

IDAHO STATE HISTORICAL SOCIETY

REFERENCE SERIES

CHIEF JOSEPH - 1840-1904

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Chief Joseph is remembered for his leadership during, and after, the 1877 hostilities between the United States Army and the Nez Perce Indian tribe. It was especially after the Nez Perce Indian War that Chief Joseph rose in prominence and greatness as he fought to win fair and just treatment for the Nez Perce Indian tribe. His legacy is one of leadership and courage.

For many generations the Nez Perce Indians had inhabited a large territory in the Washington, Oregon, and Idaho border area called the Wallowa Valley. The Stevens Treaty of 1855 asked the Nez Perce to cede much of their land to the government in return for a large reservation in Oregon and Idaho; they agreed. However, gold was discovered in 1863, and the government demanded that these reservation lands be turned back. Chief Joseph originally resisted, but later agreed to move peacefully with his people to the Lapwai Reservation in northern Idaho.

Fighting broke out in 1877 when Nez Perce warriors retaliated for what they considered outrageous acts by the white settlers, and the Nez Perce Indian War followed. During the war Chief Joseph demonstrated remarkable military tactics and defeated United States forces in several battles. Finally, he led his people over 1,000 miles of mountainous terrain, hoping to reach Canada. However, Federal troops overtook the Nez Perce on September 30, 1877, just thirty miles from the Canadian border.

The Nez Perce were forced to move and on November 1, 1877 the 431 person tribe was moved to Fort Leavenworth, Kansas. Due to miserable living conditions the Nez Perce were again moved to the Ponca Indian Reservation near present day Tonkawa, Oklahoma.

The Nez Perce, used to the cool mountain conditions of the Northwest, did not fare well in either location. Many Nez Perce Indians sickened and died due to bad sanitation and no medicine.

Chief Joseph waged a tireless campaign with government officials to allow the tribe to return to Idaho, or at the very least, be given the right to select land in Indian Territory. These requests were denied. After seven years, the Nez Perce tribe (now numbering 268) were finally allowed to return to the Pacific Northwest in 1884.

Chief Joseph and the Nez Perce were not allowed to return to their original home in the Wallowa Valley. However, they were finally allowed back in the Northwest, and made their home on the Colville Indian Reservation in Washington state, where Chief Joseph died in exile on September 21, 1904 while sitting in front

of his tipi fire. The physician for the Colville agency simply reported that he had died of a broken heart. In 1968 Chief Joseph was honored on the U.S. Post Office's six-cent stamp in memory of his courageous and outstanding life in tribute to the Nez Perce chief and his people. Chief Joseph is best remembered for his speech at the end of the 1877 hostilities.

I am tired of fighting. . . . It is cold and we have no blankets. . . . Hear me, my chiefs. I am tired; my heart is sick and sad. From where the sun now stands, I will fight no more forever.

By Guila Ford and Elizabeth Jacox

(This information has not been edited.)