# Bear Paw Battlefield

Nez Perce National Historical Park
Montana

National Park Service
U.S. Department of the Interior

## lilóynin nun ʾóykalo ʾetx heki'ca

*Glad to see each and every one of you.*

Far from our beautiful homeland, upon this quiet terrain of our Earth Mother, the spirits now forever bear silent witness to our people's painful and tragic encounter with "Manifest Destiny." This is a place of mourning, not just for memorializing a past, but as a place for letting go of what might have been. Nations consecrate other battlefields in memory of lives lost, so too, may each of us now consecrate this place on behalf of our ancestors' exhausted bid for freedom.

This is a sacred place of geographical memory in our hearts. We are taught to "turn ourselves around" in reverence and prayer upon entry into sacred space. This prayerful act keeps us ever mindful of the presence of our Creator as we reach out to the heart . . . to know that we are always truly "one". We pray that our blood and memory forever fuse our spiritual connection to our ancestry who once tread upon this ground. As you enter here, may you join us in our prayer by showing, in your own way, a respect for all those who have gone before us.

**Bear Paw Battlefield is the site of the last battle of the four-month Nez Perce War of 1877. The battlefield is a part of Nez Perce National Historical Park and Nez Perce (Nee-Me-Poo) National Historic Trail.**

*You white people measure the Earth, and divide it. The Earth is part of my body, and I never gave up the Earth. I belong to the land out of which I came. The Earth is my mother.*
Chief Tulhuulhulsuit
Fort Lapwai, 1877

*We do not wish to interfere with your religion, but you must talk about practical things. Twenty times over you have repeated the Earth is your mother, and that chieftenship is from the Earth. Let us hear it no more, but come to business at once.*
General Oliver O. Howard
Fort Lapwai, 1877

## Battle and Siege

It is September 29, 1877. The prairie skies hint of rain, snow and cold, hard wind. Our memories return to early summer at Tepablewam near Tolo Lake, Idaho and the 800 men, women and children who began this journey. An ultimatum by the U.S. Government ordered us to move to a small reservation and give up our homeland. Five bands of Nez Perce, with some Cayuse, Palouse and other allies, reluctantly comply. After our young men retaliated for crimes against us, the army pursues us. To keep our freedom, we elude the military and leave our homeland. We feel the loss of nearly 100 relatives who died since June. Our camp is primitive, with crude lodges and lean-tos. It is a two-day ride to Canada, a place promising freedom.

In a surprise attack at dawn on September 30, the soldiers stampede our horses. Less than 100 warriors defend our families against the charge of Colonel Nelson A. Miles' 400 troops and 50 scouts. Our warriors stop the army attack with heavy loss to both sides. Fearing the loss of too many men, Miles changes tactics and lays siege to our camp. Our camp is exposed to enemy fire. We are forced to seek shelter in pits dug into the frozen ground. Soldiers and Indians lay dead all around. Snipers prevent us from retrieving and burying our dead. We have been surrounded for four days and bombarded with cannon shells. Thirty of our people died this week. Some have fled during the battle and others are considering attempts to escape into Canada. When asked by Miles to end the fighting, our remaining leaders are unsure if they should trust the army.

Colonel Nelson A. Miles

Montana Historical Society

## Choices

Choices are few and none are favorable. Can we continue the fight? The supply of soldiers is endless. Should we try to escape on foot under cover of darkness through the lands of traditional enemies? Not everyone can make this trip. Many are too weak. Who will care for the elders, children, and wounded? Will we be able to bury our dead? Will we be allowed to go home?

Chief Joseph

Chief Joseph explains: *Our chiefs are killed. Looking Glass is dead.* [Tulhuulhulsuit] *is dead. The old men are all dead. It is the young men who say, "Yes" or "No". He who led the young men is dead. It is cold, and we have no blankets. The little children are freezing to death. My people, some of them, have run away to the hills, and have no blankets, no food. No one knows where they are, perhaps freezing to death. I want to have time to look for my children, and see how many of them I can find. Maybe I shall find them among the dead.*

In late afternoon, we surrender our weapons. As to our destination, Miles tells Joseph: *Which is the place that you love to stay in? I want you to tell me, as I have the power to remove these white people, and let you live there.* Miles also promises: *I will give half of them* [weapons] *back to you after awhile.*

