

# IDAHO STATE HISTORICAL SOCIETY

## REFERENCE SERIES

### THE NEZ PERCE WAR FROM CAMAS MEADOWS THROUGH TARGHEE PASS

Number 450

Revised 1987

After the battle of Big Hole, General O. O. Howard's forces pursued the Nez Perce bands on their way to the Yellowstone country, beyond which they hoped to join their old friends, the Crows. Howard had been a comfortable distance behind the Indians until he reached a camp, August 19, 1877, at Camas Meadows. At that point, he was less than a day away from the Indians, who decided to slow down his march and regain more of a lead over Howard's army. Before daylight the next morning, a number of Indians raided Howard's Camas Meadows camp, making off with 200 pack mules and some horses belonging to the Virginia City Volunteers. General Howard ordered three companies to pursue the escaping Indians in an effort to recapture the stolen stock. The pursuing companies rode in a parallel maneuver, but Captain Norwood and his fifty men of the middle column soon outdistanced the companies on the flanks. About five miles from the main camp, Norwood spotted the Indians waiting for him on a ridge. He ordered his men to dismount and exchanged some long-range rifle shots with the Nez Perce. Meanwhile, the other two companies came into contact with the flanks of the Indians. The troops, thinking that they had ridden into an ambush, both immediately dispersed and retreated back toward the main camp. The Indians took note of the retreat and began an offensive movement on Norwood and his men. Norwood realized his position was tenuous at best and led his men to a better defensive location where they hastily erected lava rock rifle pits. General Howard at this time was advancing toward the Indian camps when he came across the two retreating companies. He immediately turned them around and made due haste in an attempt to reach the besieged Norwood. The Indians, however, observed the advancing reinforcements and broke off the battle. Norwood was fortunate that help was near as he and his men could not have held their position much longer. The Nez Perce suffered no casualties during the four-hour battle, but Howard incurred one fatality, bugler Bernard Brooks, and had eight men wounded during the confrontation.

Although the Indians did not realize their plan to dismount Howard's cavalry, they succeeded in halting the army until new transportation was obtained for supplies. Howard was forced to make a hard, fast trip north to Virginia City to obtain new horses and mules, along with whatever other supplies he could procure there. His army rested for four days at Henry's Lake. There they improved their diet with fish from the lake and antelope, deer, geese, and ducks from Gilman Sawtell's resort ranch.

Howard hoped that while his men were waiting for supplies and transportation, the Indians would not get too far. Before following the Indians to Camas Meadows, he sent Lt.

George R.

Bacon with a force of forty men to intercept the Indians at Targhee Pass. Some Bannock scouts accompanied two of the most competent and energetic white scouts, Orlando "Rube" Robbins and Frank Parker, who joined in watching Targhee Pass. Arriving at Targhee Pass on August 20--the day the Indians and Howard were fighting at Camas Meadows--Bacon concluded that the Nez Perce had decided upon a route through Teton Pass, far to the south. Bacon therefore left Targhee Pass, which Howard thought he was watching, and set out to rejoin Howard whom he could not find for some time. Thus the Indians moved through Targhee Pass August 22, without any interference from Bacon. Whether Bacon's small force could have done much to hold the Indians on the Idaho side of the Continental Divide certainly is dubious. The Indian delay to fight at Camas Meadows, however, saved them from having to elude Bacon (since the absence of the Nez Perce from the Henry's Lake and Targhee Pass country misled Bacon into supposing the Indians had chosen the route farther south) and held back Howard as well. After his trouble and the loss of his mules at Camas Meadows, Howard concluded that he ought to take his exhausted army back to Fort Boise and to let other military units in Montana try to catch the Indians. His plan to retire from the chase did not get approved. General Sherman feared that no other force could get into position to head off the Indians, and instructed Howard to have his army continue on the trail of the Nez Perce to the bitter end. A four-day rest at Henry's Lake refreshed Howard's men enough that they could resume their march, August 27, when they crossed Targhee Pass and followed the Indians into Yellowstone Park. More than another month's campaign through Montana faced Howard's army. With the lead they gained at Henry's Lake and Targhee Pass, the Indians got through the park: Howard's forces never caught up with them again until the final battle of the war was already underway in northern Montana early in October.

*Publications--450 N. 4th Street, Boise, ID 83702--208-334-3428*