

BIG HOLE

BATTLEFIELD

NATIONAL MONUMENT

Montana





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United States Department of Interior

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Scene of tragic battle of the Indian Wars of the 1870's that were part of the winning of the American West

Big Hole Battlefield National Monument preserves a portion of the major battlefield along the route of the epic retreat, from present-day Idaho toward the Canadian border, of Chief Joseph and his desperately fleeing Nez Perce Indian band during the summer of 1877. Here occurred, on August 9 and 10, 1877, one of the more dramatic and tragic episodes during the long struggle in the United States to confine the Indians to the ever-diminishing reservations and to force them off the land wanted by the whites. The flight of the Nez Perce Indians from Idaho had been marked by their desire to escape peacefully from the pursuing United States Army forces and to reach Canada with as little trouble as possible with the whites en route. While Chief Joseph and his band recovered from the surprise dawn attack upon their village at the Big Hole River by Colonel Gibbon, who commanded the pursuing United States forces, the loss of warriors, lodges, and supplies was a serious handicap to the Nez Perce retreat. Embittered, they pressed forward south and east, passed through a portion of the Yellowstone National Park, then swung northward to Bearpaw Mountain, within a few miles of the Canadian border, where they finally surrendered on October 5, 1877. Thus ended one of the most spectacular "retreats" in American history and one of the more valiant, though futile, attempts of the Indians to escape from an imposed white man's civilization.

Today, in the battlefield area, remains of shallow, grass-grown trenches and many battle-scarred trees are to be found in a natural setting strikingly similar to that of 1877. Through this mute evidence may be recalled one of the fiercer aspects of that chapter of our history represented by nineteenth century Indian warfare. Moreover, the monument area, which was begun primarily as a memorial to the soldiers who risked and gave their lives here, has become also a memorial to the fortitude of the Indians.

Background of the Nez Perce War of 1877

Originally, the Nez Perce Indians were distinguished by their friendship toward the whites. In 1855, they agreed to accept a reservation on their ancestral lands in the Wallowa Valley of the Oregon Territory, and, in 1863, a majority of the tribe acceded to a reduction in the size of the reservation. Some refused to be bound by the latter agreement and became known as the "Non-Treaty" Nez Percés. Young Joseph, whose band claimed the Wallowa Valley, was their best-known leader. Most of the Nez Percés accepted reservation life, but the "Non-Treaty" groups continued their seminomadic habits. Good deportment won them public sympathy and support, but the pressure of the advancing settlements led to friction which

threatened the peace. A Government commission appointed to hear the case of these Indians decided against them.

The Campaign of 1877

The removal of the "Non-Treaty" Nez Perce bands to the Lapwai Reservation in the Idaho Territory was entrusted to Gen. O. O. Howard in May 1877. The Indians were given 30 days to remove to the reservation. Compliance with this ultimatum was progressing when hostilities were precipitated by young warriors who murdered settlers near Mount Idaho, on June 13 and 14. At White Bird Canyon, Idaho Territory, on June 17, the Indians inflicted serious

loss on a military force sent to reestablish order. Successful in other skirmishes, the Indians extricated themselves from a numerically superior force in the Battle of the Clearwater, in the Idaho Territory, on July 11 and 12. Unwilling to capitulate, the warring bands decided to flee to the buffalo country of the Montana Territory by way of Lolo Pass.

The "Non-Treaty" groups on the warpath, which now numbered possibly 700 or more, including women and children, found their entry into the Montana Territory blocked by a small military force. Rather than surrender their arms and horses, they bypassed the fortifications, proceeded leisurely up the Bitterroot Valley, and reached the Big Hole prairie without conflict on August 7.



Gen. O. O. Howard, commanding in the campaign against the "Non-Treaty" Nez Perce Indians (Photo from the National Archives).



Col. John Gibbon, commanding troops and citizens in the Battle of the Big Hole (Photo from the National Archives).

The Battle of the Big Hole, August 9 and 10, 1877

Col. John Gibbon, commanding the United States troops in the Montana Territory, hurried to overtake the fugitives. He was joined by 34 citizen volunteers. On August 8, the Indian camp was located. That evening, after a cold repast, the troops rested until nearly 11 o'clock. Then the command, 182 strong, moved forward. For 5 miles they proceeded in the starlight to a point from which could be seen the flickering campfires of the Indians, almost a mile ahead, near where the Trail and Ruby Creeks unite to form the Big Hole River. The barking of dogs could be heard clearly. Stealthily the force advanced, through the wooded point jutting down into the valley, where the present national monument is situated. Beyond this point the troops passed in among the Indians' ponies grazing on the mountainside. Near the base of the bluff along which the force advanced, a trail is still to be found. About 2 a. m. the command was extended in a line opposite the Indian camp, only a few hundred yards away and separated from it by the river.