## The Siege Ends

On October 5 Tom Hill, a Nez Perce warrior, describes the end of the siege: *I said go back to the trenches, we will have to quit fighting. While I was talking... two Nez Perce Indian scouts* [Capt. John & George Me-yop-kar-wit] *... had a white flag tied to their pole, they were coming across to see us. ... White Bull took up his gun and was going to kill both of these scouts. One Indian who is now dead told him to stop. I met these scouts and shook hands with them and told both of them not to be afraid; they would not be killed; and then they both shed tears and wept and of course we Indians came out of the trenches and shook hands with them. Joseph said "We will now quit fighting" ... Then they all came together and went across to Gen. Miles and Gen. Howard ... we all shook hands.Gen Howard said "Don't be afraid, you will not be hurt anymore". ... We stayed over with the troops, children and all. ... They thought we were a curiosity:.. he* [Howard] *did command the soldiers to keep away from them and they left us alone.*

Tom Hill

## Escape to Canada

Nearly 300 of our people make their way to Canada. Among them is 12 year old Kulkulsta (Mark Arthur). As an adult he recalls: *I ran with our horses... the bullets are everywhere; I cried to go to my mother in camp, but our people held me tight and wouldn't let me go. I went through bushes a long way; then I found some people and we went on together. Chief Joseph, our big men and my mother are not with us; we do not know if they are killed or prisoners; it was seven years before I saw my mother again.... We went to the Sioux camp in Canada.* [They] *were very good to us but it was very cold and there was very little food; sometimes there was just one rabbit for ten people.*

Over several days, our people arrive in small groups at Sitting Bull's camp near Fort Walsh, Canada. The Sioux believe the battle rages far away on the Missouri River. More refugees arrive. Finally, the Sioux understand the battle is only two days south on a tributary of the Milk River. With our warriors beside them, a band of Sioux starts south. Just past the 'Medicine Line' (the Canadian border), they encounter 30 of our people led by Chief White Bird. Our people who remained on Snake Creek have surrendered their weapons to the U.S. Army. They will suffer if rescue is attempted. Most of the relief party returns north with the new refugees. A few continue on to the place of battle to properly bury the dead.

Chief White Bird

George Kuth Collection

## Living in Exile

With the promises broken by the military, 432 of our people are exiled to Indian Territory (Oklahoma) under the leadership of Joseph. Yellow Wolf remembers: *We were not badly treated in captivity. We were free as long as we did not come towards Idaho and Wallowa. Only the climate killed many of us. All the newborn babies died, and many of the old people too. Everything so different from our old homes. No mountains, no springs, no clear running rivers... We called where we were held Eeikish Pah* [Hot Place]. *All the time, night and day, we suffered from the climate. For the first year, they kept us all where many got shaking sickness, chills, hot fever. We were always lonely for our old-time homes."*

## Wandering and Capture

Some of our people risk all to rejoin their families. Peo Peo Tholekt remembers: *I felt very down-hearted as I drifted. The memory was strong - Wallowa - the home of my father. I shall now drift alone. Unfriended and without a home. No where to sleep in comfort, hungry every day, wandering as a chased coyote. Seeking for shelter and not found.... Naked, crying over my brothers and sisters when I left them corraled by the soldiers. They will all be killed! I did seek friends among tribes speaking a different language. I found the Sioux. I remembered the Sioux had always been an enemy to my tribe! But they proved friendly to me, keeping me for a year.*

Tom Hill recounts: *During the surrender we were ordered to go out in the prairie to look for Nez Perce. I obeyed the order and I left for good. After staying away for about one year I was recaptured. I was then taken to Indian Territory to* [join] *the Nez Perce there. I stayed seven years. Then I was returned with the Nez Perce to Idaho. Chief Joseph and a band with him elected to come to Nespelem* [on] *the Colville Reservation in Washington.*

Joseph's winter encampment in Nespelem, Washington on the Colville Reservation, circa 1900.

## Today

Each generation of Nimiipuu descendants seeks healing for the grief, sorrow, and loss of family members and their homeland. The War of 1877 has far-reaching consequences. One result is the scattering of Nez Perce into Canada and across the United States (with principal enrollments on the Colville, Nez Perce, and Umatilla Indian Reservations). Schisms still exist, fractionalizing what was once a gentle balance among the many bands of Nimiipuu.

