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THE LAST STAND OF THE NEZ PERCES*

In the history of the various Indian treaties, perhaps no greater wrong was ever inflicted by the government upon the simple, trusting red men than the one unwittingly planned and carried into effect against the Nez Perces in 1877.

Few of our readers are now familiar with the Nez Perce war of 1877. That war, like many others, is now a forgotten chapter of history. That it originated in greed for gain and ended in injustice and almost in complete annihilation to that unfortunate peace-loving Indian tribe, few will deny and all will condemn. This war, together with its final outcome, is only another instance of the gross severity and hardship too often resulting to the vanquished when a superior race comes into hostile and deadly conflict with an inferior race.

It appears that Lewis and Clark in their expedition across the Continent first met the Nez Perces in 1805 and by them were accorded all the hospitality and good will then possible for this tribe to extend to them. In 1832 we find them sending a delegation to St. Louis asking that Christian missionaries and teachers be sent to them. In response to this appeal, two years later, Whitman and his bride went into the Oregon country to establish a mission. In 1855 the Nez Perces made their first treaty with our government. At this time they claimed a large territory in eastern Oregon, Washington and Central Idaho, bounded on the east by the main divide of the Bitter Root Mountains and including the lower Grande Ronde and Salmon Rivers, with a large part of the Snake and all of the Clearwater districts. By this treaty, however, they ceded to the United States the greater portion of their territory and in return for this cession, they were confirmed in the possession of a reservation including the Wallowa Valley in Oregon.

In the early '70s, gold having been discovered in the mountains, prospectors and stockmen with their herds invaded the entire region and a new treaty was forced upon them by which a majority of the Indian bands agreed to surrender all but a small reservation at Lapwai, Idaho. It seems evident that unfair means were used to secure this treaty and once

secured, the government resorted to no measures to right a great wrong perpetrated upon the Nez Percés.

The band who had long dwelt in the beautiful fertile Wallowa Valley had opposed this false treaty, refused to leave their homes and the effort to remove them brought into historical notice the head of the Nez Perce Nation, Chief Joseph, who as a human being, a warrior, a leader, and the representative of his people, ranks high above King Philip or Pontiac, superior to Osceola, Black Hawk or Sitting Bull and the equal of Tecumseh, and the noblest of them all in times of disaster, peril and misfortune.

Relying upon the terms of the treaty of 1855 and the oft repeated assurances of the Great Father at Washington, they refused to leave their home in the Wallowa Valley.

This refusal led to the Nez Perce war of 1877, in which, under Joseph's brilliant leadership, several severe defeats were inflicted upon successive detachments of the United States regular troops dispatched to intercept these Indians attempting to migrate.

To fight the United States government seems to have been no part of the plan or purpose of Joseph, but when the conflict began between the bad Indians and the lawless white men, Joseph, finding himself unable to control these lawless elements, reluctantly prepared for emergencies.

When Joseph fully realized that the United States troops had been sent to drive him and his band from the Wallowa Valley, he determined to migrate to Canada, declaring that he and his people would have nothing more to do with a government which would ruthlessly rob them of their lands which had been formally guaranteed to them by the treaty of 1855, but that they would seek new homes under the Dominion Government that would keep its promises inviolate and would never break faith with them.

This resolution, once taken by Chief Joseph, was caught up by his people and was their slogan in all their subsequent wanderings. All was now bustle and activity in gathering their moveable property and making other hasty preparations for their departure. With a strong force of United States troops near at hand, the critical situation required skill, leadership and executive ability of high order, all of which qualities Joseph possessed in a wonderful degree.

To the student, this is a faint reminder of the Helvetians' migration from the narrow valleys of Switzerland in Caesar's time, but there is no parallel. The Helvetians deliberately planned conquest. The Nez Percés, driven from their homes, retreated before a superior military power.

The United States troops being alert in pursuit, Joseph soon found that all direct routes to Canada were cut off and, having fought and out-

manouvered the United States soldiers in Idaho under General O. O. Howard, the Nez Perces were forced to go east through Lolo Pass into Montana. However, when Joseph had gained his way by strategy through Lolo Pass, he notified the people of Stevensville and other points in the Bitter Root Valley, that he only wanted a way to peaceably migrate; that he would have a way; that if not attacked, he would not harm any of the residents or molest property and that he would pay a fair price for all supplies necessary to sustain his people on their arduous journey. On the part of the Indians, this pledge was strictly kept.

