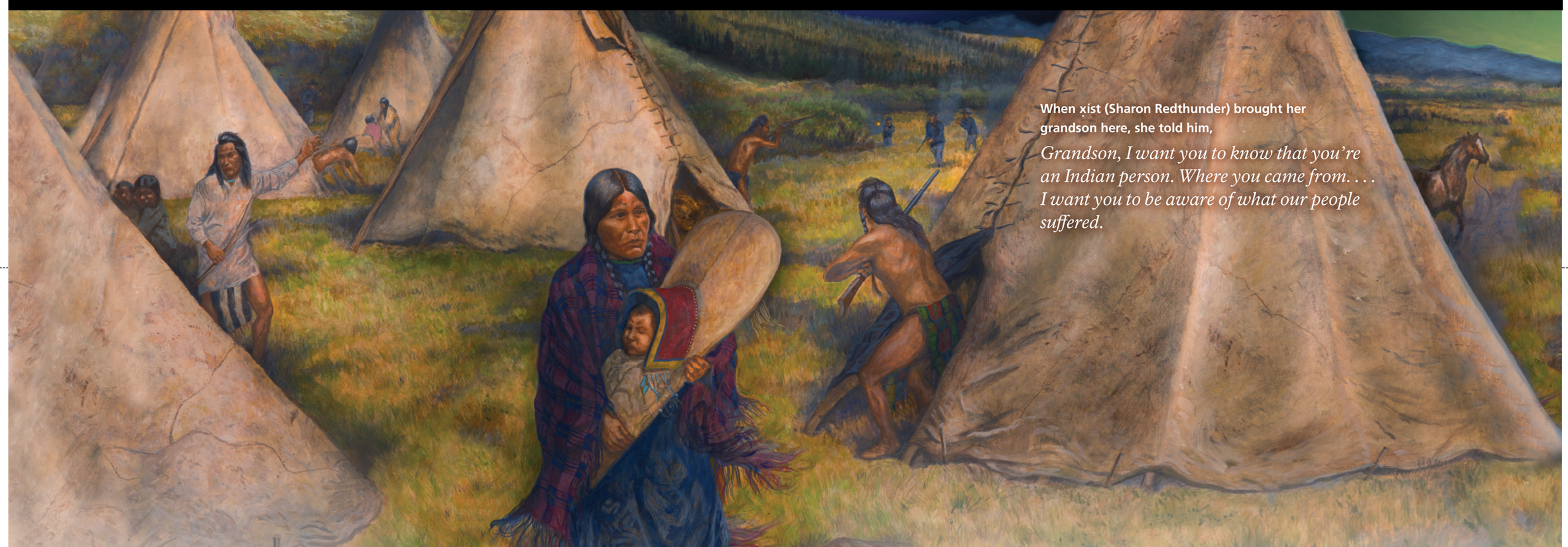
Big Hole

Big Hole National Battlefield
Montana

National Park Service
U.S. Department of the Interior



When xíst (Sharon Redthunder) brought her grandson here, she told him,

Grandson, I want you to know that you're an Indian person. Where you came from. . . . I want you to be aware of what our people suffered.

THE PEOPLE

The Nez Perce, whose story is told at Big Hole National Battlefield, call themselves nɪmí·pu· or The People. "We have been here since time immemorial," says wé·yux tí·menɪ̓n (Allen Slickpoo, Jr.). "Our legends go back 9,000 years. . . . We didn't start with Lewis and Clark." The nɪmí·pu· met these explorers in 1805. At that time, tustɪmasa̓talpá·ma (Vera Sonneck) explains, "We were one of the biggest tribes in the US. We had 13 million acres of aboriginal lands. We were in what is now Idaho, Montana, Oregon, Washington, and Canada." During the next 70 years, they would lose most of their homeland to European Americans. *(See map on other side.)*

CHAOS AT DAWN *(Above)* As their families flee for their lives, nɪmí·pu· warriors fight back during the military's surprise attack.

REMEMBERING THE DEAD *(Left)* hú·sus ʔewyí·n (Wounded Head) carved a dot in his drinking horn for each person he found dead at Big Hole, including his two-year-old daughter.

