Perce chiefs refused to sign the new treaty.

Increasing pressure between the Nez Perce and settlers resulted in the first battle at White Bird Canyon, Idaho, June 17, 1877.

Before fleeing eastward over the Buffalo Trail (Lolo Trail) to Montana, the non-treaty Nez Perce fought several more battles with army units commanded by General Howard and settler volunteers.

The Nez Perce believed the Army and volunteers were just chasing them out of Idaho and they would be safe in Montana. They intended to travel peacefully to a place where they could find peace—someday returning to their homeland.





## The Flight to Freedom ...unsettled settlers

**F**ear spread among Montana settlers as reports of the unrest in Idaho reached Montana. Newspapers fanned the flames of fear by printing distorted stories. The Nez Perce were heading over the Lolo Trail toward Montana.

Many Montana settlers were accustomed to Nez Perce visits. Some settlers claimed Nez Perce as friends, but panic prevailed. Newspaper editors demanded action by Montana Territorial Governor Benjamin Potts. Telegrams to President Hayes demanded that the army punish "the hostiles," ignoring the fact that the Nez Perce were defending their homeland.

Montana settlers formed volunteer militia groups. Stevensville settlers hastily rebuilt Fort Owen, a crumbling, walled trading post. Corvallis and Skalkaho residents built sod forts to protect their families.

Bitterroot Salish Chief Charlo, and his people, had been friendly to both settlers and Nez Perce. However, the Salish were also experiencing increasing pressure from settlers to give up their land in the Bitterroot Valley. Nobody was sure how the Salish would react to the Nez Perce presence.

By the time the Nez Perce reached Lolo Pass, Montana residents had been reading of supposed "terrible atrocities" for five weeks.



"It is an outrage that the Nez Perce shall be allowed to pass through our territory..."  
*J. H. Mills, editor, New Northwest.*

The highly publicized fate of Custer, the year before at the Battle of the Little Big Horn, magnified the settler's fear. While the Nez Perce intended to pass peacefully through Montana, the panic-stricken settlers feared for their lives.



"No matter if they do 'only want to be let alone', the people of Idaho are our people and their 'butchers' would be ours if circumstances were favorable." *J. H. Mills, editor, New Northwest, in letter to Governor Potts, July 22, 1877.*

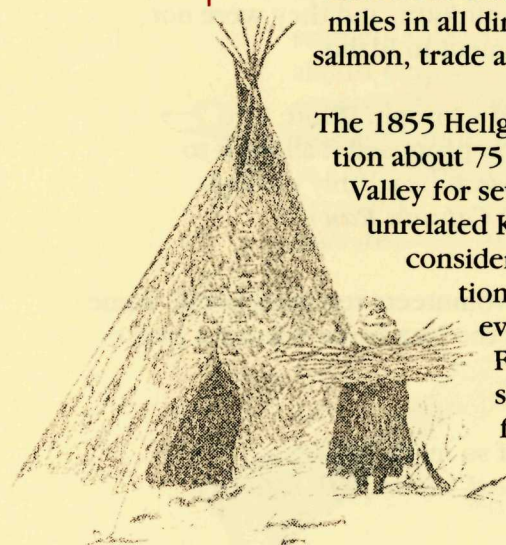
However, Chief Charlo refused to sign the 1872 treaty. His name was forged on the document. Charlo, and several hundred Salish people, remained in the Bitterroot Valley in the face of growing hostility.

Charlo allowed the Nez Perce to pass through the valley, but warned them not to harm the settlers. His warriors assisted in the defense of strongholds like "Fort Fizzle".

