The Nez Perce War

A Long Journey to Surrender

The traditional homeland of the Nez Perce war that place where Oregon, Washington, and Idaho meet. Mistakenly called Nez Perce (pierced nose) by French-Canadian trappers, these powerful, wealthy, semi-nomadic people grazed horses on the valley grasslands, gathered edible roots on the prairies, fished for salmon, and hunted buffalo east of the Bitterroot Mountains.

In the mid-1800s, calling it their “Manifest Destiny,” settlers, stockmen, and gold miners began moving onto Nez Perce lands. Desiring peace, the tribe agreed to a treaty in 1855 that confined the tribe to a reservation (about one-third of the treaty). However, those whose lands fell outside the original size. Those chiefs whose lands lay within Nez Perce’s land, forced a new treaty in 1863. The tribe agreed to a treaty in 1855 that confined them to the reservation.

Reluctantly, the non-treaty chiefs persuaded their people to obey the ultimatum. They rounded up as much of their far-ranging livestock as they could, took all the possessions they could pack, and moved onto Nez Perce’s land.

It was now clear to the non-treaty Nez Perce that they could not escape the army in Idaho Territory. In council, the five bands agreed to follow the leadership of Chief Looking Glass, who persuaded them to leave their homelands and head east to Montana and join their allies in the Crow country. They would follow the Lolo Trail, which Nez Perce hunters had used for centuries. The Nez Perce wished only to find a place where the army would leave them alone and where they would be far enough from settler settlements to avoid further clashes.

During the following month, the Nez Perce attempted to avoid the army, their journey marked by small encounters and skirmishes. General Howard summoned troops from up and down the West Coast to begin an encircling movement to trap the elusive Nez Perce. Then, on July 11, Howard’s forces met the Nez Perce near Clearwater River where they fought for two days with neither side winning. Finally, the Nez Perce withdrew, leaving behind many of their supplies and tips.

The Nez Perce War was a result of cultural conflicts. As the United States expanded westward, the settlers felt it was their “Manifest Destiny” to take the land. The Nez Perce hoped only to preserve theirs. The war seemed unavoidable. It was a dramatic example of the price paid for human lives for the westward expansion of our nation.

General of the Army William T. Sherman called the Nez Perce War of 1877 "one of the most extraordinary Indian wars of which there is a record. The Indians . . . displayed a courage and skill that elicited universal praise; they obtained from scalping, let captive women go free, did not commit indiscriminate murder of peaceful families . . . and fought with almost scientific skill . . ."