

# Past and Present Nez Perce Signage in Yellowstone National Park

Images and documents pertaining to signage related to the  
Nez Perce in Yellowstone National Park



# Past and Present Nez Perce Signage in Yellowstone National Park

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National Endowment for Humanities Consultation Grant  
GM-50564-05

*IDENTIFYING THEMES FOR THE YELLOWSTONE NATIONAL  
PARK SEGMENT OF THE NEZ PERCE NATIONAL HISTORICAL  
TRAIL*

Scholars Meeting  
In  
Yellowstone National Park  
April 17 & 18, 2006

Updated: March 7, 2007  
By: Sarah Parker



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(The Park located four of Chittenden's eight wooden interpretive signs. This letter contains a description of each missing sign).	
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Present Signage  
West Entrance Road



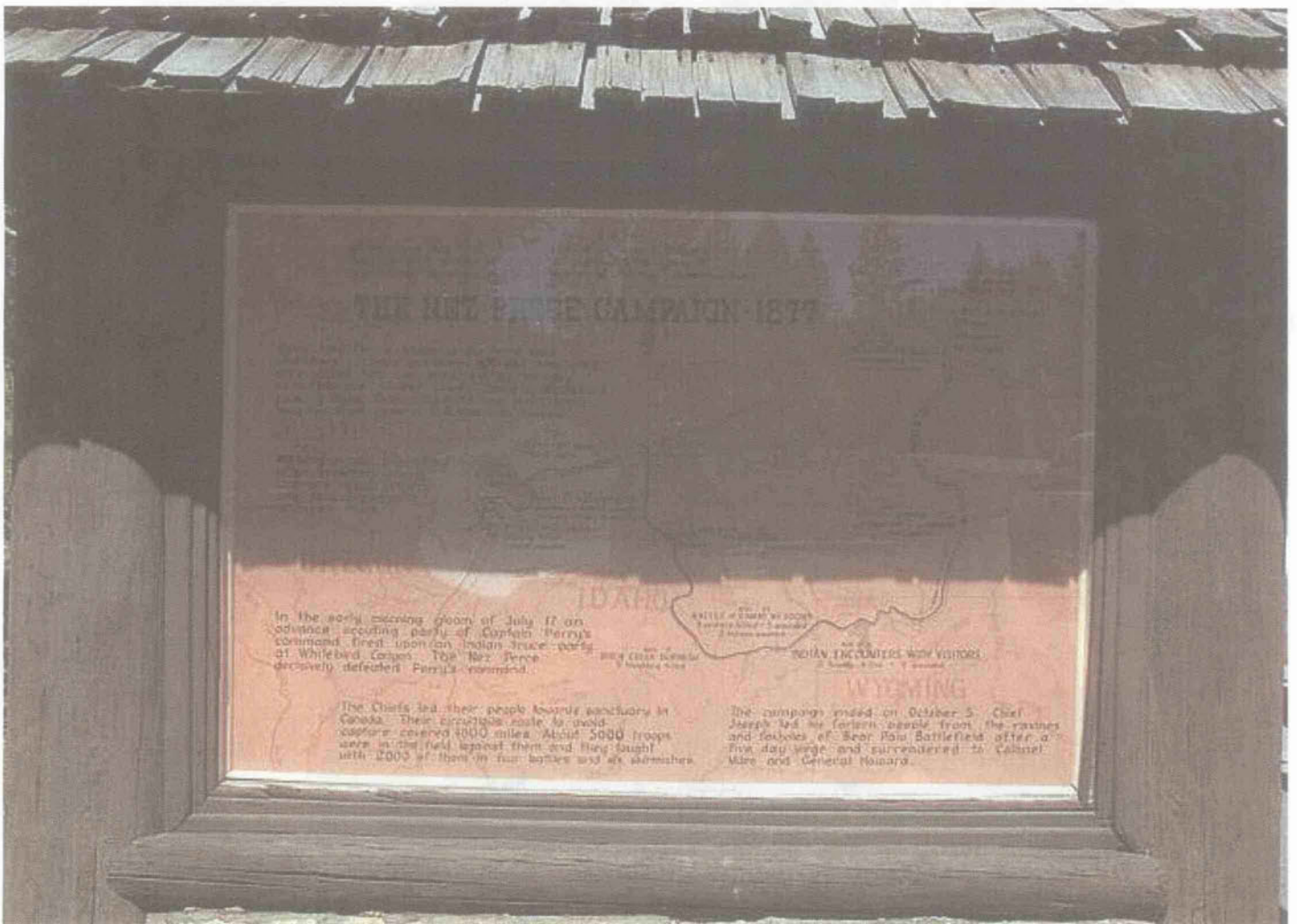
**Avenue of Travel**  
The "Avenue of Travel" is located on the West Entrance Road. Also, the Plexiglas covering is heavily scratched, preventing it from being easily read or viewed.