## The Bitterroot Salish

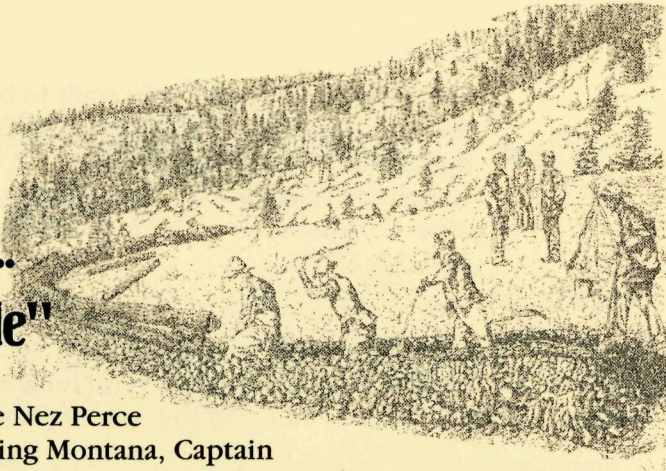
Traditionally, the Bitterroot Valley was home to the Bitterroot Salish, but they ranged hundreds of miles in all directions to hunt buffalo, fish for salmon, trade and visit neighboring tribes.

The 1855 Hellgate Treaty established a reservation about 75 miles north of the Bitterroot Valley for several other Salish bands and the unrelated Kootenai Indians. The treaty also considered the Bitterroot Valley a reservation for the Bitterroot Salish. However, white settlers pressured the Federal government to create a second treaty in 1872. This treaty forced the Bitterroot Salish onto the reservation to the north.





## Lolo Trail Barricade... "Fort Fizzle"



To block the Nez Perce from entering Montana, Captain Rawn, 7th Infantry, with thirty enlisted men and four officers from nearby Fort Missoula, entrenched themselves behind log breastworks in a small opening along the Lolo Creek drainage adjacent to the Lolo Trail. About 150 settlers joined the soldiers. The 750 Nez Perce, with their 1000+ horses, were camped about five miles to the west.

At a meeting of the Nez Perce chiefs and Army officers, the Nez Perce made four things very clear: they had no intention of molesting settlers or property; they wanted to travel in peace; they would not surrender their horses, arms and ammunition; and they were not ready to return to the hostile environment in Idaho.



"I had a talk with Chief's Joseph, White Bird and Looking Glass, who proposed if allowed to pass unmolested, to march peaceably through the Bitter Root Valley." *Captain Rawn.*

Soon after the meeting, many settler volunteers returned home. Some reports say they were convinced that the Nez Perce wanted a peaceful trip though the valley.



Others, "at the sight of so many Indians... deserted," *said Corporal Loynes, 7th Infantry.*



"Now could we see the Indians passing within sight of us. Of course they did not want us to see them, and we did not." *reported Corporal Loynes, 7th Infantry*

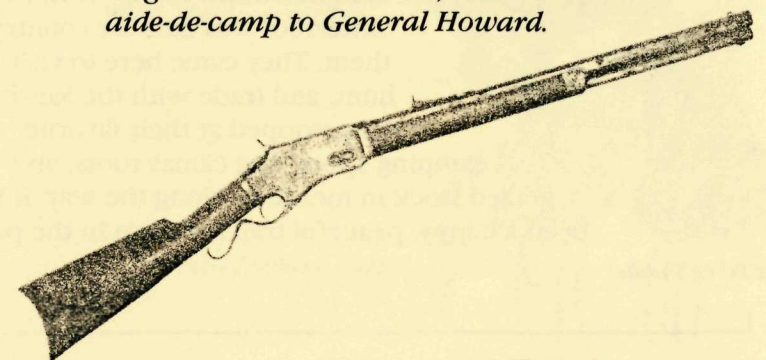
Captain Rawn had clear orders. He said the Nez Perce could not pass; however, the barricade failed when the Nez Perce, with their horses and possessions, climbed a steep ravine behind the ridge to the north and bypassed the soldiers. This maneuver earned White Bird the nickname of the "Indian Hannibal" and the previously unnamed barricade became a ridiculed "Fort Fizzle."



