

We Have Always Been Here

The prairies and plateaus of north central Idaho, Oregon, and Washington have always been home to the Nimiipuu, as the Nez Perce call themselves. Here they fished the streams, hunted in the woodlands, and gathered the abundant roots and berries of the high plateaus. The Nez Perce traveled widely on the principal rivers of the region—the Snake, Clearwater, and Columbia—to trade with their neighbors. The acquisition of the horse in the 1700s increased mobility, allowing for more frequent travel in company with their Cayuse and Palouse relatives to the Montana bison grounds and Columbia River fishing sites.

During the 1800s the Nez Perce culture underwent profound changes



The Nez Perce moved their camps with the changing of the seasons. One route was east to the plains of Montana to hunt buffalo and

trade. William Henry Jackson photographed the Looking Glass encampment on the Yellowstone River in 1871.



Two Nez Perce men from the 1871 encampment on the Yellowstone River pose for Jackson in front of their animal hide tipi.



Nez Perce women were responsible for setting up and taking care of the family's tipi. In times of crisis and peace, women provided wisdom and fortitude. Here a group of women poses in front of tipi poles in Lapwai, Idaho, in 1930.

as explorers, fur trappers, traders, missionaries, soldiers, settlers, gold miners, and farmers moved into or through the area. With the arrival of the newcomers looking for land, the Nez Perce, anxious to avoid conflict, met with officials of the US government and agreed to hold treaty negotiations. In 1855 the Nez Perce signed a treaty that created a large reservation that included most of their traditional homeland as their exclusive domain. In 1863, however, following the discovery of gold on the reservation, settlers and miners forced a new treaty that reduced the reservation to one-tenth of the land originally set aside. Some tribal leaders accepted the treaty, but those who stood to lose their land

rejected it, giving rise to the "treaty" and "nontreaty" designations of the respective factions.

US government efforts to move nontreaty bands onto the new, smaller reservation led, in part, to the Nez Perce War of 1877. When the war ended, many of the nontreaty survivors were relocated to Indian Territory (in present-day Oklahoma). Eventually some Nez Perce were allowed to return to the reservation at Lapwai, Idaho, but others were exiled to the Colville Reservation. Some Nez Perce also made their homes on the Umatilla Reservation.

The last years of the 19th century and the early years of the 20th were

difficult ones for the Nez Perce as white values and culture were forced upon them. The Dawes Severalty Act of 1887 gave up to 160 acres of land to individual Nez Perce in the belief that ownership of land would more swiftly assimilate them into the mainstream of American life. The unallotted land was sold to the general public. Soon more than 90 percent of reservation lands was in white ownership.

Today there are Nez Perce living on the Nez Perce, Colville, and Umatilla reservations as well as in towns and cities across the United States. Regardless of where they live, it is the shared heritage of the Nez Perce that unites them as a people.

1877

The Nez Perce bands who refused to accept the 1863 treaty remained in their homeland for several years. In May 1877, however, with settlers clamoring for access to nontreaty lands, the US government told the nontreaty Nez Perce that the US Army would forcibly move them onto the new, smaller reservation if they did not move willingly by June 14.

The leaders of the nontreaty Nez Perce, Cayuse, and Palouse bands, including Young Joseph, Looking Glass, and Toohoolhoolzote, not wishing to leave their homes or to go to war, had hoped for a favorable solution, but to no avail. Before the nontreaty bands could com-

ply with the government order, however, a group of young men, angered by the situation and the lack of justice in murders committed against the Nez Perce, attacked and killed several local settlers.

Fearing reprisal, the nontreaty bands and their allies headed south to a more defensible location near Chief White Bird's village. At White Bird Canyon on June 17, 1877, the Nez Perce inflicted heavy casualties on a superior force of pursuing cavalry. Skirmishes at Cottonwood in early July and a battle on the Clearwater River, July 11–12, proved inconclusive. At Weippe Prairie the nontreaties decided to cross Lolo Pass into

Montana. The bands, totaling about 800 men, women, and children, hoped that their friends, the Crow people, would help them out.

