

BLANKET OF THE SUN

The Story of Jackson Sundown, Nez Perce Warrior and Horseman

(Formerly entitled, "Earth Left By the Setting Sun")

By

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PROLOGUE

In April of 1877, the Wallowa Band of the Nez Perce prepared to leave the land that had been their ancestral home. They were being forced to live on the Nez Perce Reservation at Lapwai in Idaho.

It was a sad farewell, also, to their homeland, to the valley and lake where their fathers and father's fathers had summered, to the meadows where they had gathered roots and hunted, to the canyons that had sheltered their winter camps and stone corrals and to the snowy mountains and the Wallowa River where Old Joseph and many others of their people lay buried. It was farewell to the land they loved, the most beautiful valley in the world.

They trailed down the steep draws to the Imnaha, down Fence Creek, down Corral and Tully Creek, driving cattle and horses before them. They carried what possessions they could, food, cooking pots and household ware used in their lodges, clothing blankets, leather articles, ceremonial and war regalia that had seen times of the fur trade and the proud hunts and battles on the plains, tools, parfleches, tipi covers, horn bows and arrows, powder and guns. The huge stores of roots and whatever else they could not take with them they cached in the canyons, thinking hopefully that the exile might not be forever (Josephy 1979:495-6).

The Wallowa Band under the leadership of Young Joseph would never again live in the land they loved.

Among "the Real People," as the Nez Perce call themselves (Slickpoo et al., 1973:1), was a young Indian man called Weyetena Tut'sits Kan, or Blanket of the Sun; he would later become known as Jackson Sundown, World Champion bronc rider. His life's story is a story of a warrior; the story of the hero's path.

THE BEGINNING

Blanket of the Sun was born in Montana in 1863 while his parents and members of a Nez Perce raiding party from Old Joseph's band were in Montana in Flathead Country. The child was a relative of Chief Joseph, and would later be identified as a nephew of Young Joseph. Blanket of the Sun grew up in the Wallowa Country, in the area that would become northeastern Oregon. On the high mountain meadows the young boys spent their days with the great horse herds, particularly the Appaloosa, a breed developed by the Nez Perce tribe.

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Raiding and hunting parties going east to the Plains were an important part of the lifeway of the Nez Perce. After the Nez Perce acquired the horse in about 1710-1720 (Haines 1939), mounted parties, including hunters/warriors, women and children went to "buffalo country," following the seasonal rounds; hunting, fishing and gathering food plants.

The American Indian's free, wandering way of life did not correspond to the Euro-American settlement-based lifestyle, predicated on agriculture. According to the Nez Perce, they were (and are) "one mind with the earth." They walked or rode across the land as a part of it; moving where roots were ready for digging, where berries were ripe, hunting buffalo and other animals in season. The earth provided their subsistence, was their Mother.

The gap between the two cultures constantly created contention. Lapwai Indian Agent, J.B. Monteith left a record of this conflict in his correspondence to the Commissioner of Indian Affairs in Washington D.C. His letters provide insight into that earlier period:

9/3/1871: ...Many of the Indians are coming home from the Buffalo Country, having been gone for the past year. They report the Sioux are very warlike and determined to drive all Whites and Indians out of their county. The Nez Perces and Blackfeet had a fight with the Sioux in which they killed eighteen Sioux--Nez Perces lost none.

4/28/1874: For a year past I have tried to prevail upon Joseph to cease his nomadic habits and settle down in the Wallowa Valley. His answers invariably have been, "My Father made the tracks for me to go and I intend to walk them."

5/20/1874: I would respectfully report that a large number of Nez Perces are making arrangements to leave for the Buffalo Country in the Yellowstone the last of July or the first of August. If they are permitted to go they will remain away all winter. I have reasoned with their leaders and have tried to get them to abandoned their project, but to no effect. I would ask, shall I permit them to leave? If measures are taken to prevent their going it will necessitate the assistance of the troops to keep them from crossing the Bitterroot Mountains.

