



**IDAHO STATE HISTORICAL SOCIETY
REFERENCE SERIES**

INDIANS AND WHITES IN THE NEZ PERCE COUNTRY

Number 89

1964

Archaeological excavation of a Nez Perce site on Camas Prairie has documented human occupation of the region for 8,000 years or more. But of the hundreds of centuries that people have lived in the Nez Perce country, historical information covers little more than the time in which Indians and whites came into direct contact in 1805. Already equipped with horses of eventual Spanish origin before Lewis and Clark brought in a substantial complex of white culture, the Nez Perce Indians showed an unusual interest in the white man's gadgets and medical practices right from the beginning. Friendly Indian-white relations established by Lewis and Clark continued through the decades of the fur trade, during which a Nez Perce delegation made the long journey to St. Louis to ask their old friend, William Clark, to arrange to send some out to show them more of the white man's ways.

Missionary organizations took great interest in the Nez Perce request, and in 1836, Henry Harmon Spalding answered the call. His concern was a religious one of converting the Indians to Christianity. But in the process, he introduced them to many of the white man's secular devices as well. To settle down the roving Nez Perce people so that they might attend his wife's school (and thereby learn to read and write), he induced some of them to try out the white man's agriculture--resorting even to irrigation during the dry summer of 1839. In order to publish the Bible in Nez Perce, he brought in a printing press--the earliest in the Pacific Northwest--in 1839.

A saw mill and a flour mill followed in 1840. Before the mission had to be abandoned for a time after the Whitman disaster in 1847, some of the Nez Perce bands had received an introduction into the white man's mode of life; Nez Perce farming, in fact, continued right on down to the gold rush--an influx which gave the native farmers a new market for their crops.

Gold discoveries in 1860 brought thousands of miners into the Nez Perce country and changed the pattern of Indian-white relations completely. Coming only the next year after a treaty went into effect establishing a Nez Perce reservation and forbidding white occupation, the mining excitement disturbed those Indians who preferred their old nomadic life, and brought sudden white acculturation to those more inclined to adopt white ways. New white settlements--Pierce, Elk City, Florence, and Lewiston--sprang up in the forbidden reservation land, and from then on, white miners, merchants, stockraisers, and farmers dominated the country. Some of the Nez Perce bands agreed reluctantly in 1863 to accept a new and smaller reservation including lands into which the whites had not intruded by that time. But with the exception of Timothy (Spalding's original convert), those Indians who agreed were the ones whose lands were not to be given up; the others never did consent to the new reservation treaty.

White military pressure to force the non-treaty Indians to move from the sheer Salmon River canyon and the spectacular mountains and lakes of the Wallowa country onto the smaller reservation finally brought about the Nez Perce War of 1877.

Hostilities broke out on Salmon River when some young men in Whitebird's band finally were goaded into avenging past wrongs. Chief Joseph's Wallowa band--on their way to resettle on the new reservation--could not avoid becoming embroiled. In the opening engagement an incautious army cavalry unit rushed into a trap on Whitebird Creek and had to retire after fierce fighting. After a long pursuit. General O. O. Howard at last caught up with his Nez Perce adversaries, who entrenched themselves and fought a two-day battle on the cliffs and adjacent prairie above the Clearwater. Howard's superior forces finally compelled the Indians to move on, and after some debate, the unhappy bands who had joined the fight decided to leave the Nez Perce country over the Lolo Trail. After an astonishing campaign over hundreds of difficult miles in Idaho and in Montana, the army cornered the Indians just before they reached the refuge they were seeking in the Canadian plains. Most of the warriors went into temporary exile in Canada; the others, with the greater part of the women and children, were taken to Kansas and Oklahoma. Chief Joseph, who had given up his Wallowa home only because he had been forced to, and who had quit fighting only on the condition that he and his people could move onto the Idaho reservation (their original objective before the war began), became a national figure during his long exile and eventually successful battle to return to the Pacific Northwest.

A century of white occupation of the Nez Perce country naturally has transformed the region. An agreement of 1894 opened the Nez Perce Reservation to white settlement upon lands not allotted to individual Indians, and the Nez Perce peoples have succeeded comparatively well in adapting their way of life to fit into that of a white community. With a regional economy that has shifted primarily from a mining base to agriculture and forestry, the area benefited from transportation improvements that included completion of a paved North and South highway in 1938 and of the Lewis and Clark highway east to Montana in 1962. Construction of a Columbia-Snake River navigation system to Lewiston and construction of a major power and flood control dam at Bruce's Eddy and another near the mouth of the Salmon promise to transform the area even more strikingly in the future.

Publications-450 N. 4th Street, Boise, ID 83702-208.334.3428