

“The Nez Perce Trail”

The trail of the Nez Perce War of 1877 represents the plight of my family’s band to Canada in 1877. In an attempt to escape the United States Army, the Wallowa band traveled 1,170 miles through Oregon, Idaho, Montana, and Wyoming. (Walker) They crossed the Rocky and Bitterroot Mountain ranges facing over seven battles in four months. The map that hangs in the Nez Perce Historical Museum in Spaulding, Idaho is simple and well drawn. This image serves as a representation of the journey that changed the lives of my people. The map shows visitors the path and distance my ancestors embarked on in pursuit of freedom. However, the overall message I interpret touches places of my heart too deep to fully understand. This image stands as a reminder of the suffering and hardships placed on the backs of my people. This image now stands as a reminder of the promise and hope of our future.

Due to the discovery of gold surrounding Pierce, Idaho the Nez Perce Tribe faced many injustices. The Treaty established by Isaac I. Stevens in 1855 was disregarded resulting in additional land loss for the Nez Perce. Although not all tribal leaders had signed the Treaty of 1863; the United States ordered the removal of my people, the Wallowa band, from our original homelands at the mouth of the Lostine and Wallowa Rivers to the Nez Perce Indian Reservation in Fort Lapwai, Idaho. (National)

On June 12th, 1877 Nez Perce warriors staged a war parade through camp at Tolo Lake. With only two days left of liberty, the men of the tribe had recalled all of the previous wrongs and deceit fed to them. The young men felt hurt and humiliated by the generations of persecution and their self-restraint hung by a thread. Hostilities resulted between white settlers and the Nez Perce. Word spread that an Indian war in the West had started. General Howard of the US military pursued the Nez Perce with two companies of Cavalry. As a result the battle of Whitebird had occurred, in which 33 U.S. soldiers were killed. It was proclaimed as “Chief Joseph’s War.” (Josephy 499)

The Nez Perce warriors scouted the back trail and knew Howard’s position. They nicknamed him “Day After Tomorrow” in reference to location. (Johnson) In order to elude the army the Nez Perce were forced to leave behind many possessions. The journey consisted of men, women, children, the elderly, and sick. They traveled with a herd of over 2500 horses. With low supplies and bad conditions the journey would take many lives. (Josephy 520) The Nez Perce War Trail is more than a route taken. There are many burial sites and trauma that occurred on the journey to Canada. This trail serves as a reminder to the Nez Perce of the epic struggle to survive spiritually, culturally, and physically. The Nez Perce chose to take the Nez Perce Buffalo Trail (now known as the Lolo Trail) to escape the war in Idaho. Many feeble elders would stay behind due to the severity of the path chosen. (Walker)

Chief Looking Glass implored the warriors to stop at Big Hole also known as “Icuuncemeexpe” (Place of the Ground Squirrels). The warriors wanted to scout the back trail but Looking Glass felt after trading with local settlers the war was left in Idaho. (Josephy 563) Looking Glass directed the men to make camp and rest the people. A battle broke out at early dawn on August eighth. A nearly blind Nez Perce elder had gone to find his horses and was shot by soldiers. This began the battle of Big Hole. General Gibbon ordered his men to shoot low into the tipis. Soldiers spared no lives and shot babies, mothers and elders unable to defend themselves. At the end of this battle ninety Nez Perce were killed. (Johnson)

The Nez Perce would travel the Lemhi Trail in Idaho and eventually end up seeking refuge among the Crow. However, when denied help, the bands were compelled to continue towards Canada. Looking Glass lost his leadership due to the losses at Big Hole and Lean Elk assumed leadership and led the remaining Nez Perce towards Canada. (Johnson) They headed north to Canada and stopped at the Bearpaw Mountains. Nearly 40 miles from the border of Canada the Nez Perce were starving, cold, and ill. Chief Looking Glass insisted that they stop. With no shelter, and no food many dug into the creek bank for warmth and safety. During the attack from the US Army led by Howard, cannons were fired and leaders of the bands were killed. Ollikot who was the war chief, younger brother to Chief Joseph and my great-great-great-grandfather was killed. The result of this battle was the surrender of Chief Joseph who offered up in rifle in order to save the rest of the bands. The suffering was said to be heard in Joseph's voice as he spoke his historic speech. Written by Major Wood and translated by Ad Chapman Joseph's speech is remembered, studied, and sacred to my people. Chief Joseph's speech would mark the end of the Nez Perce War Trail. (Josephy 609)

This Nez Perce War Trail image is stamped boldly on my heart and implanted in my mind because I am aware of the history behind the Trail. Over 1170 miles represent the endurance and heart my people possess. The trail has taken many lives, history and potential of my people. The history of this trail has made me the person that I am today. This image represents a journey for freedom that my people have always known. My father always says, "Never forget your past, never forget your people, and never forget where you come from."

This image of the Nez Perce Trail however, gives me hope. In today's world and reality, we are in a sense still fighting a war on the Nez Perce Reservation. We in a sense are still traveling on our trail in pursuit of understanding and compassion from others who would take a moment to hear us. This image shows me that no matter the length of the journey my people will survive. The Nez Perce Tribe ended the physical trail over 138 years ago with bowed heads and heavy hearts. However my generation is awakening and learning to stand up and tell a story because others are willing to listen. Despite the hardships we still love fiercely and care for one another. Despite the burial sites spread over 1,170 miles we continue to live. Despite the pain inflicted we help heal one another's wounds and continue on. Despite the lack of understanding, and pain inflicted on the Nez Perce people we are still here. A trail that is never ending; we still survive.

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