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White Bird Canon, Battle of,

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Battle of White Bird Cañon

by

Major General O. O. Howard.

U.S. Army.

The battle of White Bird Canyon.

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The Nez Percé Indians, like the Children of Israel under the Son of Solomon were in 1877 hopelessly divided. The cause of the rupture had long existed and had gradually operated in nurturing and maturing its natural fruits. It was the treaty-making-process.

The primary treaty, made years ago was comprehensive enough. It took in all the Nez Percé homes and easily secured the signatures of all the chiefs of the tribe.

The second treaty, made in consequence of newly discovered mines, pared off the original tract of land, and left out old Joseph and many of his adherents. The third treaty, secured

, as was the second, in the interest of some enterprizing frontiersman, cut down the Nez Percé lands to still narrower limits, and left outside not only Joseph's Band, as well as Too-hul-hul-sootsi on the Snake river, White Bird on the Salmon and Hush-hush-cute's ~~beyond~~ beyond the North Border. Old Joseph, the stern old champion of opposition died in 1873 - his two sons Joseph & Ollicott in some indian way succeeded together to his ~~authority~~ chieftainship. Joseph, usually called "Young Joseph", when war came, was vested with supreme authority; but his brother kept close to him and was to him, as it were a chief of staff. Joseph was at

his period about forty years of age. He was a tall, finely proportioned man of a uniformly serious, demure countenance. He dressed in the wild Indian style, painted his face, braided his hair, and prided himself in his blanket adornment. Ollicott was apparently younger, though later than he, of a lively, impulsive turn and much more inclined to fraternize with white men.

The outside Nez Perces were named in orders and in the journals and reports "non-treaty indians". Those within the boundaries, far the most numerous, were denominated "Treaty-indians" or "Treaty-Nez Perces".

...ce the treaty-negotiations were in progress. The white settlers were pressing their ranges and their ranches ever nearer & nearer to the small final Reservation. ~~White~~ Whiskey selling by white men, mutual quarrels, petty fights, the death of an Indian now & then, superstitious Indian demands, spiritism with wizard performances, such as wild dances & incessant drummings, the killing of cattle, the opening of fences, ~~lost~~ thefts of ponies, excessive gambling, periodic horse-racing annoying the neighbors, and other pernicious doings ~~kept~~ with abundant fault finding from both white & red men had during the last decade engendered & perpetuated anything but good feeling.

Notwithstanding the reiterated statement that "no Nez-Percé ever had killed a white man", the settlers far & near were constantly apprehensive of an Indian war. Every annual assemblage of the Savages for any alleged purpose, created a new alarm.

At last the Government agents insisted that these chronic difficulties should cease and they begged for a Commission of men who should have power & influence with the Executive & the people ~~with~~ the Indians. such a Commission was organized came from Washington & finally in the fall of 1876 and set at Fort Lapwai - a beautiful army post situated in the midst of the present Nez Percé Reservation. The civilized & christian Indians, both protestant & catholic, came to this

council: and so did a portion of the wild Indians also. After many earnest meetings, though no agreement came of them, the commission decided that the "non-treaty nez-perces" must come within the limits ~~that~~ prescribed in the last treaty. The Executive at Washington approved the Commissions report. The Lapwai Indian Agent was instructed to carry out the ~~[illegible]~~ decision. And the Department Commander with his troops was to be at the call of the Indian Agent = i.e. to use influence & force if required, to bring the scattered people in & distribute them within the boundaries to their newly allotted grounds.

The successive efforts of the Indian agent, Mr John Monteith, and of the Commander of the Geographical Department General Howard, seemed at first during the spring months of 1877 to be attended with gratifying success.

Joseph, White Bird and Hush-hush-enin had promised collectively & severally to move upon the Nez Percé reservation by the middle of June.

And they all did approach ~~the~~ and encamp near the edge of the Reservation.

Gen. Howard who arrived at Fort Lapwai the 14th of June, found everything as he wrote "peaceful and happy as home". But toward evening

Col. Perry, the post commander, received a letter ~~from~~ written by Mr I. P. Brown from Mt Idaho – a village seventy miles distant, near the "non-treaty" Indians' Camp. Mr Brown was not yet much alarmed but he warned ~~us~~ the Colonel of an apparent preparation to resist any force that should be sent against them.

Early the 15th a small detachment with an interpreter sped on toward the Indian camp to gather information. At half past four of the same day the detachment returned bringing in Mr West a half-breed and the brother of Looking glass, a handsome pacific sub-chief who lived within the limits but whose position between the contending factions was not yet well defined. ~~He~~ The messenger's brother however was the pronounced friend of the white man.

The messengers put into our hands

a second letter from Mr Brown. (9.)
The startling news it contained was glanced at by the Commanding officer and then read aloud to the anxious crowd of friends, who in painful suspense, eager for the contents, had been watching his face during his hasty perusal. He read as follows:

Mount Idaho T. T.
Friday June 15, 1877.