"How easy any Indian force, whether seeking pillage or only escape, could pass around, through and by our untrained troops. So far as infantry goes, except to defend the larger towns or some fortified position, they are as useless as boys with popguns." *The Helena Daily Herald, July 30, 1877*



"The Indians were fagged out, their cayuses scarcely able to walk, and their cartridge belts almost empty. To let them go by was equivalent to giving them new horses, plenty of ammunition and ample provisions. It was, in a word, breathing new life into a corpse." *Sergeant T. A. Sutherland, Volunteer aide-de-camp to General Howard.*



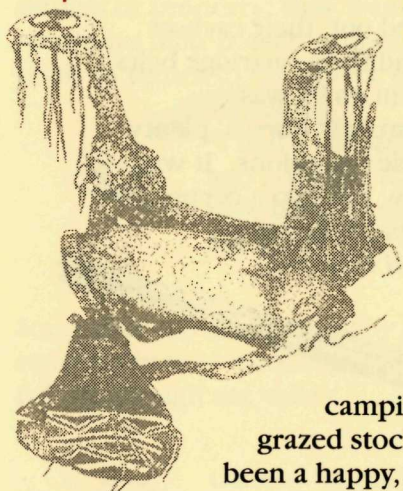


## Through The Valley...

### Lolo Creek to Carlton Creek

After avoiding a major conflict on the Lolo Trail, the Nez Perce followed Lolo Creek to the Bitterroot River. White Bird and others wanted to go north to Canada. Looking Glass insisted on traveling south toward the Big Hole where he had led many hunting parties. He knew there were few settlements and many lush meadows for grazing horses. The chiefs made a fateful decision to go south, up the Bitterroot Valley, into the Big Hole Valley, and east to the buffalo country.

#### Historic Network of Trails



Nez Perce Saddle

Trails used by native people did not necessarily consist of one path. They often consisted of a network of trails through an area.

Although the Nez Perce made their traditional home several hundred miles to the west, the Bitterroot was familiar country to them. They came here to visit, hunt, and trade with the Salish. They stopped at their favorite camping spots, dug camas roots, and grazed stock in meadows along the way. It had been a happy, peaceful trail for them in the past.

The Nez Perce camped on settler J. P. McClain's ranch just north of Carlton Creek, in the vicinity of today's Looking Glass State Recreation Area. Reports that the Nez Perce stole some of McClain's equipment proved untrue. The Nez Perce buffalo hunters often left equipment in one of McClain's outbuildings. They were just reclaiming their own property.

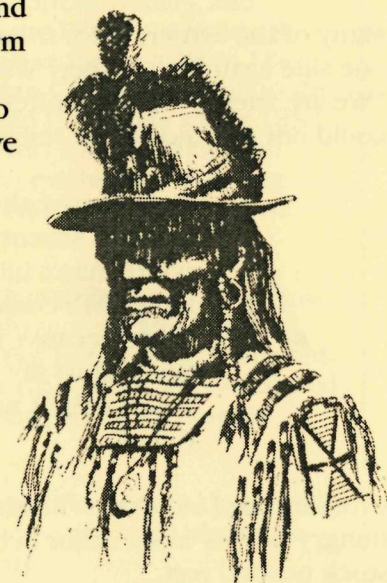
Some Bitterroot volunteers could not return home without passing through the Nez Perce camp. Looking Glass made it clear that they did not wish to fight, and permitted the volunteers to pass unharmed through the camp.



"You are volunteers; you come over to fight us. I could kill you if I wanted to, but I do not. You can go to your homes. I give you my word of honor that I will harm nobody." *Looking Glass to volunteers returning from Lolo Trail barricade.*



"Looking Glass met us and told us he would not harm any persons or property in the valley if allowed to pass in peace and that we could pass through his camp to our homes." *W. B. Harlan, settler.*



Chief Looking Glass





## Through The Valley... Carlton Creek to Stevensville

The Nez Perce moved up the Bitterroot Valley, on July 29, 1877, in "a cavalcade about five-miles long" to the Stevensville area. The main body of Nez Perce spent two or three days camped along Silverthorn Creek west of Stevensville near Charlo's home, an area known today as Indian Prairie.