At Stevensville,* Joseph, learning that Mullan Pass, near Helena, was guarded by a strong force, went south up the Bitter Root Valley and over the continental divide into the Big Hole Basin, always about four days in advance of the pursuing troops under General O. O. Howard, but the following day after the departure of the Indians, a battalion of United States cavalry, under Major Gibbon, came into Stevensville from the north, and was joined by a company of volunteer citizens, who eagerly went in hostile pursuit of their late guests, who had carefully observed their pledges in purchasing and paying in gold for supplies in passing through their country. Although surprised by a fierce cavalry charge on their camp in the Big Hole Basin just before break of day, the Nez Perces rallied and defeated this combined force under Major Gibbons in a desperate battle with frightful losses on both sides. Thirty-three soldiers were killed and sixty wounded.

About one hundred Indians were killed in their camp, many squaws and children. After burying their dead and taking away their wounded, the Indians, ignoring the defeated command of Gibbons, who helpless was camped on a bluff near the scene of the tragedy, pursued their way eastward over the lofty rugged mountains of the Yellowstone National Park, again turning northward, crossed the valleys of the Yellowstone and the Missouri, and late in September the wretched remnant of the former peaceable Nez Perce nation were encamped in a little valley on the northwest slope of the Bear Paw Mountains engaged in drying buffalo meat. Knowing that General Howard's command was about six days behind them, the Indians here, as at Big Hole Basin, did not suspect an enemy near.

As the events of that terrible journey over lofty mountains, plains and rivers have been carefully narrated by historians, it is the purpose of this article to tell briefly the tragic story of the last battle and final surrender as related by surviving participants.

To account for the disastrous attack made on this position by cavalry

*As Joseph had made annual trips east over the mountains to hunt buffalo in central and eastern Montana for twenty-five years, he was familiar with all the mountain passes and was personally known to many citizens of Stevensville, Missoula and Helena.

and infantry, it is necessary to explain that the Nez Perce camp, about six acres in extent, was well chosen for defense.

Intersected by coulees about five feet deep and protected on the south and west by low bluffs and a tortuous stream which at that season is a dry channel—in fact, the south end of the camp bordered a rather steep bank about twenty-five feet high; to the north the ground is broken but the banks are not so high. However, a vigilant foe is near at hand, which the Nez Percés, only eighty miles from the Dominion line, must encounter on the morrow.

During the night of September 29th Col. N. A. Miles, led by a scout, Jack Mail, in command of a detachment of the United States Army, had made his way north along the eastern slope of the Bear Paw Mountains, passed the northern limit of that range, then turned southward in search of the camp of the unsuspecting Nez Perce. About 7:00 a. m., September 30th, the trail of the Nez Perce was discovered by Cheyenne scouts who, eagerly following, soon came upon the camp about six miles from where the trail was first discovered. On reaching a low ridge between Peoples Creek and Snake Creek, Colonel Miles beheld to the southeast, the Indian herds, hundreds of horses, mules and cayuses, scattered over the hills, quietly grazing. Also, the tops of the Indian teepees were just visible, about two thousand yards distant.

The force under Colonel Miles consisted of three companies of the famous Seventh Cavalry, commanded respectively by Captain Hale, Captain Moylan and Captain Godfrey; two companies of the Second Cavalry and three companies of mounted infantry.

With slight reconnoissance, Colonel Miles ordered Captain Hale to form his battalion (three companies of Seventh Cavalry) in battle line advance and charge direct the southern end of the camp. Captain Tyler, with two companies of the Second Cavalry and thirty Cheyenne scouts, was ordered to approach the north part of the camp to prevent escape and to capture the pony herds. Colonel Miles approached the left with three companies of mounted infantry with pack trains. All advanced about 9:00 a. m. The Seventh Cavalry trotted forward in battle line and from Colonel Miles' column could be seen sweeping forward over the undulating prairie. In the depressions of the land they were out of sight; on the ascending slopes of the succeeding ridges, the orderly columns reappear and roll over the crest and disappear. Then at last near the lodges they are lost to the view of their anxious comrades; for a few minutes the dreadful silence is unbroken; then a few scattered shots are heard, followed by the terrible roar and din of musketry. All are in

suspense and press forward to learn the fate of the gallant men of the Seventh.

Some minutes passed in awful uncertainty, when Lieutenant Eckerson, alone, covered with the blood from his wounds, rushed to Colonel Miles with the words, "I am the only d—— man of the Seventh Cavalry who wears shoulder straps, alive." In fact, Lieutenant Eckerson had seen every officer shot down, either killed or wounded. Colonel Miles immediately ordered the infantry to attack and the four pound howitzers to occupy the ridge northwest of the Indian camp. One rider and two of the four mules were killed, the gun left pointing toward the attacking force until night, when it was stationed and defense built, but at daylight it was discovered not to command the Indian camp. Captain Tyler, in command of the Second Cavalry with the Cheyenne scout, during the battle succeeded, however, in capturing the ponies, thereby cutting off all possibility of escape on the part of the Nez Perces.