Present Signage  
Madison Exhibit

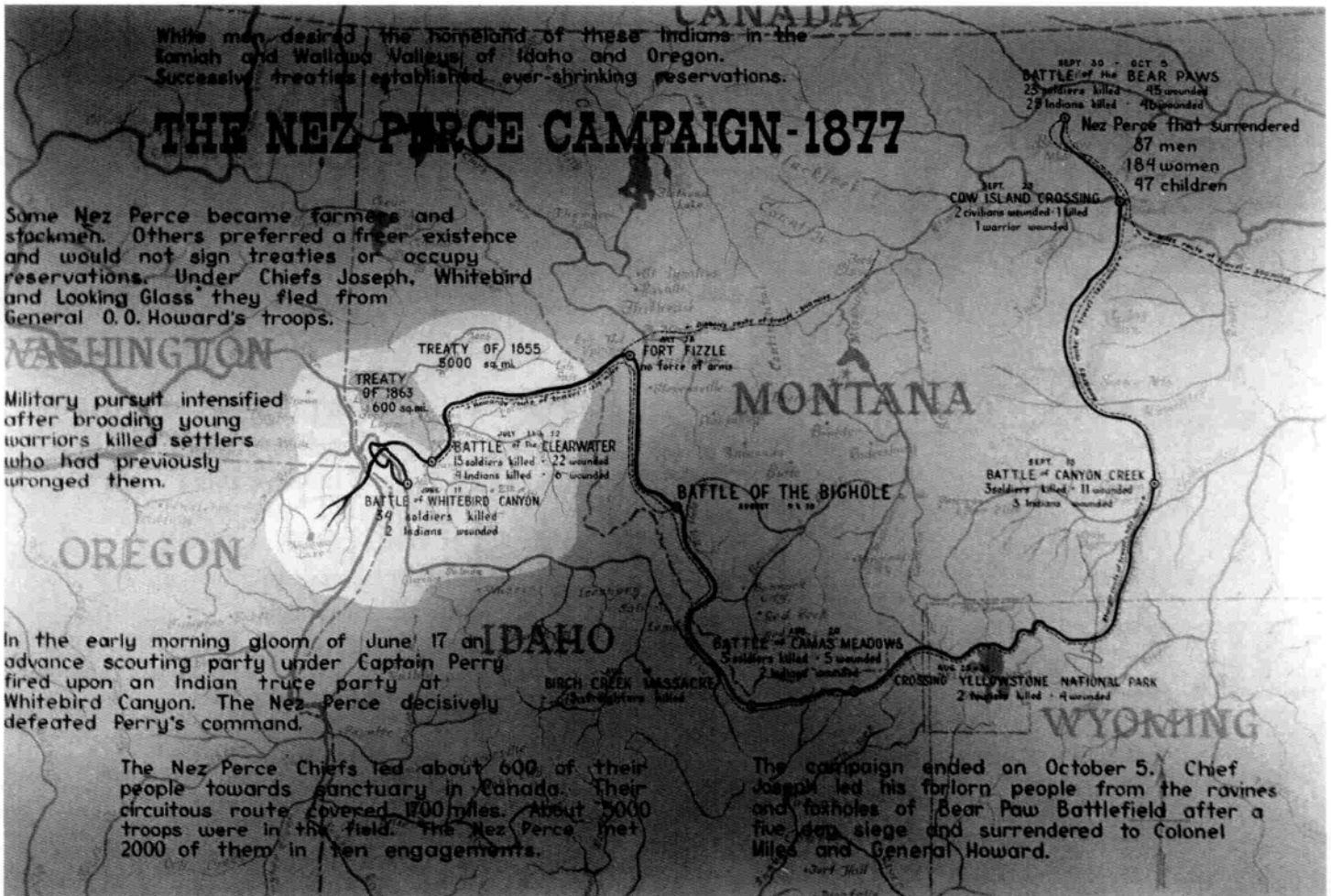


The Madison Exhibit contains The Nez Perce Campaign one side and Captive Tourists – The Nez Perce Encounter on the other side.