Howard, whom the Nez Perce nicknamed "General Two-Day Behind," was back in Idaho. The few soldiers the Nez Perce had encountered on the Lolo Trail had retreated to Fort Missoula. Charlo found himself in an awkward position. He was friendly with both whites and Nez Perce and wanted peace. Frequent intermarriage, trading, shared buffalo hunting, and mutual defense had cemented good relationships with the Nez Perce. His people had also lived among the settlers in the Bitterroot Valley.

Many of the settlers were friends of the Salish. How could Charlo join one side against the other? When asked to support the Army, he said, "We are friendly to the whites, but in your war with the Nez Perce could not take sides." He remained neutral.

"It was my father's boast that his hand had never in seventy years been bloodied with the white man's blood, and I am the son of my father. We could not fight against the Nez Perce because they helped me several years ago against my enemy the Blackfeet, but we will not fight with them against the whites."  
*Charlo.*

Crossing the Lolo Trail with their remaining possessions and 1,000+ hungry horses was a major achievement. The Nez Perce and their stock needed rest.



"The Indians...are moving very slowly, in fact have not moved at all since reaching their present camping ground (west of Stevensville)" *C. P. Higgins, Missoula banker, letter to Governor Potts 7/31/77*

The Nez Perce had no idea that Colonel Gibbon and the 7th Infantry were coming from Fort Shaw, Montana, to join the chase.

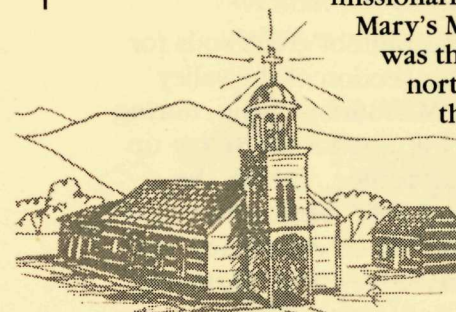
During their stay opposite Stevensville, groups of Indians visited the town to trade for supplies. Henry Buck reported, "They soon made known their wants to us, saying they needed supplies and had money to pay for them, but if we refused to sell, would take them anyway."



"The Indians have plenty of gold dust, coin and greenbacks and have been paying exorbitant prices for flour, coffee, sugar and tobacco."  
*Washington McCormick, Missoula businessman, in letter to Governor Potts, 1877.*

## The Bitterroot Valley

During the first half of the 19th century, trappers, traders, and missionaries came to the Bitterroot Valley. St. Mary's Mission, built at Stevensville in 1841, was the first Roman Catholic mission in the northwest. When the Jesuits left in 1850, the mission was sold to Major John Owen who established a trading post and built an adobe "fort" on the site.



By 1865, the valley had 100 permanent white settlers, although the area had not been officially opened to white settlement. Five years later, more than 300 whites inhabited the valley. Most of the settlers were growing produce to supply regional mining camps.

Settlers demanded more land for agriculture. They felt the remaining Bitterroot Salish should be removed from the valley and placed on the Flathead Jocko Reservation to the north.





## Through The Valley...

### Stevensville to Skalkaho

**A**s the Nez Perce traveled slowly up the valley—12 to 14 miles a day--most settlers believed the Indians had no war-like ambitions.

However, not all businessmen were willing to deal with the Nez Perce. A Corvallis merchant, P. R. Young, angrily ordered the Nez Perce out of his store and barred it shut. Later, Gibbon praised the merchant, while he chastised the Stevensville merchants.

Reports of incidents at the Corvallis and Skalkaho sod forts suggests that the settlers would have been safer in their own homes. One historian reports, "the Nez Perce warriors rode up and examined the forts. Their friendliness and amusement reassured the settlers, some of whom were even said to have visited the Indian camp and sold bullets to the warriors." Several warriors reportedly shot arrows at "Fort Run" (Skalkaho). The arrows fell far short of their mark.