6/17/1874: One year ago when instructions were received to notify Joseph and his band that they were permitted to retain the Wallowa Valley, I urged them to go in and settle down in the upper portion of the same, and cease their roving about and leave the lower portion of the valley for the Whites, but their ears were closed to any advise of the kind. Again last fall I informed them that unless they settled down and commenced farming they could not expect to retain possession of any portion of the valley. They said they did not want the valley for farming purposes, but for that of hunting and fishing. I replied that was not sufficient, that the Government expected more of them. Still they refused.

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I am perfectly satisfied that they do not intend to settle in the Valley and give up their nomadic habits unless compelled to do so. Their winter quarters is near the mouth of the Grand Ronde river, and from said point they are continually traveling in different directions, always returning in the fall to winter.

Monteith continued to try to bring the "Non-Treaty" Indians, including the Wallowa Band, to the reservation and put an end to their wandering lifestyle:

9/7/1874: If some measure could be adopted to prevent the wilder Indian from roaming over the country, each and every able bodied Indian of the Tribe could have a farm of 10 to 20 acres upon which they could raise enough provisions to supply all the members of the tribe so that it would not be necessary for them to dig roots. But to accomplish this we must prevent them from going to buffalo country every year.

3/1/1875: The Indians in question are the same party I reported in the spring of 1874 as making preparations to go to Buffalo country. At the same time I asked permission to stop them...The Indians referred to are under the leadership of "Eagle-from-the-Light," "Looking Glass," and "Young Joseph," and are comprised of Indians living on the Snake River and Salmon River together with some from the reserve...I think, if Genl. Howard could be here about July, the time they make preparations to leave, and talk to the Indians, giving them to understand that unless they acquiesced he would prevent them from going...

9/6/1875: When I received information from the Department to the effect that the Wallowa Valley had been opened to settlers, I sent for "Joseph" and upon his arrival informed him of the same. At the first interview he was inclined to be ugly and returned to his camp very much dissatisfied with the action of the govt. In the course of a week he came back and talked more reasonable.

9/11/1875: Many of the Indians who were in the buffalo country have returned and are exerting a bad influence over the younger portion of the tribe by relating their adventures with the Sioux and hunting buffalo and upon those who have just commenced a civilized life the influence is bad, tending to draw them back to their former wild habits, and such will be the case until the Government takes necessary steps to prevent these Indians from making their annual trips to the Yellowstone and vicinity.

2/2/1876: The Indians have been unusually quiet this winter. The only excitement that has occurred during the month was created by a party of white settlers living in Wallowa Valley. They telegraphed the Governor of Oregon that Joseph and band were in the valley (Wallowa) driving off and killing stock and threatening the white settlers...Joseph and most of his band have been spending Christmas and New Years in the vicinity of

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the Agency (Lapwai) attending feasts and having a good time generally, and at no time have they been more than twenty miles from the Agency, and were here at the time that the trouble was said to have taken place in the Wallowa Valley.

3/8/1876: Joseph and band, Eagle-from-the-Light on the Salmon River, and Hush-Hush-Cute on the lower Snake River claim no privileges arising from any treaties made, and do not recognize them in any way whatever...The Indians will never move on the reserve unless something more than talk is resorted to. If they were given to understand that unless they did move onto their reservation within a specified time, they would be forced on by the adoption of some decided measure, I think some would move, others would have to be brought on by the Military...The same remarks will apply to those Indians who persist in going to Buffalo Country. The only way to prevent them from is to turn them back once, after having started.

4/7/1876: In case a movement is made by the Indians of this section to go to the Buffalo Country, I sincerely hope the Dept. will adopt some measure to prevent them from carrying their desires into effect. If they are allowed to go it will have a bad effect on those who have just commenced farming and trying to follow civilized pursuits, as it may influence such to abandon their attempts at farming, etc...the Indians commence digging roots about the 1st of June and do not get through until the last of July. Then commences the Salmon fishing; this continues till about the middle of September. All, young and old, go off on these trips.