Present Signage  
Madison Exhibit  
The Nez Perce Campaign 1877



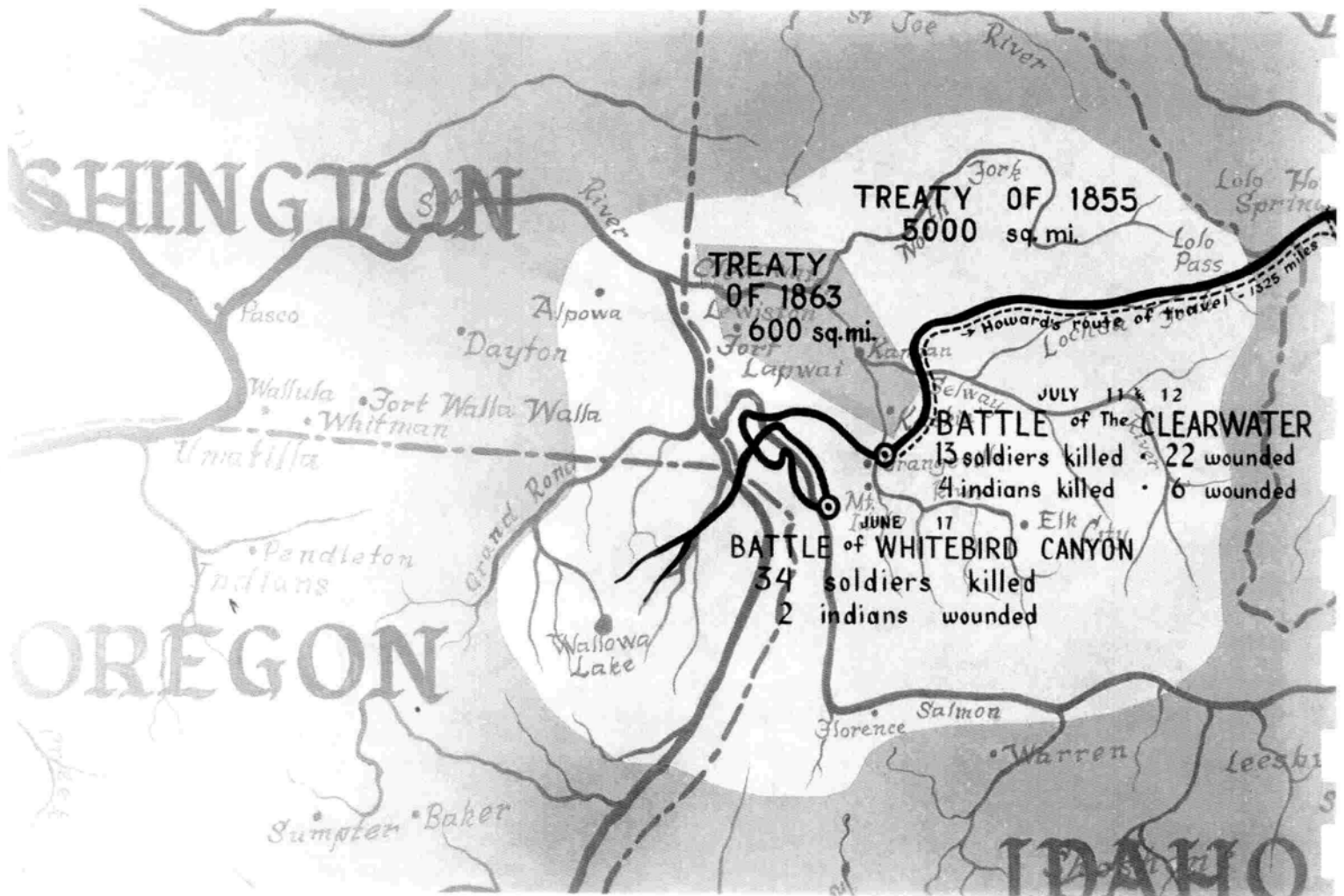
Present Signage  
Madison Exhibit  
 The Nez Perce Campaign 1877



Detailed view.