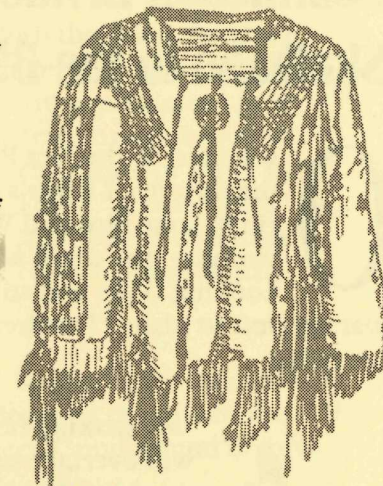
"The fort at Corvallis was built of green sods for a surrounding wall... This section of the valley was peopled largely by 'Missourians' who, during the Civil war, received warnings often to 'get up and go' to a safer place of refuge... hence the newly-coined word "skedaddle" came into vogue and the stockade was thereupon christened 'Fort Skedaddle'." *Henry Buck, settler and relative of Major Catlin, 1877*

Gibbon and his command entered the Bitterroot Valley on August 4. They camped near the present-day Pine Hollow Road, southeast of Stevensville. As Gibbon moved up the valley, volunteer settlers, who were now manning the sod forts, joined Gibbon in pursuit of the Nez Perce. The settlers elected J. L. Humble of Corvallis, and John Catlin

of Skalkaho, company "captains." Both were at first hesitant to join the chase. The Nez Perce had kept their word and traveled through the valley without incident.



*Near Corvallis, a young man named Amos Chaffin admired the beaded jacket worn by a Nez Perce warrior and told his nephew, "If we ever get into a fight with these fellers I'm going to get me that fancy jacket." After the Battle of Big Hole, his nephew asked about the jacket and Amos answered, "By grabs, I had all I could do to keep my own jacket."*



"While he lived, Major Catlin never changed his opinion, always asserting his belief that the (Bitterroot) citizens went into the battle without just cause." *Will Cave, settler and relative of Major Catlin*



"When we got to Sleeping Child Creek, I told Scott Sherrill that I thought we were doing wrong. The Indians had gone through the valley and had done just as they agreed to. I did not think that we had any right to follow them up and pick a fight. (He turned back) *James Chaffin, settler volunteer*




"But what did these same settlers do when General Gibbon came along? They volunteered to go with him after the Indians, who only a few days before had allowed them to pass through their camp to Fort Owen without bloodshed." *Alex Noyes, Big Hole Valley settler*






## Through the Valley and Over the Continental Divide... Skalkaho to the Big Hole

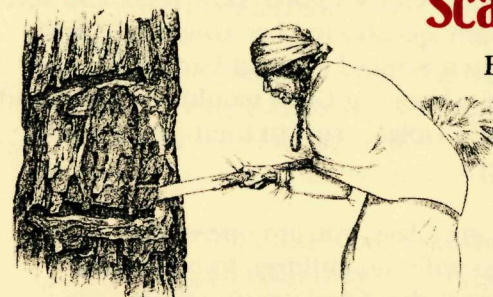
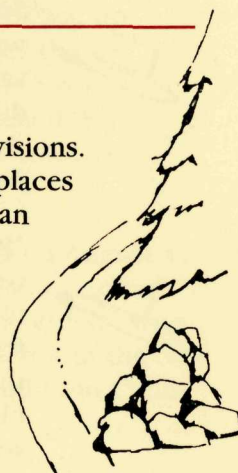
**O**n August 4, the Nez Perce camped near the confluence of the Bitterroot River's east and west forks. Two young warriors, Lone Bird and Wahlitits, told of dreams they had warning that death would follow if they did not hurry. Looking Glass was still convinced they need not hurry. The war was left in Idaho. The dreams were disregarded. Looking Glass prevailed.

 "My shaking heart tells me trouble and death will overtake us if we make no hurry through this land! I can not smother, I can not hide what I see. I must speak what is revealed to me. Let us be gone to the buffalo country."  
*Lone Bird, Nez Perce warrior*

 "My brothers, my sisters, I am telling you! In a dream last night I saw myself killed. I will be killed soon!" *Wahlitits, Nez Perce warrior killed at the Big Hole Battle*

### Personal Guardian Spirits


The Nez Perce had a strong belief in dreams and visions. Young boys and girls often went alone to remote places hoping to receive knowledge of a personal guardian spirit. This personal WYAKIN would warn them of danger and give them special powers. In all phases of daily life, the Nez Perce thought of the spirits of forces and objects around them as supernatural guardians—their WYAKIN.