ILLUSTRATION—NPS / NAKIA WILLIAMSON CLOUD
BUFFALO HORN—NPS / WASHINGTON STATE UNIVERSITY

CONFLICTS ARISE

As European Americans began encroaching on nɪmí·pu· homeland, conflicts began to occur. The US government proposed a treaty in 1855: The nɪmí·pu· would give up over half their homeland for European-American settlement but keep the right to hunt, fish, and gather on those lands.

Five years later, gold was discovered on nɪmí·pu· land. This led to the 1863 treaty that decreased nɪmí·pu· lands by another 90 percent. Five bands of nɪmí·pu·, which included their allies the pelú·cpu (Palouse) and the weyí·letpu· (Cayuse), refused the second treaty. They would later become known as the non-treaty Nez Perce.

"You might as well expect the rivers to run backwards as that any man who was born a free man should be contented penned up and denied liberty to go where he pleases," said hɪnmató·wyalahtq̓ɪt (Young Joseph), headman of one of these bands. "I have asked some of the great white chiefs where they get their authority to say to the Indian that he shall stay in one place, while he sees white men going where they please. They cannot tell me."

Descendants from his band reflect today: "Treaties divided and scattered us, both physically and spiritually. They threatened to sever our spiritual connection with the land and fostered the division of our people into Christian and non-Christian, treaty and non-treaty, and finally, tribe and non-tribe."

By 1877, the US government gave the non-treaty nɪmí·pu· 30 days to move onto the reservation or be put there by force. The nɪmí·pu· began the arduous task of gathering all of their belongings, including livestock. They lost much during the journey. Before they could reach their destination, fighting broke out.

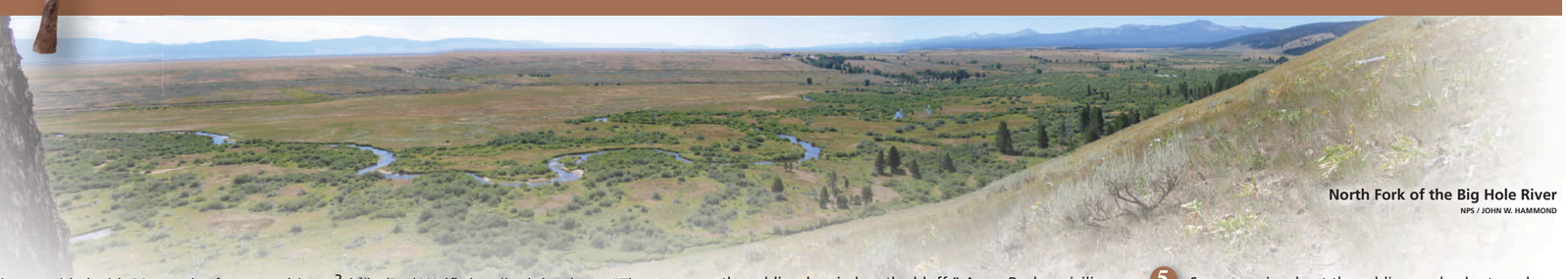
ʔɪslá·mc (Horace Axtell) learned from his ancestors what happened next: "Settlers killed one of our young boy's father. The boys took revenge and killed some settlers, and that started the whole thing. It was OK for the settlers to kill us, but not the other way around."

And so started a chain of events that led to numerous battles during a four-month flight of over 1,000 miles. Some call this the "Nez Perce War."

August 9, 1877: The Battle of Big Hole

My shaking heart tells me trouble and death will overtake us if we make no hurry through this land! I cannot smother, I cannot hide that which I see. I must speak what is revealed to me. Let us begone to the buffalo country!

—pɪyó·pɪyo ʔɪpcɪwá·tx̣ (Lone Bird)



North Fork of the Big Hole River
NPS / JOHN W. HAMMOND

By early August, over 800 nɪmí·pu· (consisting mostly of family groups and only about 200 warriors) and over 2000 horses were passing peacefully through the Bitterroot Valley of Montana. Their leaders believed the military would not pursue them even though many had premonitions warning otherwise. The group arrived at ʔɪckumcɪlé·lɪkpe (known today as Big Hole National Battlefield) on August 7. They did not know the military was close behind them. On August 8th, while the nɪmí·pu· were gathering supplies in the area, military scouts were observing their camp.