Present Signage  
Madison Exhibit  
The Nez Perce Campaign 1877



Detailed view.

Present Signage  
Madison Exhibit  
Captive Tourists



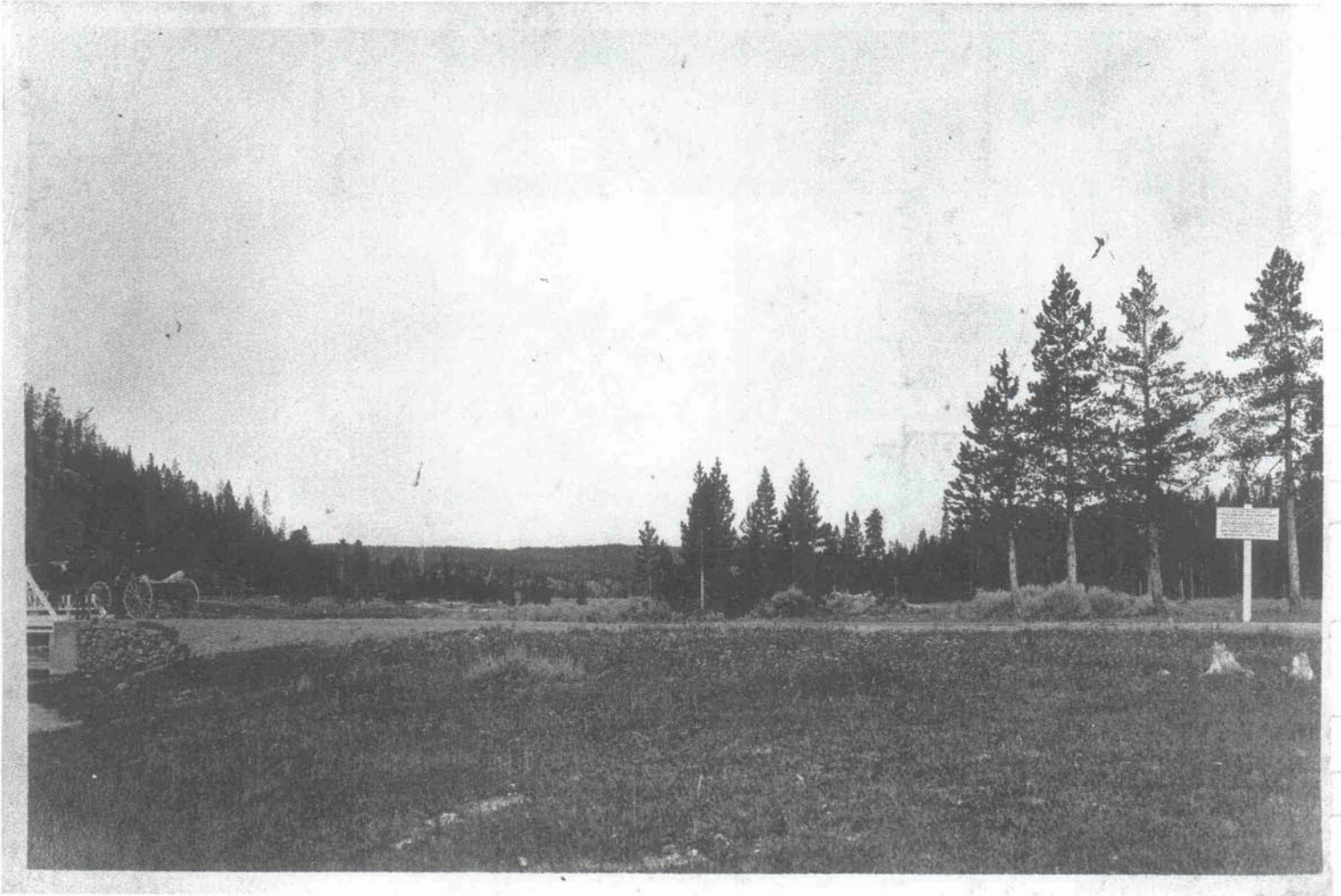
**The Nez Perce Encounter**

*Note the following is text from the sign:*

During their fighting retreat toward freedom in Canada, the non-treaty Nez Perce passed directly through Yellowstone National Park in August 1877. Their route followed this creek. When outriders encountered a party of sightseers camped nearby, the Nez Perce held the group hostage for several hours.

