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NEZ PERCE WAR SITES (HISTORIC CONTEXT)

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In United States history, practically no military campaigns against Indians compare with General Oliver Otis Howard's 1877 attempt to capture a group of nontreaty Nez Perce bands. General William T. Sherman, who almost encountered that operation while a tourist in Yellowstone Park, reported to United States Senate investigators that he had been dealing with

one of the most extraordinary Indian wars of which there is any record. The Indians throughout displayed a courage and skill that elicited universal praise. They abstained from scalping; let captive women go free; did not commit indiscriminate murder of peaceful families, which is usual, and fought with almost scientific skill, using advance and rear guards, skirmish lines, and field fortifications. [M. D. Beal, "I Will Fight No More Forever": Chief Joseph and the Nez Perce War (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 1963), 243.]

Howard concurred with Sherman's evaluation. With exceptional skill, they had eluded him for almost four months, packing their possessions and families through difficult terrain that Howard's armies had a great deal of trouble trying to traverse. In search of a refuge safe from army pursuit, they had traveled 1,700 miles through Idaho, Wyoming, and Montana before some of them made a deal with Colonel Nelson A. Miles to return to Idaho's Nez Perce Reservation. Miles, later commander of all United States Army forces, concluded that "The whole Nez Perce movement is unequalled in the history of Indian warfare." [Alvin M. Josephy, The Nez Perce Indians and the Opening of the Northwest (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1965), 632.]

Joseph's band from northeastern Oregon had experienced an even longer ordeal. They had left their Wallowa Valley home May 15, 1877, a month before they became embroiled in an Idaho conflict between White Bird's band and some troublesome lower Salmon ranchers. Joseph's exceptional ability to preserve and interpret his Nez Perce heritage regardless of overwhelming adversity enabled him to emerge as a statesman with a well-deserved national reputation for protecting his people and extricating them from exile in Oklahoma. (When a National Portrait Gallery postage stamp appeared to mark its opening, October 5, 1968, Joseph was the national statesman pictured on that commemorative issue.) His trail from Wallowa Lake in Oregon to Bear Paw's battleground in northern Montana represents a nationally significant episode of Nez Perce tradition that has gained National Park Service recognition for many of its more important features. In such an extended episode, a number of potential National Historic Landmarks can be identified, including at least three that have not been designated or otherwise incorporated into National Park Service sites.

Out of an inventory of more than 42 historic sites in Oregon, Idaho, Montana, and Washington related to General Oliver Otis Howard's 1877 Nez Perce campaign, one (Lolo Trail) already is a

registered National Historic Landmark; one (Big Hole) is a National Monument; two more are Nez Perce National

Historical Park components (White Bird and Clearwater battlegrounds--as well as Lolo Trail); and three more ought to be identified as National Historic Landmarks. These are a traditional cultural and camp site at Wallowa Lake in Oregon, a marvelously preserved battle site near Camas Meadows in Idaho, and a concluding siege site near Bear Paws in Montana where Howard's more-than-1,000 mile campaign was concluded.

Commencing in response to an ultimatum he had issued in 1876 to Joseph's Wallowa band, Howard's campaign turned out to be far more arduous than he had anticipated. For several months, national attention was focused upon his numerous misadventures in attempting to move Joseph's people to a northern Idaho Nez Perce reservation. Resistance of Oregon ranchers to allowing any Nez Perce Indians to remain in their traditional Wallowa homeland, and reluctance of Joseph's band to resettle with other Nez Perce Indians in another territory, got Howard into an awkward predicament in which Joseph emerged from an eight-year controversy with a national reputation as a superlative Indian leader. Unable to attain either of his primary objectives--preferably to remain in his Oregon homeland, or, if Howard's ultimatum could not be rejected, to settle in Idaho--Joseph wound up in exile in Washington. Some of his people fled to Canada; others were accepted in Idaho; some had to accompany Joseph to a non-Nez Perce reservation in Washington; and a substantial group of campaign survivors perished in Oklahoma and Kansas before Joseph's segment was allowed to return to Idaho or Washington. This entire episode attained national significance in Indian and military history. Pacific Northwest and northern plains sites gained congressional recognition as part of a Nez Perce trail designation in 1986, with Indian reaction to Howard's campaign as a central core in identifying an appropriate trail route.

A site of exceptional Nez Perce cultural significance--a small camping and ceremonial area overlooking Wallowa Lake--survives to identify Joseph's homeland. Forced to depart from this traditional area of summer activity, Joseph and his band set out on a long, four-month journey that took them to Bear Paws Battleground in north-central Montana. Although they intended only to cross Snake River into Idaho, they encountered hostilities on Salmon River that involved White Bird's band--another Nez Perce group under similar ranching pressure to move to Camas Prairie, where reservation lands of other bands were thought appropriate for them. White Bird did not want a war either, but neither he nor Joseph (as band leaders) could avoid further hostilities when forces from Howard's army surprised their camp in White Bird canyon. That site of an initial Nez Perce victory is National Park Service property.

Eluding Howard's army--aside from some skirmishes--on their circuitous trip to a Clearwater camp near Stites, White Bird's and Joseph's bands were joined by Looking Glass and other Nez Perce nontreaty elements forced into battle. When Howard's army finally located and attacked them at Clearwater battleground (another Nez Perce National Historical Park site of landmark significance), about two dozen Nez Perce warriors held Howard off until all nontreaty groups there could go up to Weippe Prairie (another existing National Historic Landmark) and determine an appropriate course of action.

Aware that they could anticipate further trouble from Howard's army if they attempted to remain in Idaho, which Joseph preferred in spite of all their current difficulties, all Nez Perce groups involved in White Bird's military operations set out on their traditional Lolo Trail (National Historic Landmark) to Montana's buffalo plains. Some preferred to seek refuge in Canada, but as a group they continued on to join their traditional Crow buffalo hunting associates. While camped at Big Hole, they had to repulse an attack by John Gibbon's army force at a National Battlefield site.

Aware of their new Montana problems, they returned to Idaho, where Howard continued to pursue them. They managed to stall Howard's approach, though, by capturing most of his pack mules at Camas Meadows. When Howard's detachment attempted to recover their mules, they were able to consolidate their success by a siege on a site that retains its rock pits and 1877 integrity to a remarkable degree. Significant because it prevented Howard from stopping their progress back into Wyoming and

Montana, their engagement concluded their Idaho dealings with Howard's military forces.

Finding their Crow associates unwilling to become involved in hostilities with Howard, and unable to go on a peaceful buffalo hunt, Joseph and his nontreaty Nez Perce associates had to head for Canada after all. Adroit in avoiding more than a few skirmishes between Yellowstone Park and northern Montana, they finally were besieged at another site of landmark significance. White Bird and a majority of Nez Perce warriors decided to seek safety in Canada, but Joseph negotiated a deal with Miles and Howard that he could return to Idaho (where he had consistently tried to stay), along with a group of warriors who were in no shape to travel further. A majority of Nez Perce women and children (but not his own family) remained with Joseph to return to Idaho. (That took eight years of further negotiation, after which some of them were sent to Washington instead.) Bear Paws battleground, where neither side could win a victory, leading to a compromise, also is clearly of landmark significance and retains its 1877 integrity as a Montana state monument.

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