Commanding Officer
Fort Lapwai:

Last night we started a messenger to you who reached Cottonwood House, where he was wounded and driven back by the Indians. The people of Cottonwood [18 miles from pst. Idaho] undertook to come here during the night; were intercepted, all wounded or killed. Parties this morning found some of them on the Prairie. The wounded will be here shortly, when we will get full particulars. The whites are

engaged about forty of them in getting the wounded. One thing is certain: we are in the midst of an Indian war. Every family is here, and we will have taken all the precautions we can, but are poorly armed. We want arms ammunition and help at once. Don't delay a moment. We have a report that some whites were killed yesterday on Salmon river. No later word from them; fear that the people are all killed, as a party of Indians were seen going that way last night. Send to Lewiston and hasten up. You cannot imagin people in a worse condition than they are here. Mr West has volunteered to go to Lapwai; rely on his statements.

Yours truly

S. P. Brown

Then followed a post Script:

x x x The wounded have come in. – Mr Day mortally; Mrs Norton with both legs broken; Moore shot through the hip; Norton killed and left in the road six miles from here. Teams were attacked on the road & abandoned. The Indians have possession of the prairie and threaten Mount Idaho. All the people are here and we will do the best we can. x x x Hurry up; hurry! Rely on this Indian's statement; I have known him for a long time; he is with us.

L. P. Brown

Peace had now fled & War indeed had come. General Howard wrote Mr Brown at ~~once~~ 5. P.M. – "Dear Sir: Your two dispatches are received. I have sent forward two companies of Cavalry to your relief. They leave tonight. Other help will be en route as soon as it can be brought up. I am glad you are so cool and

ready. Cheer the people. Help shall 12
be prompt and complete. Lewiston
has been notified.

Yours truly,
O.O. Howard

Taking with him Lieut. Theller of the Infantry Colonel Perry with his ninety enlisted men all well mounted set out that very night, the 15th of June for the east Idaho — while General Howard remained at Lapwai to gather up his scattered garrisons & bring them to the front.

The murders and wounding of citizens were numerous — about forty in all. The outrages committed beggared description. The stories, which in youth have seemed but unreal tales of horror, where the unpitying savages have seized & tomahawked helpless females & innocent children, were at this time around Mount Idaho portrayed in actual life. The day before the troops arrived was

for the survivors one of indescribable terror and anguish. Perry pressed forward his horses, long inured to such forced marches. Before noon of the 16th he reached the deserted Cotton-wood House, whence the Norton family had ~~the~~ ~~may~~ issued 36 hours before & ~~fled~~ vainly attempted to flee for refuge toward the south ~~Mount Idaho~~; by sundown he was at Grangeville - a small ~~settlement~~ hamlet a few miles north of Mount Idaho. Very numbers of citizens ~~came~~ had ~~The Indian scouts~~ come out to meet the troops. The horses were very tired and the men had their fatigue aggravated as is always the case by the jaded animals. Yet the citizens plead for an immediate advance. They feared that the Indians would get away - They predicted an easy victory.

and declared with the Savages they were not for off. Gen. Perry had his cavalry judgment over-borne and again sounded the advance. About a ~~dozen~~ dozen citizens, as many as could arm themselves accompanied the little squadron. While Perry & his command are toiling on through an otherwise pleasant night, let us see where the wild Indians are & what they are doing. To a deep & ~~deep~~ concealed river, perhaps a thousand feet across, plunging along like a mountain torrent with its bed filled with boulders and its banks jagged with immense precipitate cliffs & broken rocks; such is the famous Salmon a tributary of the almost endless Snake.

The part near the lodges of

the hostile Indians was
flowing westerly. From
this river's bank toward the
north White-Bird-Canyon
opens back like a broad
place from a city-avenue.
The Canyon is deep. White
Bird Creek quietly courses
along in its bottom.
At the Canyon's head there is
a narrower ravine that
ascends to the lofty table land.
down this ravine is a smaller
stream trickling along among
thickets of small trees & bushes.
Beside this stream a narrow
roadway - rather a horse trail
than a wagon road - finds its
way to the low ground entraced
in the broad Canyon. This trail

turns suddenly to the left at the lower level and winds off past several detached hillocks or "buttes", till near the large White-Bird Creek it gradually changes direction again to the south. Just beyond the bend is a sort of ridge with two or three more "buttes" a few rods apart = the smaller is only a rounded hill perhaps forty feet high with gentle slopes. The ~~other~~ nearest was irregular, somewhat parallel with the Creek and having an abrupt face toward the approach and crowned with broken rocks of considerable size. Behind these "buttes" the morning of the 17th of June at dawn the smoke was ascending from the Indian lodges. These "buttes" & others farther east were Joseph's watch towers.

