

IDAHO STATE HISTORICAL SOCIETY

REFERENCE SERIES

TOLO LAKE

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A natural attraction and an important Nez Perce Indian center particularly during camas season, Tolo Lake lies on the southern edge of Camas Prairie in north central Idaho.

In early 1877, the United States Army attempted to force Nez Perce bands based along the Salmon River and in the Wallowa Valley (directly west in Oregon) to leave their ancestral homes and relocate on a relatively small reservation carved out ten years earlier from a larger reservation established in 1859. En route to their intended new home, the bands led by White Bird and Joseph held a council near Tolo Lake. While they were there, on June 13, hostilities broke out on some ranches along the Salmon River to the south. Both groups retired to the southern slope of the prairie, where the opening battle of the Nez Perce War was fought on June 17.

After a long campaign, several nontreaty Nez Perce bands were exiled to Canada and Oklahoma and the Tolo Lake area was opened to settlement. One result of that change was that carp were planted in Tolo Lake in 1882--to be replaced by bass sixty years later. In 1890 Tolo Lake became state property, and it continues to be a natural as well as historic attraction. It has regained its appearance prior to establishment of a small community near the lake in the early twentieth century. The rural farm town has vanished entirely. Located only six miles west of Grangeville, it had no long-term future after automobiles made larger communities more accessible.

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