The Indian story of this attack will more clearly account for this bloody repulse of the Seventh Cavalry. On this fateful September morning, the Indians were unconscious of any danger at hand; about 8:00 a. m. a Nez Perce boy, who had gone out to secure his pony, discovered the Cheyenne scouts and gave the alarm which caused every warrior to seize his rifle and choose a position with the purpose of repelling the attack of the enemy. Within thirty minutes some of the lodges had been struck, loaded on about one hundred ponies and with a large number of the women and children, accompanied by about sixty warriors, were rushed out at first attack. Soon appeared the charging column of the Seventh Cavalry, officers boldly riding in front, not four hundred yards distant. The Indians from concealed positions withheld their fire until the front line of cavalry was within one hundred yards of the steep bank which protected the southwest end of the Indian camp. The momentum of the charge massed the troopers in confusion on the fatal brink of that line defended by the accurate fire, at close range, of the Indians concealed near the top of their natural defense. Within five minutes the charge of the cavalry had been repelled; the brave officers, Captain Hale and Lieutenant Biddle and fourteen troopers were left dead on the field in front of the Indian camp; nearly one-fifth of the attacking force were killed. Several of the wounded officers and troopers were left on the field until nightfall, but they were visited by the Indians, who, after taking their arms and ammunition, supplied them with water and neither harmed the wounded nor in any way mutilated the dead.

But returning to the story of the attacking force: About 1:00 p. m., all previous efforts having failed, Colonel Miles decided to make a concerted attack. Troops A and D, having lost every officer in the first

charge, were now placed under the command of Capt. Henry Romeyn of the Fifth Infantry, and were ordered to attack the Indians on the southwest. At the signal to charge, the infantry, under Capt. Simon Snyder, made every possible effort to reach the Indian lines, but owing to the advantage of the strong defensive position and the deadly fire of the Indians, only one small Campony I, under Lieutenant Mason Carter, with fourteen men, succeeded in crossing the coulee. Of these, five were killed outright; the others concealed themselves in the gullies until nightfall, when they rejoined their comrades. In this attack Captain Henry Romeyn was desperately wounded. All attacks proving futile, by 3:00 p. m. a siege was determined upon. Although Colonel Miles' command outnumbered the Indian warriors, the situation on October 1st was critical, for the reason that the camp of the renegade Sioux, under Sitting Bull, was just over the Canadian boundary, only eighty miles distant. Joseph was, in fact, hourly expecting relief from that source, for on the night of September 30th, he had despatched six of his most trusted warriors to go to the camp of Sitting Bull for aid. The terrible fate of the six Nez Perces sent out that night is a story of treachery: About daylight on the 30th, these six Indians went into a camp of the Assinniboines, who welcomed and flattered them, all unsuspecting danger. The treacherous Assinniboines suddenly fell upon and murdered their guests, solely for the sake of securing their fine rifles and other valuable accountrements, not common in the wretched camp of the degenerate Assinniboines.

The morning of the first of October was very cold, with six inches of snow. There was not an Indian in sight; they had dug rifle pits during the night. Colonel Miles held a conference with Joseph, who offered to return to his old home in Oregon, but positively refused to surrender, and the skirmish was resumed. Later in the day, Colonel Miles wishing to terminate the useless struggle, induced George Cavanaugh (Cayuse George), a squaw man, to bring Chief Joseph out for another conference. Cayuse George approached stealthily and halloed for perhaps a half hour; finally a squaw came out to learn what he wanted. Joseph later informed him through the same messenger that if he wanted to see him to go back to the tent of Colonel Miles and then come down the hill in front of the camp. For this service Lieutenant Jerome offered his famous black horse, which was accepted by "George," who rode into the Indian camp. A few minutes later, the black horse, carrying both Joseph, under assurance of safe conduct, and Cayuse George, galloped up to the tent of Colonel Miles. Terms of capitulation were soon arranged. Then at last, notwithstanding the promise of safe conduct, Joseph was retained in the camp of Colonel Miles.

Lieutenant Jerome, with Cayuse George, was sent to receive the sur-

render of the Indians. Bobby Graham, a camp follower, also stole into the Indian camp. At first the Indians stacked their guns, under the direction of Lieutenant Jerome; then Chief White Bird took up his gun, saying that if he gave up his gun, he gave up his life, as he had killed some settlers on the way. Other Indians asked for Joseph, then took back their guns. Cayuse George rode the black horse back to the camp of Colonel Miles. In the meanwhile, the Indians threw Bobby Graham ingloriously out of camp. Lieutenant Jerome was held by the Indians. It was afterward learned that the squaws put him into a rifle pit and carefully provided that he would receive no injury during the night.