### Scarred Trees


Both the Salish and Nez Perce stripped the bark from ponderosa pine trees to eat the sweet cambium, or inner bark. These "scarred trees" can still be seen at Indian Trees Campground.

On August 5, the Nez Perce traveled up Spring Gulch, across Low Saddle on the north side of Sula Peak, dropped down into Ross' Hole and camped near present-day Indian Trees Campground before crossing the Continental Divide.

 "We traveled through the Bitter Root Valley slowly. The white people were friendly. We did much buying and trading with them. No more fighting! We had left Howard and his war in Idaho." *Yellow Wolf*

Completely unaware of Gibbon, Looking Glass expressed the same belief by proclaiming, "War is quit!"

The steep trail over the Divide was familiar, but difficult. After the climb, and one night at Trail Creek, the Nez Perce made camp on the banks of a clear, cool stream where the forested mountains meet the green meadows. Horses grazed. Women cut lodge poles and gathered roots. Children played and men hunted game. They had made it to the Big Hole!

 "That night the warriors paraded about camp, singing, all making a good time. It was first since war started. Everybody with a good feeling. Going to the buffalo country!" *Yellow Wolf, Nez Perce warrior*





Most of the Nez Perce believed they could now relax and savor their freedom. Still, a few questioned Looking Glass' optimism. Several young men wanted to scout back along the trail for signs of trouble. Looking Glass would not agree and said that scouting would violate trust in their peace agreement with the Bitterroot settlers.



"All right, Looking Glass, you are one of the chiefs! I have no wife, no children to be placed fronting the danger that I feel coming to us. Whatever the gains, whatever the loss, it is yours." *Five Wounds, Nez Perce warrior who wanted to send scouts back over trail.*

On August 6, Gibbon, commanding the 7th Infantry and the volunteer army, crossed the hills south of Rye Creek. The crude wagon "road" was so steep and difficult that they had to make a "dry camp" before reaching the summit. They crossed into Ross' Hole the next day, making camp just a few miles below the spot where the Nez Perce had camped two nights before. Here, near the confluence of Waugh and Camp Creeks, Captain Humble, and many of the volunteers, returned home having fulfilled their obligation to accompany the soldiers as far as Ross' Hole. Thirty-four settler volunteers, enticed by Gibbon's offer of captured Nez Perce horses, continued the chase.



"Now some have accused us of going out just to steal the horses; that gives the wrong impression, as we did not think of that until the general made us the offer. He told us that we could have all the horses except enough to mount his command, if we could whip the Indians." *Tom Sherrill, Settler.*

Gibbon dispatched Lieutenant Bradley and Captain Catlin, with some of their men and a couple volunteers, to locate the Nez Perce. Early on the 8th, Gibbon and his men started over the Divide. It required many laborious hours, using double teams and men on drag ropes, to get the wagons up the steep slope.



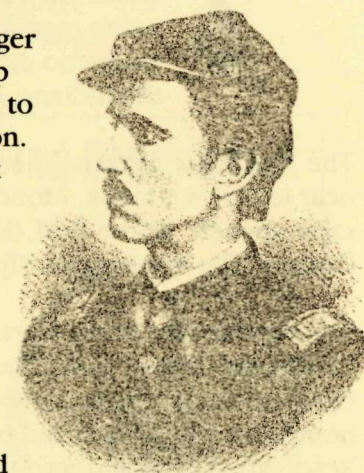
"The road was excellent until we commenced to climb the divide separating us from Ross Hole at the extreme upper end of the Bitter Root Valley. Here the ascent was so steep, rugged and crooked that we were compelled to halt at nightfall and make a dry camp before reaching the summit." *Gibbon.*



"You must remember that it was not the nice auto road they have up the hill now with its seven percent grade. It was an almost impassable mountain trail, and the men were compelled to help the mules by pulling on a good long and stout rope." *Tom Sherrill, settler and citizen volunteer, in describing the crude trail to present day Gibbons Pass.*

Before reaching the top, Bradley's messenger arrived with news that the Nez Perce camp had been located. Leaving the wagon train to follow later, Gibbon and his men pushed on. They reached Bradley and his scouts about sunset.