7/3/1876: Last week an Indian belonging to Joseph's band was killed in the Wallowa Valley by one of the settlers...From all I can learn the Indians were disturbing no one, and the case is deliberate murder. There is no danger of Joseph or his people molesting anyone if the Whites will let them alone, but if they persist in pushing too hard, the Indians in question may take matters in their own hands and wreak vengeance on innocent parties.

8/31/1876: Very few Nez Perces went to the Buffalo county this season...Joseph's band of Nez Perce Indians still persist in putting forth their claim to the Wallowa Valley and make their regular visits to the valley. In July last an Indian belonging to Joseph's band was killed by a settler in said valley...and Joseph insists that the only way the matter can be amicably settled is by the Government giving said valley to him and his band and removing the settlers. The Indian witnesses refused to appear in court against the murderers (being fearful of being held by the whites).

2/9/1877: In accordance with instructions contained in Dept. letter dated Jan. 6, 1877 MK "L". I notified Joseph of the wish and purpose of the government in regards to him, his band and all bands of roving Indians living off reservations...

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(after a discussion trying to convince Joseph to go to the Reserve voluntarily, Joseph replied) "I have been talking to the whites many years about the land in question, and it is strange they cannot understand me, the country they claim belonged to my father and when he died, it was given to me and my people and I will not leave it until I am compelled to" (Monteith's correspondence, Lapwai Indian Reservation).

Joseph's reluctance only made the government more determined to subdue the non-treaty Nez Perce. They brought all forces to bear on the non-treaty leaders. Gen. O.O. Howard met with the non-treaty leaders on a pretense to council with them, however his purpose was to bully them onto the reservation. In a dominance move he jailed the speaker for the non-treaty bands, Toohoolhoolzote. The net closed as the Chiefs watched Toohoolhoolzote locked in the guard house.

Reluctantly the non-treaty bands began choosing land on the reserve where they could move their people. Young Joseph, Looking Glass and White Bird decided they would move their bands to areas on the upper Clearwater River (Josephy 1979:494).

Thus began the move to leave the ancestral lands they loved, where there hearts and spirits were intertwined with the trees, the rocks, the streams. The burial grounds of their ancestors, so important in their culture, would be left unguarded. When Old Joseph died in August of 1871, his people were camped at the confluence of the Wallowa River and the Lostine River:

He was buried at once on a hilltop above the camp, but that same night reinterred at the foot of the hill. The Indians built a fence of poles around his grave, and within the fence erected another pole, with an arm at its top, and painted it red. From the arm they hung a bell that rang in the wind and was used by Dreamers to signify moments of great import... About 1874 a white man stole the bell, and in 1886, long after the Nez Perces had been ousted from the Wallowa, the persons who then owned the property on which old Joseph was buried opened the grave and took the chief's skull. Later it was exhibited in a dentist's office in Baker, Oregon (Josephy 1979:442).

As Young Joseph prepared to move with his band to the reservation, a group of young warriors rebelled against depredations by white settlers that had gone unsettled. Seeking their own justice, they killed several whites. This was the beginning of the Nez Perce War of 1877.

WEYETENA TUT'SITS KAN

Blanket of the Sun, nephew of Young Chief Joseph, grew up within his tribal family in the beautiful Wallowa Mountains, moving in the spring from the warm canyons of the Imnaha and Snake Rivers to

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the high mountain meadows. By the time he was five years old his father had given him a horse of his own (Alcorn et al., 1983:47). He was fifteen years old when the Nez Perce War of 1877 began.

The non-treaty bands recognized chances for peace were gone when the raiding party returned, reporting the killings of the white settlers. Gen. Howard's insensibility to the Nez Perce and his jailing of Toohoolhoolzote, left little hope he would listen to their explanation. This erratic move on the part of the young warriors forced the flight of the non-treaty bands, with General Howard and other military forces in pursuit. As a member of the fleeing band, Blanket of the Sun and his cousin Suhm-Keen, Shirt On (who would later be known as Sam Tilden), were given the responsibility of night-herding the horses of the decamped tribe (Alcorn et al., 1983:48).

