

## Idaho's Indian Wars

### Number 23

Prior to the coming of white settlers, there were few major conflicts between Indians and whites. The Idaho gold rush made for trouble, though, and the resulting Snake War of 1866-1868 involved Indians from southwestern Idaho. Years of friction and minor incidents finally precipitated two major outbreaks in 1877 and 1878.

Stock raisers had tried for years to drive Joseph's Nez Perce band from Wallowa into North Idaho. Joseph, White Bird, and several other Nez Perce leaders did not accept an 1863 proposal to reduce the size of their reservation after the illegal influx of gold-seekers. Although the Indians were reluctant to give up their homelands, General Oliver Otis Howard forced Joseph to move to North Idaho in 1877. White Bird's band was also under military pressure to move from Salmon River to the new reservation, and became involved in fighting that spread to Joseph's people as well: on June 14, 1877, three Indians avenged old outrages, and the army decided to retaliate.

An army campaign on White Bird Creek was abruptly halted when the Indians routed a numerically superior white force, but nearly four weeks later, in the battle of the Clearwater, the Nez Perce (now grown in numbers to 325, but still outnumbered) were dislodged. Their only recourse was a long, hard trip over the Lolo Trail to Montana, where they hoped to join their old friends, the Crows, and to be rid of the war with General Howard.

A small military force from Missoula failed to hold them, but troops under Colonel John Gibbon overtook them August 9 at Big Hole. Recovering from their surprise, the Indians besieged Gibbon, but moved on at the approach of General Howard. Their route then took them back across the Continental Divide into Idaho and then through the Yellowstone country. Finding that the army would not let them live quietly with the Crows, the Nez Perce turned towards Canada. But they were surprised again near the border by a force under Colonel Nelson A. Miles. After several days of indecisive fighting, Joseph came to an agreement with the army by which he would settle on the reservation in Idaho; White Bird and many of the warriors feared to return and went on to Canada. The agreement with Joseph, through no fault of those who made it, was not kept, and Joseph's group, more women and children than men, were sent to Kansas and Oklahoma, where those who survived spent several years before they were returned to the Pacific Northwest.

Idaho's other major uprising occurred in the summer of 1878. Trouble had long been brewing among the Bannocks at Fort Hall, and friction with the Shoshoni added to the difficulty. Buffalo Horn, a Bannock leader, had gained considerable military experience, and his men were ready to fight. Following an incident on the Camas Prairie on May 30, the Bannocks left to join Egan's Northern Paiutes in Oregon, sinking Glenn's ferry on the way, and fighting a battle at South Mountain in which Buffalo Horn survived by only four days. After further hostilities in Oregon, the scattered Bannock warriors eventually made their way back; most of them returning to Fort Hall.

Finally, the Sheepeater campaign of 1879 grew out of the Bannock War, and after a summer-long search for a Shoshoni band that inhabited the Salmon River mountain wilderness, a Sheepeater group at last was found and moved to Fort Hall.

Considering the fact that the Indian people of Idaho were forced to give up their lands and were crowded onto reservations on which many of them found it impossible to work out a satisfactory way of life, a resort to force was not surprising. These campaigns terrorized the whites and ruined the Indian peoples who were involved, but "solved" the Indian problem for most whites. For the Indians, the wars meant simply that they had no alternative but to exist on reservations permitted them by the white intruders.

Repeated demands for a brief statement concerning the Indian Wars of Idaho have led to this short account, which has been condensed from No. 5 in the Idaho Historical Series: "Idaho's Indian Wars," 4 pages, illustrated.

A great deal of information is available on these wars, and for anyone who wishes to look into the subject further, the following are suggested: Francis Haines, The Nez Perces: Tribesmen of the Columbia Plateau (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1955), 329 pages; L. V. McWhorter, Yellow Wolf: His Own Story (Caldwell: Caxton, 1940), 324 pages, and Hear Me, My Chiefs! (Caldwell: Caxton, 1952), 640 pages; Helen Addison Howard, War Chief Joseph (Caldwell: Caxton, 1941), 362 pages; Alvin M. Josephy, The Patriot Chiefs: A Chronicle of American Indian Leadership (New York: Viking, 1961), pp. 312-340; George F. Brimlow, The Bannock Indian War of 1878 (Caldwell: Caxton, 1958), 382 pages; W. C. Brown, "The Sheepeater Campaign" in the Tenth Biennial Report of the . . . State Historical Society of Idaho (Boise, 1926), pp. 25-51; M. D. Beal, "I Will Fight No More Forever": Chief Joseph and the Nez Perce War (Seattle: University of

Washington Press, 1963. Reissued, New York: Ballantine Books, 1971), 398 pages.

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