A young Nez Perce/Cayuse/Palouse boy takes off his coat, shoes, and socks on the battlefield. His puzzled mother asks what he is doing. He replies: *To see how it feels. Those people who were here didn't have these things.*

Make of this place and this history what you will. Convey to your children the sacred significance of this place for all time.

With humility, we pay homage to and echo our elders' prayer to return to our beautiful homeland far distant from this quiet place.

## Visiting Bear Paw Battlefield

Bear Paw Battlefield is 16 miles south of Chinook, Montana on Route 240. A self-guided trail, picnic tables, and primitive toilets are available.

Bear Paw Battlefield
P O Box 26
Chinook, MT 59523
406-357-3130
www.nps.gov/biho

The Blaine County Museum, the interim visitor center, is a good place to begin your visit. The multimedia presentation "40 Miles From Freedom" describes the Battle of Bear Paw. The museum also has exhibits on local history and paleontology. Contact the museum for hours.

Blaine County Museum
501 Indiana Street
Chinook, MT 59523
406-357-2590
www.blainecountymuseum.com

Bear Paw Battlefield is the final stop on the Nez Perce (Nee-Me-Poo) National Historic Trail. The 1,170 mile trail starts in Joseph, Oregon, following the path of non-treaty Nez Perce during the War of 1877. The trail passes through federal, tribal, state and private property.

Nez Perce (Nee-Me-Poo) National Historic Trail
USDA-Forest Service
NPNHT Administrator
12730 Highway 12
Orofino, ID 83544
208-476-8334
www.fs.usda.gov/npnht

**Camping, hunting, trapping, collecting or digging are prohibited.**

**Any person who, without an official permit, injures, destroys, excavates or removes any historic or prehistoric ruin, artifact, object of antiquity, or other cultural or natural resource on public lands of the United States of America is subject to arrest and penalty of law.**

**Stay on the designated trail. Do not remove offerings or artifacts. The trail is designed for foot travel only. Please no pets, bicycles, or motorized vehicles on the trail.**

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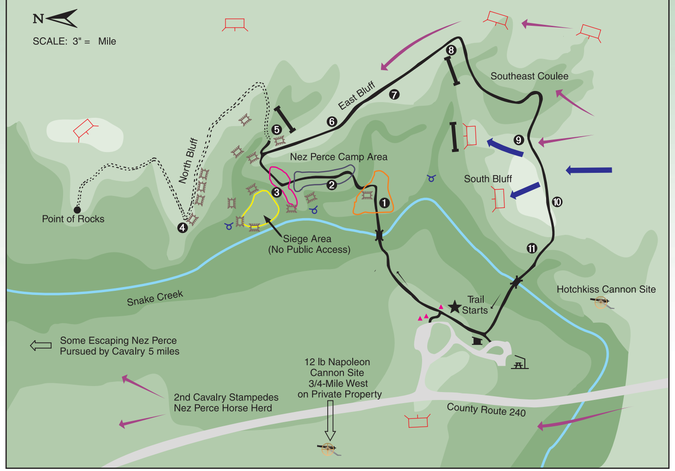
# Bear Paw Battlefield at C'aynnim 'Alikinwaaspa




- Picnic Shelter
- Restrooms (no water)
- Monuments
- Battlefield Trail (1 mile)
- Point of Rocks Trail (1/4 mile)
- Interpretive Stops
- Joseph Band
- Looking Glass Band with ally Husishusis Kute
- White Bird Band
- Tulhuulhulsuit Band
- Springs
- First Assault (Cavalry)
- Second Assault (Infantry)
- Initial Nez Perce Defenses
- Nez Perce Rifle Pits
- Army Rifle Pits
- Cannon Site

## GUIDE TO NUMBERED STOPS ON TRAIL

### C'aynnim 'Alikinwaaspa

Yellow Wolf remembers making camp on September 29, 1877: *Next morning, not early, the camp moved. We knew the distance to the Canadian line. But there was no hurrying Looking Glass, leader since crossing the big river* [Missouri]. *About noon the families came to where camp was to be made. The scouts knew and had several buffalo killed at the campground. The name of the place is* [C'Aynnim 'Alikinwaaspa - Place of the Manure Fire]. *Only scarce brushwood, but buffalo chips in plenty. With horses' feet sick* [tender] *and lots of grass, the chiefs ordered, "We camp here until tomorrow forenoon."*

### ❶ Making Camp

Abundant game and fresh water offered by Snake Creek made this a good place to camp and gather supplies before the final push to Canada. Lean Elk and Wottolen expressed concern. Both experienced visions of attack. However, the fatigue of the forced march and no sign of the military convinced the chiefs to order camp.