As Perry began to descend the ~~rapid~~ ravine-trail at the first glimmer of daylight ~~the~~ Joseph & his warriors who were watching for him, detected the advance of the soldiers. They were not without depredation. Many counseled an immediate flight down the Canyon & across the Swift Salmon — but leaders like Joseph & White Bird said "no!" They felt confident in their superior numbers, for they had more than three to one, without reckoning ~~besides~~ the women who could be horseholders and helpers in a hundred ways. They knew the ~~new~~ fierceness & the newness of the Lapwai-horses which Perry & Trimble brought to the field. They saw the advantage of their position. They could hold the ridge & "battles" and send ~~off~~ always to their left front sufficient force

to run for around Perry's squadron, ascend one of the transverse ravines & get to the high land in rear of the soldiers, and so cut off completely their retreat; meanwhile the main Indians ~~could~~ would stand by the ridge and do all they could. The Indians were already well armed with the best of rifles. It was said that one of their number who had condescended to herd cattle on the slopes & ravines of the Salmon & its tributaries had furnished the common Indian treasury with a money chest of several thousand dollars. However that may be, they did not lack in this battle for ammunition nor for well trained ponies.

As ~~I am~~ we are informed Joseph & Ollicut stayed at the center while the

imperturbable White-Bird
pushed out to assail Perry's flank.

Lieut. Theller preceded the column with a small advance-guard.

Capt. Perry with the citizen-allies and his troop came next.

Major Trimble, after an interval, with his own troop completed the little column as it marched along steadily & wearily toward the fated field.

Suddenly the Indian skirmishers, mostly hidden by rocks, bushes in the ground or ravines, began their work. It was an irregular but a deadly fire; for remember these Savages were "practiced shots."

As saddles were being emptied & horses getting ~~wild~~ desperate, hundreds of these wild

flooded

faces were already past the "buttes" and swarming off in little bees with no apparent order to get beyond our soldiers and filling up all favorable gulches & ravines.

For a time Perry's handful of men did not fall back. Theller covered them by his skirmish line under such shelter

The citizen Volunteers ran to the ~~left~~ East "butte" and getting as good ~~shelter~~ cover there as they could began to fire ~~as~~ where they could see a head or hand of their foes for a mark.

Perry's own troop formed in line next to the volunteers westward.

And then without closing the interval Trimble came on "forward into line" and held the extreme left west of all.

The rattling of the carbines & rifles, the falling of the killed & wounded, the excitement

soon becoming madness of the horses which were not well trained and never good at a stand up fight - who shall describe it all the noise and resulting confusion? Who shall tell just what was done or not done? Lieutenant Parnell, saw a throng of Indians supple & panther like, as they are rushing for the highest rocky point. He sent thither a Sergeant & six men. and sharply ~~crackled their~~ their carbines rang carbines. The ~~throng~~ motley throng was checked & crept back & down for better cover.

The bugler on whose strong relied for calls above the din of battle fell mortally stricken - Some cavalry men had turned & were galloping to the rear. Two citizen volunteers were wounded & the remainder

ran back & surrendered their "butte". Both flanks were now enveloped and the line was already broken when Perry & ~~Parnell~~ Trimble came together and exchanged a word.

"Can't go to Salmon River Trimble."

"No, that's annihilation."

First after this Perry undertook an orderly retreat to a new & strong position, but under such leaden rain it could not be secured.

The panic stricken were blinded & cried out anything in their distress & urged their comrades to run for their lives. ~~and~~ For faster & faster the Indians came on. Bolder now, hardly concealing themselves at all mounted & dismounted they pressed forward, killing the wounded and chasing individuals

who chanced to stray from the main body
or who were thrown from
disabled horses. Lieut. Theller
was dismounted, - Parnell & Trimble
saw that at that time he was rescued and
again mounted.

It goes without saying it that
the battle was really over. A panic
and rout were consequent, for
the wild Indians were relentless.
Yet the splendid American horses
by their speed enabled a few to outstrip White
Bird's flankers by taking a shorter
way to the heights above. Perry
& Parnell then organized a rear guard
and covered by repeated charges
& firings all their friends who had passed them.

But many, many, & the brave
Theller among them perished before
they could struggle up the steep sides of
the bloody White Bird Canyon.

Subsequently the history of their

courageous struggle for life (24
could be traced by the spots where
their bodies were found. Here
& there in groups and there alone like
advance pickets they were left ~~scattered~~ along
the steeps & in the gulches where
they had sorely but vainly
sought shelter from their
merciless pursuers.

A personal witness said: "The
Indians fought us to within
four miles of Mount Idaho,
and only gave it up on seeing
we could not be driven farther,
except at our own gait."

Of the devoted ninety, so ~~partly~~
hearty & strong & confident, who had three
evenings before gone out from
Fort Lapwai to help the citizens
of Mount Idaho & stop the
murders, thirty two were slain,
and most of the remainder so throughly

demoralized. ~~[illegible]~~ for a long time the ~~very name~~ mere rumor of ~~an~~ a hostile advance inspired them with terror.

Imagine the feeling of the officers families at Fort Lapwai — when the news doubly exaggerated by Indian messengers began to come in — Even Colonel Perry's first letter made it worse than the Custer massacre. He begged Gen. Howard to break the dreadful tidings of her husbands death to Mrs Teller. When he slowly made his way to her quarters she apprehended the worst. She did not have to be told for she read the unmistakable truth in his face. The shock however was greater than she could describe.

Such was General Howard's introduction to the famous Nez Percé Campaign.