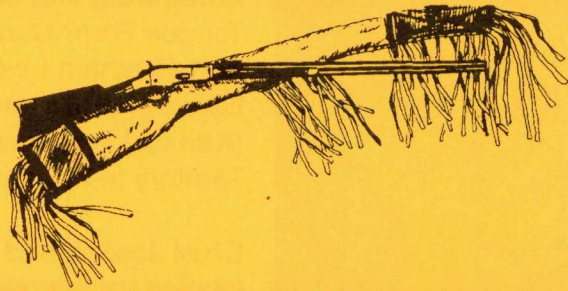


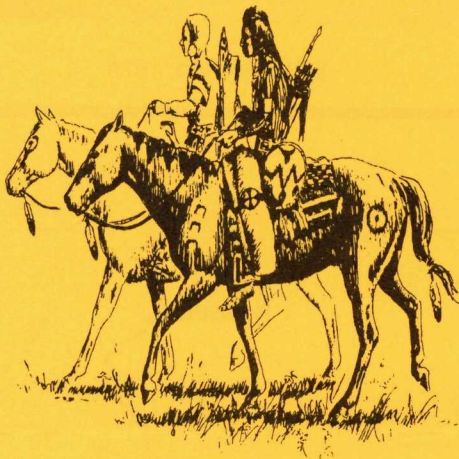
Nez Perce

National Historical Park
MT/ID/OR/WA
National Park Service
U.S. Department of the Interior

Battle of the Bear Paw



A Forced March



In the summer of 1877, five bands of Nez Perce, including some Palouse allies, began a 1,300 mile journey from northeastern Oregon and central Idaho through Montana Territory. In less than four months about 800 people, including 125 warriors, herded more than 2,000 horses and carried whatever possessions they could manage on this long and difficult trek. They pushed forward not because of an eagerness to reach their destination, but because they were being chased by U.S. Army troops under General Oliver O. Howard with orders to place them on a reservation in Idaho. Although they tried to evade the pursuing soldiers, actions were forced at White Bird Canyon (Idaho), Clearwater River (Idaho), Big Hole (Montana), Camas Meadow (Idaho) and Canyon Creek (Montana).

Their journey took them first to the buffalo country of the Yellowstone

River to seek assistance from their Crow allies. When the Crow were unable to assist, they turned north to join Sitting Bull's band who had taken refuge in Canada. Knowing they were several days' march ahead of their pursuers, the Nez Perce stopped to rest on September 29 along Snake Creek, just north of the Bear Paw Mountains and about forty miles short of the Canadian border.

The exhausted Nez Perce were unaware that Colonel Nelson A. Miles had been dispatched from the Tongue River Cantonment in eastern Montana to intercept them. With elements of the 7th Cavalry, 2nd Cavalry, 5th Mounted Infantry, and 30-40 Cheyenne and non-Indian scouts, Miles' command totaled 400. The troops crossed the Missouri River by steamer and approached the Nez Perce camp. Miles ordered camp be made 12 miles southeast of the Nez Perce on the September 29.

The Battle

About 4:00 a.m. on September 30, army scouts brought word of the Nez Perce camp. Miles ordered his troops to march, expecting to surprise and overwhelm the Nez Perce with a sudden attack. The Nez Perce camp awoke on that fateful morning to cold weather, their calm soon shattered as the alarm went out, "Enemies right on us...soon the attack!" The 7th Cavalry's frontal attack resulted in heavy hand-to-hand combat. The 2nd Cavalry made a flanking movement and separated the Nez Perce from their horses. The 5th Infantry secured a high bench to the south, but the Nez Perce held their position and prevented any further advance.

After both sides suffered heavy casualties the first day, the troops besieged the camp for five more days. On October 4, General Howard's troops arrived as reinforcements. During the battle, the army lost 23 men, with 45 wounded. The Nez Perce lost 30 people with 46 wounded. Chief White Bird and about 150 Nez

Perce managed a night escape from camp and fled to Canada.

On October 5, the final day of the battle, at 2:00 p.m., Chief Joseph, representing the remaining Nez Perce, offered his rifle to General Howard. Howard yielded the honor to Colonel Miles, thus ending the Nez Perce campaign.

"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."

--Chief Joseph

Exile



Yellow Bull, 1879

Photographs courtesy of National Anthropological Archives, Smithsonian Institution