This military movement was entirely undetected by the Indians. For more than 2 hours, within earshot of the camp, the troops waited tensely in the crisp August air. When dawn strengthened the outlines of the 90 tepees of the camp, the troops were ordered down into the willow bottom along the river. An Indian seeking the horse herd approached the left of the line, and the rifle shot which killed him was the signal for the attack. Firing rapidly, the shouting attackers plunged across the river and assaulted the sleeping village. Its dazed occupants fled. Those instinctively seeking the protection of the dense brush or the river bank rushed into the path of the advancing troops. Others fled in the opposite direction. In the melee, women and children were not distinguished from warriors. Within 20 minutes, the camp appeared to be in possession of the attackers, and

its destruction was ordered. But the Indians were not beaten. Recovering from their shock, they made the soldiers' position untenable. Shots came from all directions—from "the brush, the creek-bank, the open prairie, and the distant hills."

Colonel Gibbon ordered a retreat to the wooded point near the upper end of the village. Recrossing the stream and charging up the bluff, the troops took shelter behind logs and trees and in rifle pits hastily dug with trowel bayonets. Here they heard wails of grief, rage, and horror from the Indians who found friends and relatives in the carnage. Warriors were exhorted to renew the attack. Some braves distinguished themselves with reckless boldness, attacking the besieged troops, who were also the targets of sharpshooters strategically placed at considerable distances. But no disciplined sorties were made against the besieged. Once the Indians fired the grass, but a shift in the direction of the wind kept this threat from the soldiers' position.

Most of the Indians packed their camp equipment and hurried off the field, leaving a few warriors to continue the siege. Just when the latter departed is not certain. Desultory firing continued into the night. Then couriers successfully left the soldiers' lines; however, it was dusk the next day, August 10, before the supply wagons with bedding and food reached the troops. Losses of the attacking troops consisted of 29 killed and 40 wounded, two of the latter being wounded fatally. Officials reported 89 slain Indians found on the battlefield or nearby. Among them more than 30 were said to have been women and children. Many more must have been wounded.

This battle brought to the "Non-Treaty" Nez Perce Indians the realization that "all hands were against them" and embittered their fleeing bands toward the white man. Nevertheless, they released, unharmed, two women captured with tourist parties in Yellowstone National Park. The relentless chase by United States Army forces and the desperate retreat of Chief Joseph

did not end at the Big Hole. Showing remarkable endurance, the Indians brushed aside and eluded fresh military forces, and the fleeing band pushed on to the south and east before turning north toward Canada. By September 30, at Bearpaw Mountain, in the northern part of the Montana Territory, the Indians were nearing their long-sought refuge across the international boundary line. On that morning they were surprised by the sudden approach of a United States Army force under the command of Col. Nelson A. Miles. The chiefs again rallied their weary followers. Their resistance forced the soldiers to settle down to a siege. In its sixth day, on October 5, Chief Joseph surrendered with this pathetic statement: "From where the sun now stands, I will fight no more, forever." Later he explained: "My people needed rest—we wanted peace."

The Monument

The monument was established by Presidential proclamation in 1910, when 5 acres were set aside for military use. In 1939, the area was enlarged to 200 acres. This acreage does not include the site of the Indian village or camp site where the severest fighting occurred.

In addition to Big Hole Battlefield National Monument, two other areas of the National Park System perpetuate sites made memorable by the Indian wars of the 1870's. These are the Modoc-Indian stronghold of 1873, in the Lava Beds National Monument, Calif., and the Little

Bighorn Battlefield of 1876, in the Custer Battlefield National Monument, Mont.

How To Reach the Monument

Big Hole Battlefield National Monument is located in western Montana, 12 miles west of Wisdom and 21 miles southeast of United States Highway No. 93.

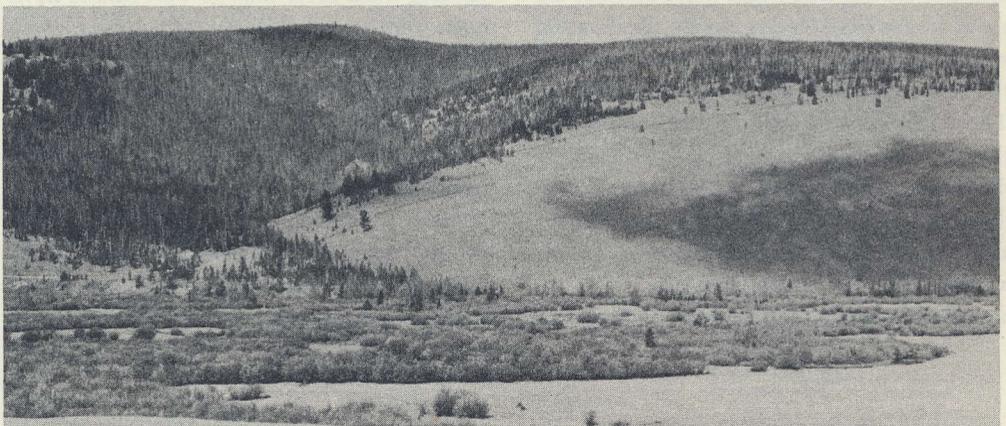
Interpretive Facilities

Firearms and other relics of the frontier period are displayed in the small, log cabin museum at the monument. The howitzer captured by the Indians in the battle of August 9, 1877, is exhibited here. A memorial monument to the soldiers engaged in the battle and a sculptured memorial to Chief Joseph are reached by the foot trail which leads along the soldiers' rifle pits and to other points of interest in the area.