The skirmish was actively renewed. It is reported that Looking Glass, a noble, humane young chief, was killed that night. However, at this time many of the young warriors, under the treacherous White Bird, had left camp and made their escape into Canada. In the early morning of October 2nd, an Indian came boldly up the hill into camp and inquired for Colonel Miles in excellent English, declined coffee, which was offered, and stated that he had come to see Joseph. When he had been conducted to Joseph and learned that his chief was safe, he stated that they held Lieutenant Jerome, but were ready to exchange. The exchange was effected between the lines and hostilities were renewed.

However, on October 1st, the wagon train, with a twelve pound brass cannon, arrived under the command of Captain Brotherton of the Fifth Infantry. During the day of October 2nd, the fire of the gun produced no effect and that evening Colonel Miles took the twelve pounder across Snake Creek and planted it west of the Indian camp, out of range of the Indian guns, and a strong force of both cavalry and infantry guarded it during the night. General Howard, whose army was distant about fifty miles south, arrived in Colonel Miles' camp on the evening of October 2nd with an escort of thirty men.

On the morning of October 3rd, the twelve pounder opened fire. The first shell exploded on the ridge and inflicted no damage. Colonel Miles observed the effect and said to the gunner, "Cut her a little shorter." The second shell exploded right in the center of the camp. Lodge poles, Indians and dogs all seemed to be in the air. The Indians showed willingness to surrender. After much delay, the surrender was made that evening. Having determined to surrender, Joseph, surrounded by his people, started on foot, but on leaving camp, he mounted his pony and rode direct to the headquarters. Handing his carbine to Colonel Miles, he stated that he surrendered and would never again resist the authority of the United States.

To account for the number of Indians, it is necessary to mention that on the first day of the battle, Lieutenant McClearnand, with G troop of

the Second Cavalry, pursued for five miles and attacked the party which had left camp at first outbreak, but he was repulsed and driven back by the Indians, who rejoined Joseph that night. White Bird and his band, who had committed depredations on the way, escaped during the night of October 2nd and went over into the Canadian territory. Joseph remained for the protection of his helpless followers. In this connection, the following statement of the numbers engaged, casualties and the Indians surrendered is given by Major Henry Romeyn, who in 1905 was living at Fort Meyer, Virginia. Colonel Miles' entire command, including thirty Cheyenne scouts, was about 350; losses, killed, 2 officers and 22 enlisted men and 2 Cheyenne scouts; wounded, 5 officers, 38 enlisted men. Nez Perces: 17 killed; 40 wounded; surrendered, 87 men, 184 women and 147 children. The latter were detained some months at Fort Keogh and were then conveyed to Indian Territory, where by death their number was reduced to 280 within seven years, when through the intercession of General Miles, they were removed to Colville Agency, Washington, in 1884.

The humanity and noble generosity of the Nez Perces in caring for the wounded soldiers on the battle field furnish the brightest page in Indian history. In fact, the Nez Perces had never scalped or mutilated the bodies of their dead foes or tortured a prisoner.

Chief Joseph, who died September 18, 1904, was universally honored by his people and held in high esteem by the United States Government as a man of lofty character. He was the last as well as the greatest of the famous Indian leaders of the nineteenth century. He was, without doubt, the ablest of his race since the days of Joseph Brant, Theyendenege, the famous Mohawk chieftain.

An incident of the removal of the Nez Perces from Fort Keogh illustrates the fine sentiment, character and the ready sacrifice of life itself for their offspring. The steamer which carried them down the Missouri River was so heavily loaded that the lower deck was near the water line; a young squaw, carrying her "papoose" in the usual way on her back, stooped to dip drinking water; the papoose fell out of its holding over her head into the river; without an instant's hesitation the young mother sprang into the water and disappeared in that swift current, and although neither rose to the surface, the steamer was not even checked to learn their fate.

As the water of the Missouri rolled over the bodies of mother and child, so has the white race remorselessly oppressed and almost exterminated the best distinctive character of the North American Indians.

The crystal lakes, the forest canons of the Powder River Mountains and the rich meadows of the Wallowa Valley no longer know the dusky

faces of the red man. The prosperous villages* and farms of the relentless invader have supplanted them.

Their names only remain to remind us of the Nez Perce, who for nearly a century, had been the friend of the white man.

NELSON C. TITUS.

*Joseph, Enterprise, Wallowa.