Meanwhile, Howard was still playing catch-up. He had camped near Lolo Hot Springs before moving up the Bitterroot Valley. On August 9, he camped near the mouth of Rye Creek. When he learned from a relay of military messengers and the settlers that Gibbon was not far behind the Nez Perce, Howard selected twenty of his best cavalry and began a forced march to reach Gibbon.



James Bradley  
1st Lt 7th US Infantry

The same day, the dawn's silence was shattered when Gibbon's 7th Infantry and Catlin's Bitterroot volunteers attacked the unsuspecting, sleeping Nez Perce at their camp beside the Big Hole River at the present Big Hole National Battlefield.





## Epilogue...the struggle continues

**T**hundering gunfire from the willows along the creek ended the tranquil dawn. A cry of "we are attacked" aroused the sleeping Nez Perce warriors to battle. The war was "not quit." The Big Hole Battle had begun.

The presumed understanding made at the Lolo Trail barricade was just one more broken trust that bewildered the Nez Perce.



*Years afterward, an elder Nez Perce woman expressed the heartfelt Nez Perce distress: "...we were fools and the white man's lies made us more foolish."*



*White Bird's sentiments were similar, "A white man must have no respect for himself. It makes no difference how well he is treated by the Indians, he will take the advantage."*

The Nez Perce eventually surrendered in the Bear Paw Mountains, near today's Chinook, Montana, where Chief Joseph made his memorable speech. White Bird, and one-third of the Nez Perce, escaped to Canada. The war was finally "quit", but human suffering was not.

The captive Nez Perce were imprisoned in Indian Territory, now Oklahoma. There, more Nez Perce died than were killed in all the fighting. Some Nez Perce were eventually allowed to return to their homeland, but Joseph and others were forced to settle on the Colville Reservation in Washington state.



## The Beginning of the End . . .

**T**he Nez Perce trip through the area was not the end of Indian strife in the Bitterroot Valley. Just 14 years later, in 1891, Charlo sadly agreed to move the remaining Salish people to the Jocko (Flathead) Indian Reservation.

*Henry Buck, Stevensville settler, merchant and war participant, reflected on the situation,*



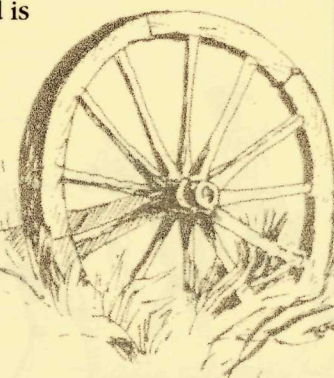
"It was this same high-handed dictatorial policy of our government in Idaho that fired Chief Joseph to wrath in defense of his birthright and forced us, as innocent citizens, to seek our own protection, and which, only a few years later, demand of Charlo and his tribe, our defenders, the surrender of his heritage in exchange for a home not of his choice."

### Hiking and Backcountry Driving Segments

A 3.5 mile National Historic Trail follows part of the original Nez Perce route. The trailhead is east of Highway 93 near the Indian Trees Campground. The trail gives the ambitious hiker an idea of the forbidding terrain.

Scarred trees and traces of wagon ruts are still visible. Clark (Lewis and Clark Expedition) and his party used this trail in 1806 on their return east. By the 1870's, it had been expanded into a rough wagon road.

For the adventurous motorist, there is a rough one-lane forest road (FR 106) that crosses the Continental Divide at Gibbons Pass and follows Trail Creek to the Big Hole Valley.







# The Flight of the Nez Perce

...through the  
Bitterroot Valley – 1877



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