As the bands moved east, time and again they out-maneuvered Howard and the other military strategists. As summer deepened it appeared the military contingent had remained in Idaho, suspending their pursuit. Nearing Big Hole, Montana, the Tribal Council discussed a travel route. Should the band take the short cut, going directly north to Canada through the Flathead Reservation, or take the longer route east to the homeland of the Crows? Looking Glass successfully argued for the later, pointing out the lack of military pressure (Joseph 1979:561-571).

With the urgency apparently over, Looking Glass realized how trail-weary the people were and urged them to rest and regroup. The War Chief positioned no guards or sent out scouts along their back trail. It was a deadly error. August 7, troops swept down on the sleeping camp. Black Eagle recounted the battle:

They (soldiers) killed forty-four Indians before being driven from the camp. I knew two little boys who were sleeping in a tepee that was burned. The mothers covered them with blankets and a buffalo robe, and they escaped unhurt. Peopeo Tholekt was the father of one, and the other was Peo's wife's brother. Another brother sleeping in the same tepee was Jackson Sundown (late champion horseman of the Northwest). Peo's wife and child escaped when the attack was first made at the last battle (at Bear Paw), but the family was never again united. I do not know what became of her. Her child and Sundown were of the same age (McWhorter 1983:145-6).

The battle at Big Hole sent the Nez Perce fleeing, trying to reach safety in Canada, with the military in pursuit. On September 29, 1877, they again rested, being well ahead of Gen. Howard, however, from the southeast, Col. N.A. Miles attacked the weary Nez Perce camped at Bear Paw, Montana, defeating them. Yellow Wolf described his reaction as the soldiers closed in:

I felt the coming end. All for which we had suffered lost!

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(McWhorter noted at this point of Yellow Wolf's story he paused, and sat in silence for several minutes.)

Thoughts came of the Wallowa where I grew up. Of my own country when only Indians were there. Of tepees along the bending river. Of the blue, clear lake, wide meadows with horse and cattle herds. From the mountain forests, voices seemed calling. I felt as dreaming. Not my living self (McWhorter 1983:212).

Chief Joseph, the guardian of the families, and a remnant of Nez Perces were taken as prisoners, and sent south into confinement in the "hot place" (McWhorter 1983:283-292). No leniency was given the captured people. Living in inhospitable surroundings many of them died, until at last a small surviving group were returned north to live on the reserve at Nespelem, Washington. Joseph, his heart saddened over his people's loss, would die there, setting before a campfire on September 21, 1904. He and his people were never again allowed to live in their beloved Wallowas.

CANADIAN RETREAT

Small straggling bands of refugees had escaped as the battle at Bear Paw ragged around them. The bedraggled fugitives, cold, hungry, many of them injured, struggled to reach Sitting Bull's camp in Canada. Chief Joseph's younger brother, Ollokut had been killed in the siege. His wife was among the refugees. Her husband was dead. Life as she had known it no longer existed. She remembered the feelings:

We had only asked to be left in our own homes, the home of our ancestors. Our going (from the battlefield at Bear Paw) was with heavy hearts, broken spirits. But we would be free. Escaping the bondage sure with the surrendering. All lost, we walked silently on into the wintry night (McWhorter 1986:511).

Wounded, Blanket of the Sun fled north with the escaping Nez Perce.

It is believed Sundown stayed with the Sioux about two years, then crossed the border into Washington Territory with several other Nez Perces who had also escaped the fight at Snake Creek in the Bear Paws. He remained at Nespelem, Washington Territory, for a short while, then went over to Montana. When he became eligible, he was granted a land allotment on the Flathead Indian Reservation. There he married and fathered two daughters (Alcorn et al., 1983:48).