The teepees destroyed at Big Hole left little else for protection. Huddled in crude lodges and wrapped in blankets the people camped, warmed by fire pits burning buffalo dung. The village was arranged in familiar patterns with families, bands and allies together.

### ❷ Horses! Horses!

On the morning of September 30, Yellow Wolf recalls: *Next morning, not too early, while some were still eating breakfast, two* [Nez Perce] *scouts came galloping from the south. As they drew near, they called loudly. Stampeding buffaloes! Soldiers! Soldiers!*

The young son of White Bird recalls the surprise: *It was morning and we children were playing. We had hardwood sticks, throwing mud balls. I looked up and saw a spotted horse, a Cheyenne warrior, wearing a war bonnet, come to the bluff above me. He was closely followed by the troops. Some of the children ran back to the camps, some hurried to the gulch.*

Yellow Wolf

Washington State University Libraries

Horses were critical as Yellow Wolf recounts: *Joseph's voice was above the noise as he called "Horses! Horses! Save the horses!* Black Eagle recalls: *I left going for the horses. I saw our horses not far away. The horses were wise to the shooting and all began to stampede.* Within minutes hope faded as horses were scattered.

### ❸ Nez Perce Camp Under Siege

Yellow Wolf reflects: *Evening, and the battle grew less. Only occasional shots. Soldiers guarding, sitting down, two and two. Soldiers all around the camp so that none could escape. It was snowing. The wind was cold.* About 450 men, women and children retreated to the north end of the camp. On the flats and the sides of the coulees the ground became frozen as rain turned to snow and temperatures dropped.

A Nez Perce woman recalls: *We digged trenches with camas hooks and butcher knives. With pans we threw out the dirt. We could not do much cooking. Dried meat and some other grub would be handed around. It would be given to the children first. I was three days without food. Children cried with hunger and cold. In the small creek there was water, but we could get to it only at night.*

Four more terrifying days remained. On October 4, according to Yellow Wolf: *It was towards noon that a bursting shell struck and broke in a shelter pit, burying four women, a little boy, and a girl of about twelve snows. This girl and her grandmother were both killed. The other three women and the boy were rescued.*

### ❹ Point of Rocks

After scattering the horses, the Army and Cheyenne Scouts turned their attention to fleeing Nez Perce and defenders at the north end of the camp. Among the defenders were Tulhuulhulsuit and seven warriors. Caught between the 2nd Cavalry and Scouts, the warriors became trapped at the base of the red, rocky outcrop. In the open and unable to find a defensible position, Tulhuulhulsuit and five others were killed. Eagle Necklace the Younger and Tamyahnin were wounded but made it back to camp.

### ❺ Rifle Pits

Ollikut, Lean Elk and other warriors met the soldiers as they advanced along this bluff. The fighting was intense and made worse by low clouds and drizzle. The Army was stopped, but the Nez Perce suffered serious losses as 26 died the first day. On the west edge of the bluff, a marker identifies where Ollikut, Joseph's brother, was killed. Across the coulee to the northeast Lean Elk was mistaken for an enemy in the severe weather and killed by other Nez Perce. His warning to Looking Glass had come true that neither would leave this place.

Nez Perce warriors prepared fortifications in the form of shallow rifle pits on the bluffs overlooking the camp and in the coulees leading into it. Yellow Wolf remembers October 2: *It came morning, third sun of battle. The rifle shooting went on just like play. But soon Chief Looking Glass was killed. Some warriors in* [this] *pit with him saw at a distance a horseback Indian. One pointed and called to Looking Glass "Look! A Sioux!" Looking Glass stepped quickly from the pit. Stood on the bluff unprotected. A bullet struck his left forehead and he fell back dead.* Looking Glass was hopeful help had come from the camp of Sitting Bull in Canada.

### ❻ Negotiations or Deception?

Under a U.S. flag of truce on the morning of October 1, Miles and Joseph met. The precise meeting location is unknown. At the end of the meeting, Joseph turned to leave. He was called back by Miles and was placed in chains.