Angry at past betrayals, a pair of Nez Perce shot and left for dead George Cowan, but a chief intervened and the rest of the tourists were released unharmed. Six weeks later the Nez Perce surrendered to the U.S. Army in northern Montana. They were then transferred to reservations far from their home lands.

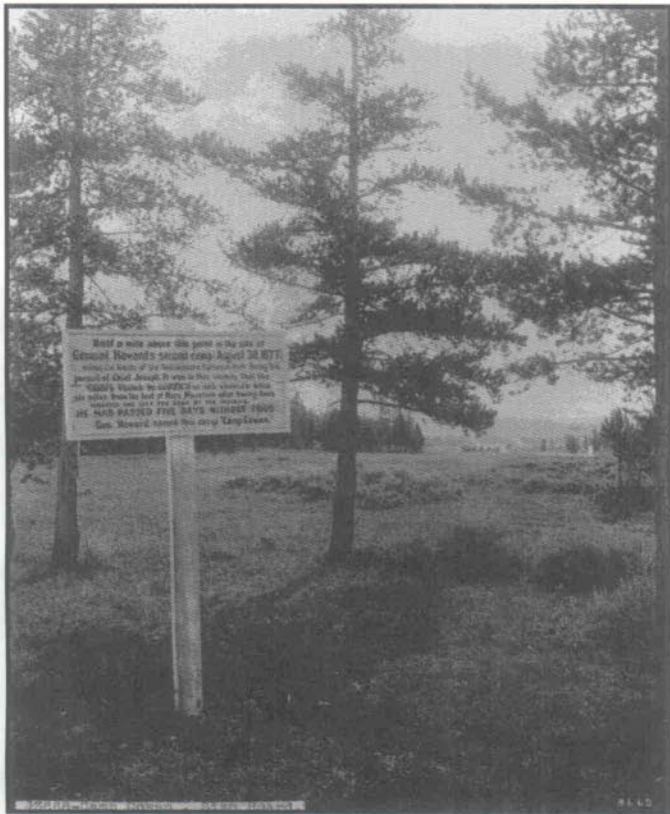
## Past Signage



YELL 40151: The sign was created circa 1914 by the US Army Corps of Engineers, the only description for it is: NEZ PERCE CREEK VALLEY SIGN MARKING HOWARD'S "COWAN CAMP."

(Image can be found in Yellowstone's Photo Archives – located in Yellowstone's Heritage & Research Library and Archives in Gardiner, MT)