Administration

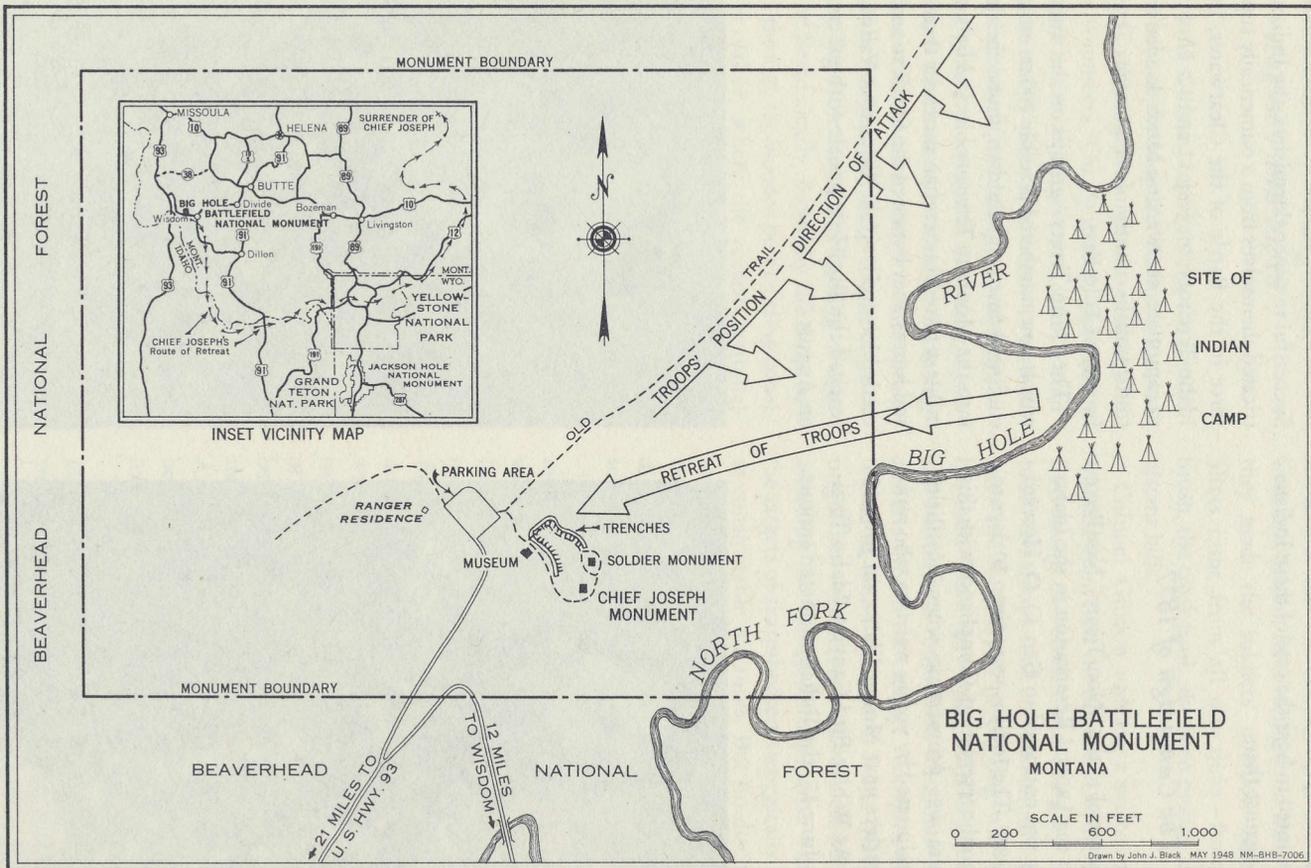
Big Hole Battlefield National Monument is a part of the National Park System owned by the people of the United States and administered for them by the National Park Service of the Department of the Interior. The area is under the immediate supervision of the superintendent of Yellowstone National Park, who stations a ranger at the monument each year from June 15 to September 15. Inquiries regarding the monument should be addressed to the Superintendent, Yellowstone National Park, Yellowstone Park, Wyo.

General view of the Big Hole Battlefield





Cover—Above: Chief Joseph, leader of the "Non-Treaty" Nez Perce Indians (Photo by Haynes, Inc.).
 Below: Sketch of Indian caravan, based on photo of Joseph and his men taken on July 4, 1900, by Thos. Magee and now owned by Charles L. Osborne.



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