More and more soldiers came after them, eventually totaling more than 2,000 infantry and cavalry by the time the war ended. At Big Hole, August 9–10, the Nez Perce lost between 60 and 90 people in a surprise attack under Col. John Gibbon. The relentless pursuit continued. The expected aid from the Crow people did not materialize. In October 1877, after a 1,100-mile chase, the US Army besieged the Nez Perce and their allies at Bear Paw in northern Montana. Many escaped to



In the aftermath of the 1877 war, Chief Joseph argued passionately that he and his people be allowed to return to their homes in the Wallowa Valley in Oregon. Instead they were sent to the Colville Reservation in Washington, where many Nez Perce still live today.

In 1903 (left to right) Andrew Whitman, Ollokot the younger, Chief Joseph, and Peo Peo Tholekt were photographed in Washington, DC, during Joseph's last appeal to the US government.

Canada or found their way back to the Umatilla and Nez Perce reservations. Others, exhausted from the ordeal, were forced to surrender.

The memory of the 1877 war lingered for many generations. The survivors mourned those who were lost and, as one Nez Perce historian puts it, "We mourn those lost, still. As time passes into the future, we slowly accept our great loss, strengthen our hearts, and continue with the living of today. Such is the teachings of our way. But we will never forget what happened here. To forgive . . . that is another matter."

*The Land unites us with
[our ancestors] across
time, keeping our culture
alive . . . We live in the
place our ancestors called
home before the great
pyramids of Egypt were
built.*

Nez Perce Tribal Executive Committee

hmmatō•wyalhtqit (Chief Joseph)

Precious Homeland

You may feel that you know us because you have read our story already in the printed words of historians and other chroniclers of "life." You may see around you where the deep canyons of river and creek carvings created living spaces we no longer occupy. You may even taste and smell the air and feel the sun upon your face much as we had once done, so many years ago. Or perhaps you will enter a hall filled with dancers in their fine regalia and hear a prayer or two. Even so, you still may not truly understand us as a people.

The old people talked of these places. They talked of the beauty of "home" and of the abundance of food. They talked of landmarks and special places. They talked longingly of family and relatives of a misty past with whom they enjoyed living each day. And, finally, they talked of having to leave. They remembered starving and being cold. They remembered losing old ones and young ones all along the way. And they remembered the deeper pain of loss—not simply of a precious homeland but of human beings they once knew and loved: "We left many of our people buried out there. We pray they will never more be disturbed."

Today, you may read and hear different forms of their expressions. In English. And you will miss the nuance

of expression that comes from the heart of our ancient tongue. Our survivors and historians spoke "nimiipu timpli," in the Nez Perce way. It is these stories that were handed down from generation to generation. It is the ancient tongue that truthfully relates our hearts and our truths.

One cannot truly say, in English, what we express in our language. There are many expressions that cannot be directly translated into the language of the "conquering peoples." No, you may not hear our truths as our people had once expressed them. And you may not understand our hearts as a consequence. Today, some are learning to speak that ancient tongue of our heart's expression: our ancestral language. Is it possible that we, too, might convey these histories in the old way, that our past may live in the consciousness of our young people's tomorrow, that they will not forget our origins so easily.

We, the descendants, live far apart from one another in today's world—not only in miles distant, but ideologically and spiritually. We live in a scattered way to day. However, we are still the *walwama* of the Wallowa Valley. We are still the *lamtama* of the Salmon River country. We are still the *kamnaha* of the upper Clear

Nez Perce children (near right) pose for the camera in their traditional finery on the Colville Reservation in Washington about 1900. Today, Nez Perce children and young people are still taught the stories and traditions of the past by their family and elders.

Far right: These Nez Perce are attired in regalia commonly worn at celebrations and special events. Such ceremonial finery helps connect the traditions of the past to the present.



water country. We are still the *palucpu* and *weyiletpu* of the Snake River country. We are still the *ahalhutsut*'s people of the treaty bands. And we are all still the *cupnitpelu*, "the ones who came out of the woods" (*nun wisix ikuyun nimiipu*).

Though you can behold the wonder of this country, you will not fully embrace the great power and strength of a united Nez Perce people before that Treaty of 1855. However that may be, Mother Earth turns upon a new day and time. Perhaps it will be the young ones who will create a healing place for all our people's future. As you travel through this beautiful country with an eye of wonder, remember us as we once were while greeting us as we are today. In some places we are also visitors, as are you. Remember this when you enter the Salmon and Snake River and the Wallowa Valley countries, that this was also our home . . . once.

—Albert Andrews Redstar
Chief Joseph band
Colville Confederated Tribes