

# Big Hole

Official Park Guide



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

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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-pounder 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.

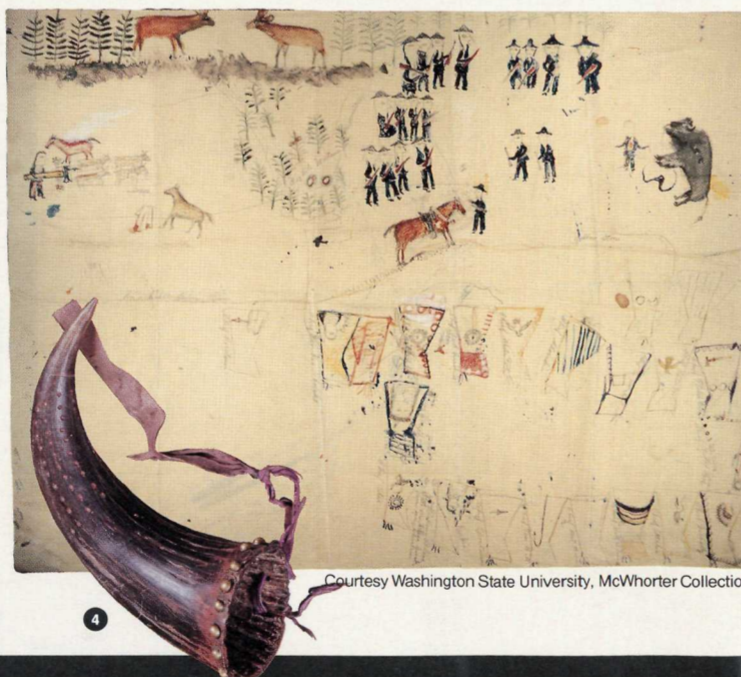
General Howard's troops arrived the next day and found Gibbon wounded and his command out of action. In a military sense, the Nez Perce had won the battle, but the "victory" was a hollow one. Sixty to ninety members of the tribe had been killed, only about thirty of whom were warriors; the rest were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

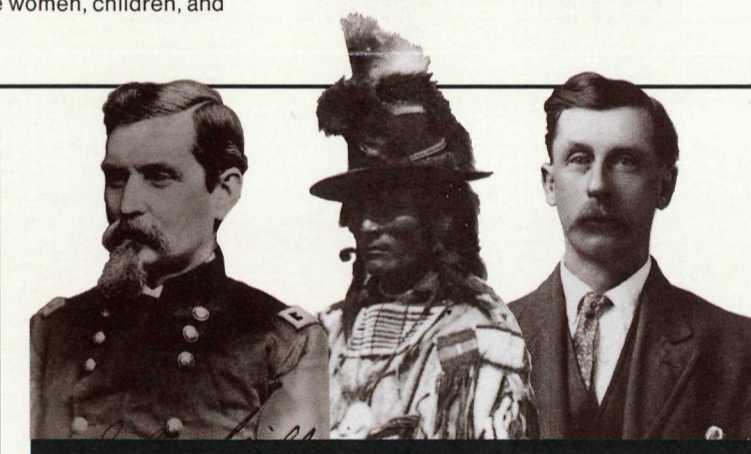
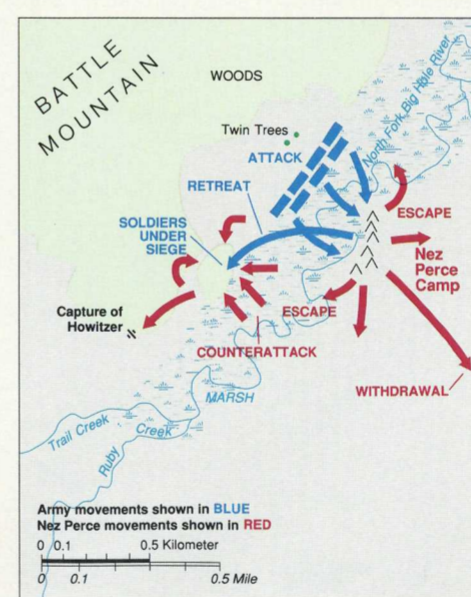
The military's losses were also high, with 29 dead and 40 wounded, but they knew that they had greatly damaged the fighting ability of the Nez Perce. Furthermore, the 7th Infantry had not retreated, as other units of the army that fought the Nez Perce had been forced to do. Subsequently, seven enlisted 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."