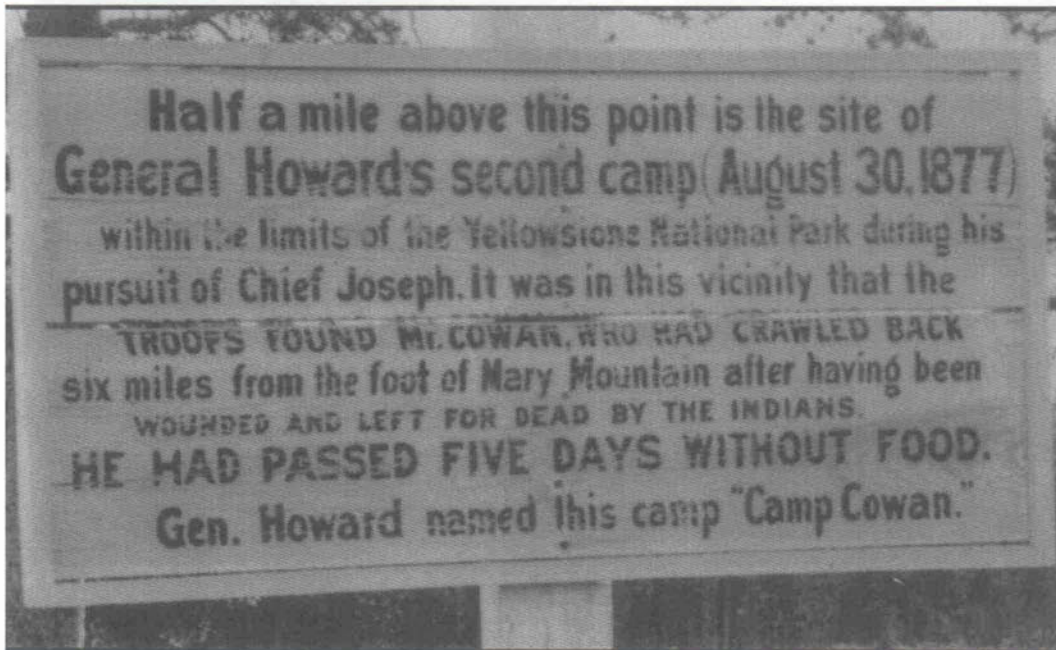
*See detailed views on following page.*



**Past Signage**  
**Nez Perce Creek Valley Sign**  
(Photographs housed at Library of Congress)

*Note that the following is text from the sign:*

Half a mile above this point is the site of General Howard's second camp (August 30, 1877) within the limits of the Yellowstone National Park during his pursuit of Chief Joseph. It was in this vicinity that the TROOPS FOUND MR. COWAN, WHO HAD CRAWLED BACK six miles from the foot of Mary Mountain after having been WOUNDED AND LEFT FOR DEAD BY THE INDIANS. HE HAD PASSED FIVE DAYS WITHOUT FOOD. Gen. Howard named this camp "Camp Cowan."



## Past Signage



YELL 128107: According to Aubrey Haines, this sign was removed sometime during WWII, its whereabouts are unknown. A steel pipe, placed there by Mr. Haines, now marks the site. The general locality of the sign is where Nez Perce Creek enters the Lower Geyser Basin.

**UPDATE: In May, 2003 the Bison Ecology Management crew found this sign in the vicinity of Mary Mountain.**

(Image can be found in Yellowstone's Photo Archives – located in Yellowstone's Heritage & Research Library and Archives in Gardiner, MT)

## Past Signage

### Chittenden Interpretive Sign

On 8/26/06 (!) Mary Anne Bellingham and Frank Smith were looking for the site where the "Helena Party" had been attacked by a party of the Nez Perce, who were fleeing Oregon, and being pursued by General Howard. A wooden sign marking the site was installed by Chittenden in 1904, but it had not been reported since the 1970's, and was believed to have been destroyed by fire. Remarkably, Bellingham spotted the sign, and immediately recognized its importance.

The sign is 37 3/4" x 24 1/2" overall, with center area 35 1/2" x 21 3/4", and 1" thick. The frame is made of 1 3/4" x 1" stock, with mitered corners. Finishing nails are driven through the frame into the center boards. Four nails are driven through the boards into the tree.

Maximum height of letters is as follows:

2 1/8" ON THIS...

2 1/2" tourists...

3 1/4" attacked...

2" AUGUST...

2 5/8" and one...

5/32" (irregular)

Pt. by Ancil...

Bottom of sign is  
63" above ground  
level.

Site was revisited on 9/9/06 Mary Anne Bellingham,  
Frank Smith, Kent Morby, and Erik Hendrickson.



One of several signs erected by H. Chittenden in 1904 to provide Interpretation of key events associated with the Nez Perce in Yellowstone in 1877.