JACKSON SUNDOWN

Little information is available about the transitional years. What is known is, Blanket of the Sun became known as Jackson Sundown and developed a reputation as a uniquely skilled horseman. His first marriage failed and by 1910 he had moved to Idaho. In 1912, he married Cecilia Wapshela, a young Nez Perce widow with two small sons (Alcorn et al., 1983:48). The family lived on her ranch at

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Jacques Spur, six miles east of Lapwai.

Sundown was muscular, handsome, with a strong familial resemblance to Joseph. Indications are he maintained strong mental ties to the beliefs of his childhood. Josephy points out:

All the members of Joseph's band in the Wallowa were characterized as Dreamers, and white men came to distinguish them by their hair, for they...refused to cut their hair, white fashion, but wore it long and brushed in a roll above the forehead (Josephy 1979:426).

A photograph from the Slickpoo Collection (Slickpoo et al., 1973: 255) shows Sundown at an informal gathering of Nez Perce (no date). All present are in modern dress, however, several men including Sundown, have the hair style described above by Josephy, in contrast to the others with short hair styles.

A simple description of the Dreamer faith, so important and sacred to the Wallowa band, indicates it was based in the religion of the ancestors; all things having a supernatural side. Men and women, through the power of guardian spirits, were given power, often through dreams and visions. "There were also a purity and simplicity to this doctrine..." (Josephy 1979:426).

In 1912, using the name Jackson Sundown, he entered rodeo contests in Canada and in Culdesac, Orofino, Kamiah and Grangeville, Idaho. Although he was then forty-nine, his prowess had improved as he grew older.

Six foot tall and weighing about 155 pounds, he was lean and sinewy. He wore his thick black hair in two braids tied under his chin...His shirts and scarves were brightly colored, and he liked bat-wing, shaggy chaps that were orange colored with black spots. Sundown quickly became a favorite with the rodeo crowds (Alcorn et al., 1983:48).

THE RODEO

In towns on the rodeo circuit, posters were hung well in advance of the event. Outlying ranch and farm families would pack up the tent and the grub box filled with sandwiches, fried chicken, pies, cakes, and head for town. After they'd settled on a camp spot by the creek, set up housekeeping, and located graze for the horses, everybody would head for main street.

The parade started about one o'clock with the local bands and city officials heading it up. At Culdesac in May of 1914, band members wore "heavy wool-fleece chaps, neckerchiefs, long-sleeved working shirts and 10-gallon Stetsons" (Loeffelbein 1994:94). The music might not be quite in tune, but it was always loud and added to the festive atmosphere. The kids raced along the boardwalks following their heroes through the parade.

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Members of the Nez Perce tribe often rode in the parades on beautifully decorated horses, wearing ceremonial dress. Cecilia and Jackson Sundown occasionally joined the Border Days parade in Grangeville (Alcorn et al., 1983:48).

Sundown was a successful all-round rodeo rider. In 1914, other riders would not take part in events he entered, saying Sundown always won the purse. As a result, the rodeo manager decided to hire Sundown as an exhibition rider for \$50.00 a day to entertain the crowds. Frank Gillett, a member of the Grangeville Cowboy Band, remembered seeing Sundown in 1914 doing exhibition riding:

...he stole the show, for he made a striking appearance. He was six feet tall, and slim and straight, with strong features and perfect white teeth, and he sat a horse with such nonchalance, that the crowd went wild (Loeffelbein 1994:96).

In the crowd that year was famous sculptor, Alexander P. Proctor. After watching Sundown ride Proctor realized he had the perfect model for his commissioned work, "Indian Pursuing Buffalo." In 1915, Sundown competed in the Pendleton Round-Up, but he finished a disappointing third place. At fifty-two years of age, he decided he had ridden his last rodeo (Alcorn et al., 1983:49). But his guardian spirit had more to add to this famous warrior's path.