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.

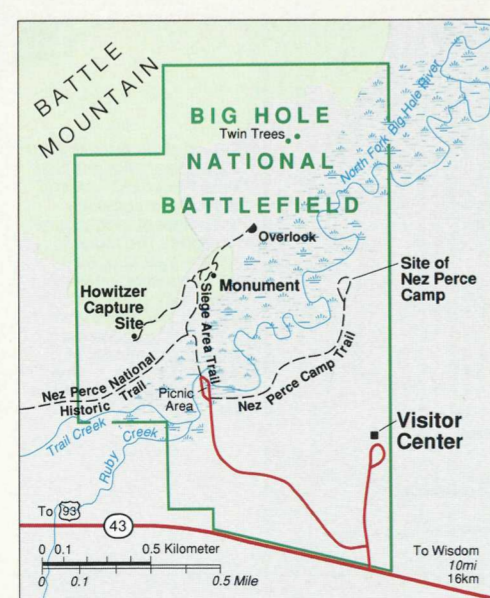
Stop first at the visitor center, which overlooks the battlefield. An 18-minute video program and a museum of photographs, quotations, and personal belongings of some of the battle participants and non-combatants provide orientation to the park and its story. There is also a sales and information desk. 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.

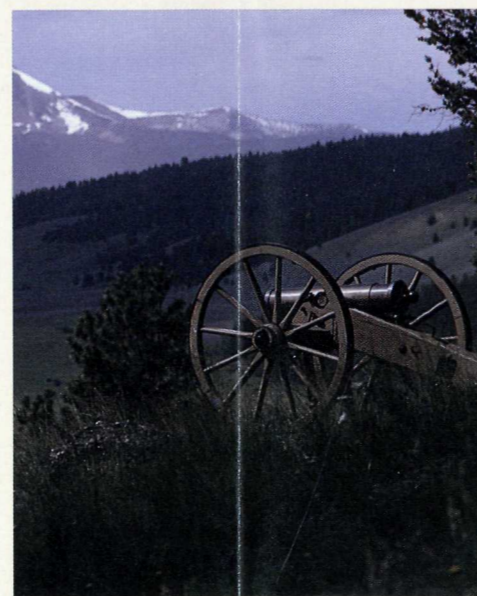
**Siege Area** The soldiers were besieged here for nearly 24 hours. The trenches they dug still remain. They remind us of the desperate struggle the soldiers waged here to survive and of the Nez



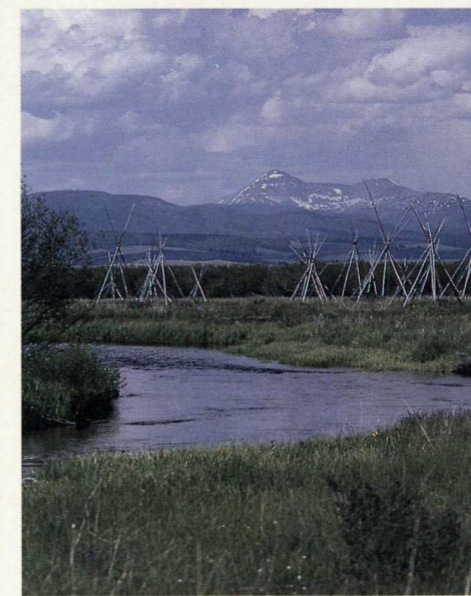
Perce efforts to pin down the soldiers while their families escaped. A guide booklet to the Siege Area is available along the trail.

**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.



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