Past Signage  
Chittenden Interpretive Sign

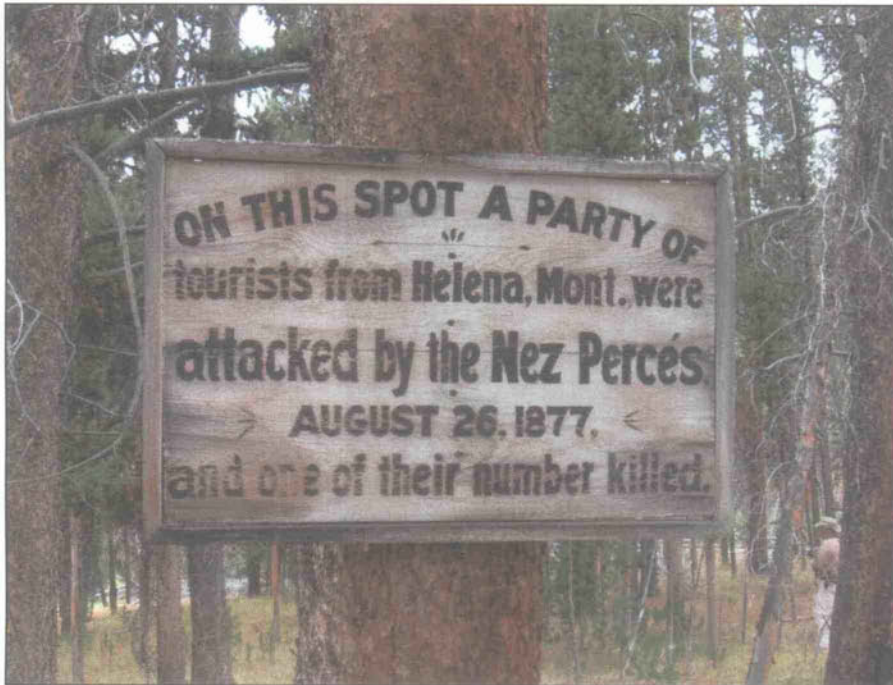


Detail of sign. Letters are black paint over a white painted background on board. The frame appears to have been painted white.



Discovers Mary Anne Bellingham and Frank Smith.

Past Signage  
Chittenden Interpretive Sign



Note curved top line with upper case letters; abbreviation of “Mont.”; plural “Nez Percés”; upper case date; decorative lines; and centering of each line.



At bottom of sign is painter's mark: “Pt. by Ancil D. Carley. Helena” (sic)



Past Signage  
Chittenden Interpretive Sign



Back side of sign. Note center portion of sign consists of two 1" boards. Note also that the center boards have shrunk relative to the frame.



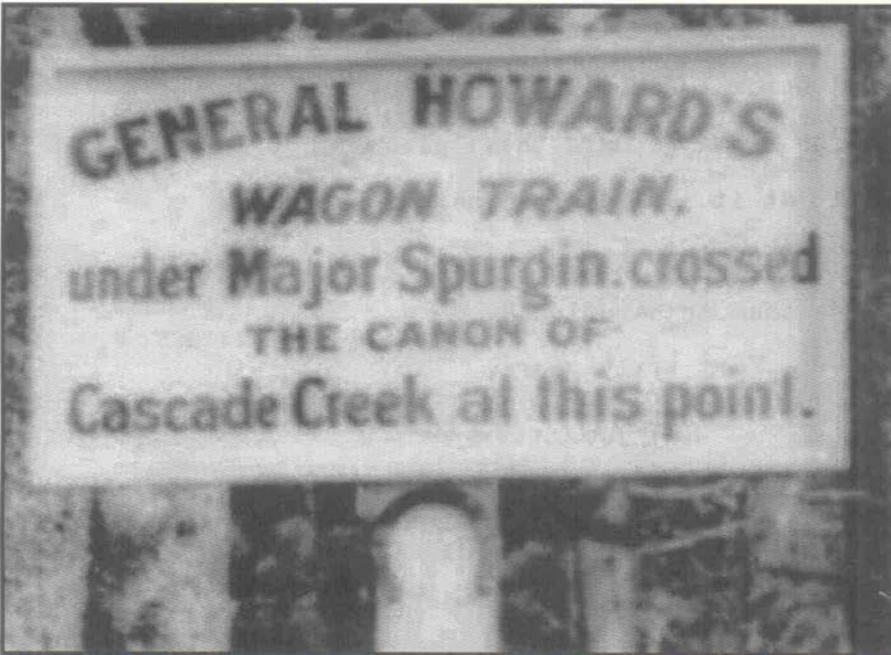
About 40' in front of sign is a pile of rocks