Sundown had agreed to pose for Proctor, and in 1916 the sculptor loaded a car with his gear and his seven lively children, and headed for Idaho. They camped along the stream at Jacques Spur, living in Sundown's best ceremonial tipi. Proctor's oldest daughter remembered:

When he posed for Dad, he wore only a breach clout and moccasins. He rode bareback with an Indian-style halter. He would come at a full gallop directly at Dad...I remember how he and Dad would 'hunker down' on their heels in the evenings in front of the tipi and swap tales (Alcorn et al., 1983:49).

Although he had decided the 1915 Round-Up would be his last competition ride, Proctor convinced him by offering to pay his entry fee, to enter the 1916 Pendleton Round-Up.

The grounds were filled with riders and spectators as Sundown and Cecilia set up the ceremonial tipi. Later in the arena, Sundown qualified as one of fourteen riders in the semi-final competition. He rode a wild buckskin called "Casey Jones" like he owned him to the final gun. Sundown then moved into the finals with two well-known bronc riders: Rufus Rollen of Claremont, Okla. and Bob Hall of Pocatello, Idaho.

Rollen and Hall were half Sundown's age. The two younger riders rode first, both making excellent rides. The crowd was on its feet and cheering. Sundown had chosen to use his old range saddle on "Angel," the outlaw bay he'd drawn. As he got ready to ride an old

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friend, Lee Caldwell, advised him "to scratch 'im from the start. Make a ride in the first three jumps and then clamp down on him and get set for the rest of your ride" (Alcorn et al., 1983:50).

As Sundown swung up Indian style, from the right side, easing onto Angel's back, the cheering quieted. Every eye was riveted on the tall, handsome Indian settling into the saddle. The blindfold was pulled off and Angel whirled twice, then began to leap, trying unsuccessfully to throw the rider. Following Campbell's advice, Sundown clamped down after the fourth jump. All the years in the Wallowa's as a child riding, and his career as a horseman paid off that afternoon. Sundown became a part of the horse as Angel jack-knifed and sun-fished across the arena. In a final effort the big bay headed for the fence. Sundown fanned his hat, sticking to the saddle and raking spurs across the horses shoulders.

The crowd exploded, "Sundown! Sundown! Sundown!" Then the shot signaled the end of the ride. Jackson Sundown, Blanket of the Sun, Nez Perce warrior at age 53, was the World Champion Bronc Rider for 1916 at the Pendleton Round-Up.

Pick-up man Herb Thompson rode along side, then gave Sundown a lift to the stands. The prize, a \$500, silver trimmed saddle was buckled onto Sundown's own horse and he rode around the arena to thunderous cheers and applause.

After the excitement of the Round-up was over Sundown set up his tipi in Lewiston, Idaho and Proctor finished "Indian Pursuing Buffalo." It now stands in the RCA Building in New York City. A bust of Sundown was later given by Proctor to Stanford University (Alcorn et al., 1983:50-51).

Sundown made his last public appearance in 1917, giving a spectacular riding exhibition for then Governor, Moses Alexander. Then, until his death in 1923 he led a quiet life with Cecilia, training horses for Ben Reeves on his Salmon River Ranch.

On December 18, 1923, Jackson Sundown died of pneumonia. He was buried in an unmarked grave in the Slickpoo Mission Cemetery near Jacques Spur. In 1972, he was added to the Pendleton Round-Up Hall of Fame (Alcorn et al., 1983:51).

In later years a stone monument remembering the Nez Perce warrior and horseman was set in place. A symbolic, saddled Appaloosa was tethered at the head of the grave while speakers remembered the man who was an important member of Nez Perce tribal history, and needs to be remembered as one of Idaho's true heroes.

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The memorial on the stone reads:

JACKSON SUNDOWN

Weyetena Tut'sits Kan

Nez Perce Born in Montana 1863

Died at Jacques Spur, December 18, 1923

At the age of 60 years

(The other side of the stone reads:)

Jackson Sundown rode with Chief Joseph in 1877. He performed in many rodeos in the Northwest and Canada. In 1916 he won the World's Championship at Pendleton and an ovation never before equalled.

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