1 hímɪ·n maqsmáqs (Yellow Wolf) described that night: "The warriors paraded about camp, singing, all making a good time. It was the first since war started. Everyone with good feeling. Going to buffalo country! . . . War was quit. All Montana citizens our friends." Meanwhile Colonel John Gibbon reported "All laid down to rest until eleven o'clock. At that hour the command . . . of 17 officers, 132 men and 34 citizens, started down the trail on foot, each man being provided with 90 rounds of ammunition. The howitzer [cannon] could not accompany the column. . . . Orders were given . . . that at early daylight it should start after us with a pack mule loaded with 2,000 rounds of extra [rifle] ammunition." Tom Sherrill, a civilian volunteer from the Bitterroot Valley, told: "We were soon assembled at the foot of the hill. . . . We were commanded to halt and . . . we were very close to the Indian camp."

2 hú·sus ʔewyí·n (Wounded Head) told what happened before dawn August 9: "A man . . . got up early, before the daylight. Mounting his horse, he . . . crossed the creek, when soldiers were surrounding the camp . . . he was shot down. The sound of the gun awoke most of the band and immediately the battle took place." Corporal Charles Loynes recalled, "We received orders to give three volleys [low into the tipis], then charge—we did so. That act would hit anyone, old as well as young, but what any individual soldier did while in the camp, he did so as a brute, and not because he had any orders to commit such acts."

hímɪ·n ʔɪlp̓ílp (Red Wolf) described the chaos: "The women, all scared when the soldiers charged the camp, ran into the water, the brush. Any place where they could hide themselves and children. Many were killed as they ran." pɪná·ʔwɪnoʼnmay (Helping Another) explained what she did: "I hid under some willow brush, lying like this [flat on side]. A little girl lay close, my arm over her. Bullets cut twigs down on us like rain. The little girl was killed. Killed under my arm." The soldiers were then given the order to burn the tipis.

3 "These soldiers came on rapidly. They mixed up part of our village. I now saw [tipis] on fire. I grew hot with anger," recalled hímɪ·n maqsmáqs (Yellow Wolf). "Those soldiers did not last long. . . . Scared, they ran back across the river. We followed the soldiers across the stream. . . . the soldiers hurried up the bluff." Amos Buck, a civilian volunteer, told: "Here we began to throw up entrenchments. The Indians quickly surrounded us and were firing from every side, while we were digging and firing."

4 Colonel Gibbon recalled: "Just as we took up our position in the timber two shots from our howitzer on the trail above us we heard, and we afterwards learned that the gun and pack mule with ammunition were . . . intercepted by Indians." wewúkɪye ʔɪlp̓ílp (Red Elk) also described the capture: "We saw the warriors closing in on the cannon. Three men, one from above and two below . . . None of the three stopped from dodging, running forward. The big gun did not roar again."

5 Some warriors kept the soldiers and volunteers besieged while others raced back to camp. "I started back with others to our camp," explained hímɪ·n maqsmáqs (Yellow Wolf). "I wanted to see what had been done. It was not good to see women and children lying dead and wounded. . . . The air was heavy with sorrow. I would not want to hear, I would not want to see again."

6 The nɪmí·pu· buried their dead and prepared to move. Most warriors went with the camp to protect it. The battle continued and some warriors stayed behind, including hímɪ·n maqsmáqs (Yellow Wolf), who told: "The night grew old and the firing faded away. Soldiers would not shoot. . . . We did not charge. If we killed one soldier, a thousand would take his place. If we lost one warrior, there was none to take his place." Near dawn they saw a man ride up to the soldiers. "We did not try to kill him. . . . The soldiers made loud cheering. We understood! Ammunition had arrived or more soldiers were coming. . . . We gave those trenched soldiers two volleys as a 'Good-by!' Then we mounted and rode swiftly away."

From 60 to 90 nɪmí·pu· were killed, with an unknown number wounded. Of the military and civilian volunteers, 31 were killed, 38 wounded.

So our people had to escape, . . . had to find a way . . . to take care of the dead as best they could. But it is not our way to leave our dead untended. . . . We should care for them in death as we care for them in life, with love. So that's a very painful part of the Big Hole story.

—sísa·wipam (Roberta Conner)

Riderless horse ceremony
NPS

12-POUND MOUNTAIN HOWITZER: Aimed at the camp below, the howitzer (cannon) was fired twice before nɪmí·pu· captured it. Today, nɪmí·pu· recognize this achievement through song, story, and ceremony.
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