**Past Signage**  
**Major Spurgin Sign**  
(Photographs housed at the  
Library of Congress)

*Note the following is text from  
the sign:*

GENERAL HOWARD'S  
WAGON TRAIN.  
under Major Spurgin crossed  
THE CANON OF  
Cascade Creek at this point.



Subject: .....

6055

Improvement Yellowstone National Park,  
U. S. ENGINEER OFFICE,

Yellowstone Park, Wyo., February 7, 1903.

Major John Pitcher,  
Acting Superintendent,  
Yellowstone National Park,  
Port Yellowstone, Wyo.

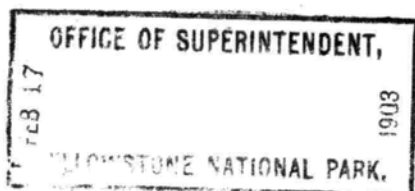
My dear Major:

Two years ago, as you know, I went through the Park and determined a number of points of historic interest on the route of Chief Joseph and General Howard. I have ever since been intending to fix a few signs to mark these places, but I have never had the time to do it. I inclose herewith eight signs which seem to me to be of importance, and if they meet with your approval ~~they~~ <sup>I will</sup> cause them to be printed.

Very truly yours,



Captain, Corps of Engineers.



General Howard's headquarters, September 1, 1877. The ford by which the Nez Percés crossed the river is about half a mile distant. Howard did not follow them but took his command down the left bank of the river, over Mount Washburn, and crossed the Yellowstone at Baronet's bridge.

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"Spurgin's Beaver Slide."

Half a mile back from the road is the place where Captain W. F. Spurgin, 21st Infantry, let General Howard's wagon train down the steep side of the mountain. The marks on the trees, burned in by the ropes used to let the wagons down, are still distinctly visible.

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Three fourths of a mile up the valley of this stream is the place where a party of tourists from Helena were attacked by the Nez Percés, August 26, 1877, and one of their number killed.

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On this spot a party of tourists from Helena, Mont. were attacked by the Nez Percés, August 26, 1877, and one of their number killed.

OFFICE OF SUPERINTENDENT,  
YELLOWSTONE NATIONAL PARK.  
General Howard's wagon train, under Major Spurgin, crossed the canon of Cascade Creek at this point.

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6056

At this point, August 24, 1877, the Nez Perce Indians, under Chief Joseph, captured a party of tourists from Radersburg, Mont., including Mr. Geo. F. Cowan. The party were taken up the valley of Nez Perce creek by the trail over Mary Mountain.

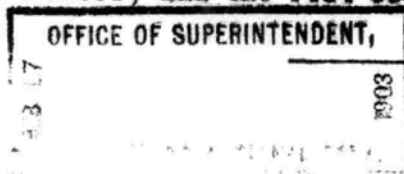
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Camp Cowan

This is the site of General Howard's <sup>second</sup> ~~first~~ camp (August <sup>30</sup> ~~29~~, 1877) within the limits of the Yellowstone National Park during his pursuit of Chief Joseph. It was near this point that the troops found Mr. Cowan, who had crawled back six miles <sup>from the foot of Mary Mountain</sup> after having been wounded and left for dead by the Indians. He had passed four days without food.

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On this spot, (August 24, 1877) the Nez Perce Chiefs held a council to decide the fate of the Cowan party who had been captured that morning in the Lower Geyser Basin. The party were released, but afterwards recaptured, taken back about a half a mile east of the council ground, and there attacked by the Indians. Cowan was left for dead, Carpenter and the two ladies were taken along as prisoners, and the rest escaped.



(Document can be found in Yellowstone's Archives – located in Yellowstone's Heritage & Research Library and Archives in Gardiner, MT)