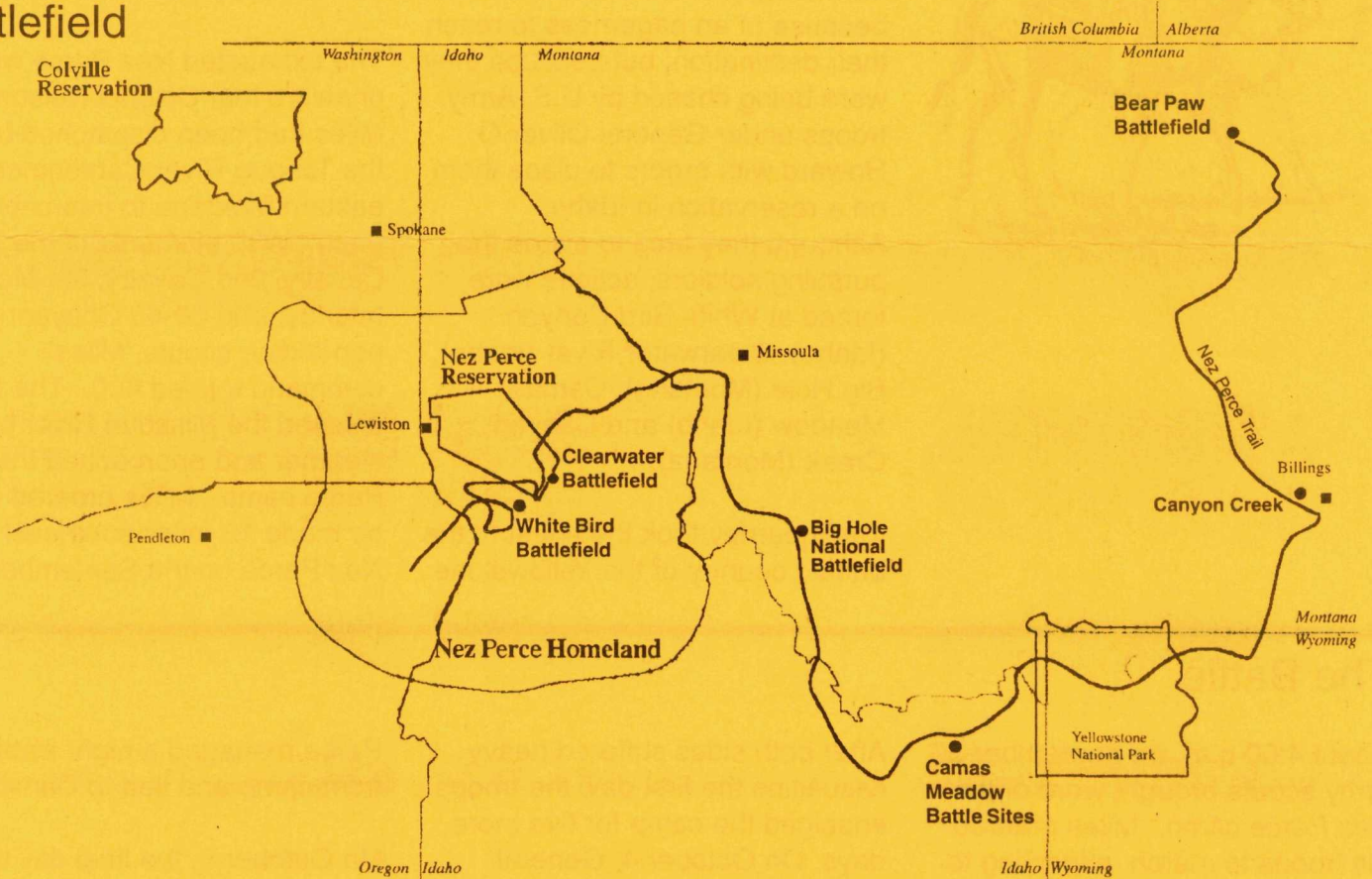
During the surrender negotiations Colonel Miles agreed that the Nez Perce could return to the Idaho reservation, but he was overruled by his superiors. The 431 Nez Perce were first escorted to the Tongue River Cantonment, then Fort Abraham Lincoln (North Dakota), Fort Leavenworth (Kansas) and eventually to Indian Territory in Oklahoma.

Chief Joseph and Yellow Bull lobbied for the return of their people to Idaho for the next eight years. During this period many of the Nez Perce died while living in a place so foreign to them. Finally, in 1885, with the support of Miles and others, 118 Nez Perce were returned to Idaho. The remaining 150, including Joseph, were sent to the Colville Reservation in the State of Washington.



Chief Joseph, 1879

Visiting Bear Paw Battlefield



Bear Paw Battlefield is a unit of Nez Perce National Historical Park, managed by the National Park Service. The site is located 16 miles south of Chinook, Montana, via US Route 2 and County Road 240. A self-guided walk, picnic tables and restrooms are provided. Camping is not available.

For additional information contact:
Bear Paw Battlefield
P.O. Box 26
Chinook, Montana 59523.
(406) 357-3130.

There is no visitor center at the battlefield, however information is available at the Blaine County Museum which is open daily from 1:00 - 5:00 p.m. Hours are extended during the summer.

For more information contact:
Blaine County Museum
501 Indiana
Chinook, Montana 59523
(406) 357-2590

Bear Paw Battlefield is the final stop on the Nez Perce National Historic Trail. This 1,300 mile trail starts in Joseph, Oregon, and follows the path of the non-treaty Nez Perce bands during the 1877 War. The trail passes through various federal, tribal, state, local and private lands.

For additional information contact:
United States Forest Service
Region 1, WRHP
P.O. Box 7669
Missoula, Montana 59807
(406) 329-3511