Shortly after Joseph's capture, Lieutenant Lovell Jerome was captured while on reconnaissance. By his account he was given food, blanket, shelter and allowed to move freely about the Nez Perce camp while retaining his pistol.

On October 2nd a prisioner exchange was arranged under the watchful gun sights of soldiers and warriors. The siege continued without negotiations until October 5.

### ❼ Initial Assault

Company K of the 7th U.S. Cavalry charged and outpaced the remainder of Miles' command along this bluff. They expected little resistance. Racing northward with the 7th, Captain Myles Moylan recalls: *After crossing the divide which separated us from the Indians village, the battalion formed a line about 1½ miles from the village, Company K on the right, Company D in the center, and Company A on the left. During the movement to the front line, Company K struck the Indians first and was repulsed* [after being] *severely handled by the Indians.* Somewhere near the trail as Lieutenant Henry Romeyn explains: *Captain* [Owen] *Hale and Lieutenant* [Jonathan] *W. Biddle* [of Comp. K] *were killed at the first.* Numerous officers and enlisted men were wounded. The element of surprise was lost.

Captain Myles Moylan

Courtesy of Little Big Horn Battlefield National Monument

### ❽ Code of Honor

On the left coulee slope, Moylan recalls: *Capt* [Edward F.] *Godfrey had his horse killed from under him. The fall stunned him. Trumpter Thomas Herwood rode between Godfrey and the Indians. In this gallant attempt to save his officer, Trumpter Herwood was wounded.*

Before you, in the gully draining to Snake Creek, soldiers lay dead or wounded as the evening fell. Romeyn remembers: *Those who fell into the hands of the hostiles were not molested otherwise than to be stripped of arms and ammunition. They* [Nez Perce] *even gave some of the wounded water after nightfall when it could be done safely.* Another account recalls a warrior giving a blanket to a wounded soldier.

### ❾ The Army Regroups

Much of the initial fighting occurred along this narrow bluff overlooking the Nez Perce Camp. Romeyn recounts: *At the south end of the campground there was a perpendicular bluff that afforded excellent cover. This was instantly occupied by the Nez Perces who, withholding fire until the 7th* [Company A & D] *were within two hundred yards, then delivered it with murderous effect. Wherever the Indians heard a voice raised in command there they at once directed their fire.*

After retreating, Miles ordered the cavalry to dismount and reinforce Company K. Fire was directed toward the bluff on the west side of the coulee. The Nez Perce held their position of advantage. *The 5th Infantry came up and was halted at the crest. Here it was met by a hot fire from the coulee and men and horses began to drop before they could dismount. The Hotchkiss gun was brought up* [near this location] *and was soon driven from the position with severe loss to its gunners.* Only hand to hand combat with units of the U.S. 5th Infantry forced the Nez Perce to yield the high ground. Romeyn continued: *By three o'clock it was evident that the attack must become a siege.*

### ❿ Soldier Grave Site

A temporary field hospital and command post were located here as described by Romeyn: *A small piece of ground directly in the rear of the steep bluff alluded to was sheltered from the enemy's fire, and the wounded who could walk or crawl were gathered for attention by the Surgeons.* Two fallen soldiers were returned to their hometowns for burial. Twenty-one soldiers were buried in a mass grave. From 1877 to 1903 local residents maintained the gravesite. The remains of the soldiers were removed to Fort Assiniboine in 1903. Then, in 1912, they were relocated to Custer National Cemetery at Little Bighorn Battlefield National Monument. The long depression is the only evidence of the mass grave.

### ⓫ Relinquishing the Rifle

On the morning of October 5, the two remaining hereditary leaders, White Bird and Joseph, met two 'Treaty Nez Perce' to discuss terms of "quitting the fight". White Bird mistrusts the Army's promises, refuses to surrender, and with 30 others escapes to Canada that night. Joseph declares to the Nez Perce Camp that his decision to end the fighting is to save his people. At 2:00 PM, as he hands over his rifle to Miles, he states briefly and simply. *"From where the sun now stands, I will fight no more, forever."*

Assisted by White Hawk, Black Eagle, Many Wounds, Peo Peo Tholekt & Yellow Wolf, L.V. McWhorter marked historical sites on the battlefield 1927-34. In 1928, the group also placed the Nez Perce Monument near Stop 5.

**This is sacred ground for all who fought here. It remains today a burial ground to the Nez Perce people who lost their lives while seeking freedom.**